

## **The Impact of No Child Left Behind Act and Common Core State Standards on Curriculum and the Diverse Learner**

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### **Abstract**

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*Controversy has surrounded the No Child Left Behind Act and Common Core State Standards by parents, administrators, and educators, contending that it has had a damaging effect on curriculum, teaching, and the diverse learner. Whether the No Child Left Behind Act or the Common Core State Standards are successful has been questioned for years and it is still vague if student's have accomplished what lawmakers had set forth for them. United States news reports have suggested that the country is falling behind academically to rest of the world. President Barak Obama's 2011 State of the Union address affirmed that the United States must surpass the rest of the world academically and lead the world in innovation. This theory that the United States is falling behind has lead policy makers to reexamine the education system. This paper reviews the literature on the No Child Left Behind Act or Common Core State Standard's impacts on curriculum, the diverse learner and offers suggestions for further research.*

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### **Introduction**

Linn, Baker, and Betebenner (2002) noted that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001, heightened the testing obligation for states and sought to bridge the gap between the sociocultural disadvantaged communities and the elite. Further, the NCLB legislation, as stated by Linn et. al (2002), analyzes all student's outcomes on a yearly basis, which includes the diverse population of school districts. Students who are considered to score at a skilled level vary from state to state (Linn, et. al, 2002). According to Kendall (2011), communities range in socioeconomic stability leaving an unbalanced statistical analysis of student's test scores. Kendall (2011) contended that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) created in 2009 by political entities, were a set of initiatives to establish a national set of criteria where all students are solely knowledgeable making them college and career ready.

Both the NCLB, and the CCSS, have been a focus of controversy. Whether it be that both these legislations do not effectively meet the needs of the diverse learner, argue of political overtake in education, or the impact of high stakes testing on students and teachers (Linn, et. al, 2002; Kendal, 2011), have been battled by many educators. To fully examine both the NCLB and the CCSS, I will discuss the following in this paper: (a) How the NCLB and CCSS have influenced curriculum, (b) analyzation of the benefits and drawbacks of the trend to structure curriculum around testing, how "proficiency for all" has had an impact on students and districts, and(c) how the NCLB and CCSS have impacted the diverse learner.

### **The Influence of the No Child Left Behind Act on Curriculum and the Impact of "Proficiency for All"**

On January 8, 2001, President George W. Bush signed the most notable legislation by congress, in an attempt to change the standards for all learners in both the elementary and secondary school systems (Simpson, Lacava, & Graner, 2004). This legislation, known as the No Child Left Behind Act, was implemented to make all learners "proficient" on state level exams (Simpson et. al, 2004). Algozzine (2003) noted that even though the federal government was in no way supposed to be involved in educational policy, it has now been the main focal drive in classrooms across the United States. This legislation has raised issues for teachers and curriculum developers over the years.

To say the least, curriculum influence has been driven by scientific data, where all qualified teachers are evaluated based on student's test scores (Apple, 2007). It is the assumption then, curriculum design is centered on high stake exams, data driven evaluation, and test preparation centered content (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013). As mentioned above, politics have taken over the very creation of curricula. As noted by Apple (2007), it is the very movement of neo-conservatives and neo-liberals to overtake curricula and make it a one sided system. Olsenn (1996) formerly noted that the neo-liberal democracy will have a critical impact on curriculum development. Further, Olsen (1996) affirmed that schools will need to prove confirmation that things are being done effectively and accurately. Olsen (1996) also examined the damaging effects these ideas bring to an institution, which is solely undermining what is truly important in public education. Apple (2001) argued that curricular content lacks critical thinking skills and instead promotes performance and scientific analysis. What Apple (2001) examined was the very deterioration of the school system and the pressure of districts to be proficient on state wide exams. This pressure put affliction on teachers to produce high test scores, and in turn, instruction is centered on direct teaching and test preparation (Apple, 2007). This pressure of school district to produce "proficient" student outcomes, has had a great deal of burden on teachers (Apple, 2007). The question if curriculum was at all influenced by the NCLB is an understatement. Further, curriculum, due to the NCLB and the "proficiency for all," has led to the creation of teacher centered curriculum and content based on direct test taking skills (Algozzine, 2003).

