

some legacies of No Child Left Behind



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The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 was hailed upon its passage by a broad bipartisan coalition of federal legislators in the United States as a path to significant improvement in the education of American children. It served to focus attention on accountability, commercially developed “scientifically research-based” instructional programs, explicit instruction, increased amounts of time devoted to “core subject areas” as defined by the legislation, and enhanced teacher qualifications. Intended to improve children’s academic performance, in part through some standardization of practices in schools that sought NCLB funds, this legislation was nonetheless implemented in very different ways in schools and school systems across the United States.

We are beginning to see significant changes in federal education policy, particularly as legislators consider the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. Already the funding for Reading First, a key component of the implementation of NCLB, has been discontinued. Given the current push for new federal education initiatives, it seems a good time to examine the effects—both intended and unintended—of such an influential piece of legislation. In addition, exploring the ramifications of NCLB may provide insight for societies around the world as they strive to develop education policies and legislation.

The authors who have contributed to this special themed edition of *Childhood Education* address myriad consequences of No Child Left Behind. The five articles selected for this issue consider how this legislation

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has affected young children, the teaching of reading, a particular population of students with special needs, and teachers. All of these articles, we hope, will prompt readers to ponder how the stated intent of NCLB meshed with the actual implementation of its mandates. Each offers recommendations for future policies and legislation that will

be more likely to move every child forward in terms of learning and achievement.

Jessica Hoffman looks specifically at one program derived from No Child Left Behind—Early Reading First. This initiative focused on enhancing language and literacy instruction in preschool classrooms. Research concerning both child and teacher outcomes, as well as our own experiences as evaluators and project directors of several Early Reading First (ERF) projects, led us to believe this particular aspect of NCLB has been mostly positive. Still, it is not without its pitfalls, as Hoffman points out. She highlights the distinction between constrained and unconstrained skills that were foci of ERF and explains how this distinction must affect the interpretation of assessment data. Despite the achievement gains made by children in ERF classrooms, this initiative has not been reauthorized in 2010; therefore, Hoffman offers recommendations for applying the lessons learned from Early Reading First to the new Striving Readers initiative, as well as to future legislation.

One of the greatest benefits of Early Reading First was its mandate to “provide students with cognitive learning opportunities in high-quality language and literature rich environments” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Unfortunately, as Sherron Roberts and Elizabeth Killingsworth found in their review of the NCLB document, the same value was not placed on literature-rich environments in elementary, middle, and secondary school settings. In their careful and thorough content analysis of the entire No Child Left Behind Act, Executive Summary, and Reading First documents, these authors determined the role assigned by these mandates to books, free reading, and children’s literature in literacy instruction. The findings obtained from their study are dismal for proponents of literature-based instruction, but Roberts and Killingsworth provide research and theoretical support to help teachers defend their use of real children’s books to teach reading and to advocate for the essential role of children’s literature in literacy instruction and learning.

A strong advocate for children’s literature, Susan Lehr also explores the role of children’s literature within the confines of No Child Left Behind policy and the ways

in which it has been enacted in classrooms. By weaving theoretical and research perspectives together with her own bold opinions, Lehr urges readers to reflect on how politics and literature each influence teaching and learning. She examines the interplay between NCLB and censorship and discusses how the removal of high-quality literature from classrooms not only diminishes opportunities for critical thinking for all students, but also does a disservice to students—particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds.

When considering which groups of students have been most affected by the mandates of NCLB, high-achieving and gifted students are typically not at the forefront of discussion. Yet Jennifer Jolly and Matthew Makel discuss the narrowing of curriculum and the lack of differentiated instruction (except for struggling learners) that have resulted from these mandates have had a negative impact on this particular population of students. These authors argue that the attention placed on universal proficiency, an expected outcome of NCLB, has resulted in the underachievement of the most capable students.

We conclude this collection of articles on the legacies of No Child Left Behind with a provocative look at its effects on teachers. Jerry Aldridge and Jennifer Kilgo examine the ways in which this legislation has further served to marginalize women teachers by removing their professional decision-making authority. As readers, we were intrigued by this theoretical discussion and were reminded of the dissertation of one of our doctoral students, RaeNell Houston (2009). Houston's study is one of the few of which we are aware that explores teachers' reactions to the implementation of Reading First. Of particular relevancy to Aldridge and Kilgo's article was Houston's finding about the strict fidelity to a school's purchased curriculum required by the majority of Reading First programs. Although hers was a small, qualitative study, Houston found that even those teachers who claimed to implement the curriculum with complete fidelity inadvertently provided examples from their own teaching where this was not the case. Others admitted that they did not even attempt fidelity, but instead used their expertise to do what they felt was best

for children, despite the rigorously monitored mandates of NCLB and Reading First. While this latter group of teachers might challenge the arguments made by Aldridge and Kilgo, the tension that all the teachers in Houston's study felt as a result of attempting to implement NCLB policy certainly affirms the authors' notion that the legislation has placed a great deal of stress on teachers, and this sentiment has been echoed by virtually all the teachers with whom we have worked since the legislation was passed in 2002.

In evaluating these five articles as a whole, it is clear that the outcomes of No Child Left Behind as it was implemented throughout the United States were far more negative than positive, at least from the perspectives of these authors. When faced with so many disappointing consequences, we wonder how legislation that replaces professional decision-making with teacher fidelity to a scripted curriculum, and that substitutes the rote learning of constrained skills for critical thinking and exploration of ideas by students, could ever have been expected to produce lifelong, intrinsically motivated learners.

It is easy to be discouraged by the consequences described in these articles, but we see a glimmer of hope from the teachers, like those in Houston's study, who continue to use their professional wisdom to do what is right for students in spite of efforts to deprofessionalize them. We are also offered hope by the recommendations made by each of the authors to reshape education policy in ways that will truly promote equity and excellence for all. We encourage the readers of this issue to use the questions and concerns raised by these articles to advocate for the changes needed to build a better and brighter educational future for all students and those who teach them.

References

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