According to Ryan (2004), NCLB was created to increase student success and bridge the gap between the academically and culturally diverse students. However, Ryan (2004) perceived the NCLB as doing just the opposite for students. Schools began to divide culturally and academically, pushing the diverse student into segregated systems and dejected teachers from taking jobs in more academically and culturally diverse schools. What Ryan suggested from those statements, is for schools to focus more on growth, rather than proficiency. The term "proficiency for all" does not take into account the extreme diversity levels of students in the K-12 school system. Kim and Sunderman (2005) articulated the concern "proficiency for all" had on students from diverse backgrounds, stating that it is an injustice to have these students be proficient as their general education counterparts. Kim and Sunderman (2005) suggested considering student's growth on exams, specifically reading and math, rather than factoring in test scores to determine student's success. The idea of "proficiency for all" can then be thought of as bias when referring to the diverse student's academic success. (Kim and Sunderman, 2005; Ryan, 2004; Algozzine, 2003).

The idea behind the NCLB, ensuring a balanced system of education for all students, is not a new thought. In fact, there is a historic precedence that began with Thomas Jefferson's idea of a free educational system. Further, Horace Mann's creation of an equitable system of education led him to become the first superintendent of schools, and W.E.B. Debois' commitment of human rights, were ideas before the creation of the NCLB (Meier, 2004). This idea of the NCLB has been established long before federal legislation, signed by George W. Bush. *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, paved the path for equality in the school system. Students of all races and color were ensured equal opportunity in education. The All Handicapped Children's Act of 1975, allowed for students with disabilities to receive an equal education. These ideas, established by the NCLB, have been recreated from prior ideas (Meier, 2004). Further, Meier (2004) strongly affirmed the flaw in the NCLB, stating that it hurt underprivileged, diverse students, rather than helping them.

### **The Influence of the Common Core State Standards on Curriculum**

There has been a misunderstanding by teachers, administrators, and school officials, regarding the implementation and creation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Further, confusion arose in terms of the CCSS being the new "curriculum" for school districts across the nation. In fact, because the federal government is not permitted to propose set curriculum for school districts, governor's authority was given to propose and implement new standards (Guillory, 2015). These standards were supported by President Barak Obama to ensure students in grades K-12, specifically in math and reading, to be career and college ready by the time they graduate (Guillory, 2015). Although this is not a set curriculum, it has, in every way, affected curriculum. Porter, McMaken, Hwang and Yang (2011) affirmed that even though the CCSS was not supposed to affect curriculum, it cost the government millions of dollars to provide districts with professional development and curriculum re-design. The CCSS forced school districts to create new curriculum that aligned with these standards (Mathis, 2010). However, curriculum developers found it difficult to contend with this re-creation due to the high stakes testing that is involved with the CCSS (Loveless, 2013).

Guillory (2015) proclaimed that the biggest and most important part missing from the implementation of the CCSS, specifically English Language Arts (ELA), was curriculum. Curriculum developers were left with, what the CCSS creators gave them, and that were sample texts in no way essential to curriculum (Loveless, 2103; Guillory, 2015). In the FAQ section of the CCSS, there are a list of literature components that would essentially be taught in classrooms, however, there is an inference that the content is leaning more towards a political gain. Most of the content listed in the FAQ section is dominated by a cultural bias, and it is implied that state and local officials are left in determining what is taught in our school systems (Guillory, 2015). Further, Guillory (2015) stressed the importance of aligning curriculum with standards to successfully implement them in classrooms.

The CCSS has promoted the idea of “college and career ready.” The idea of “college ready” is largely debatable, and more so, not accurate terminology for the student first entering college (Conley, 2007). Conley (2007) stressed the significant difference between college readiness and high school proficiency, affirming that although students may have taken the same topic course in high school, the way a high school teacher approaches the topic compared to a college professor, is significantly different. A college course is paced differently, critical thinking is required that may not have been emphasized in high school, and further, deep analytical and reasoning skills is required of college students (Conley, 2007). The question has been asked if K-12 education systems should really prepare students for college and careers.

Conley (2010) contended that students are under the impression that they do not have to succeed, or try to succeed, in high school because they can always go to a community college. Conley (2010) described a community college as a place where all students were accepted due to the open admissions policy, and prepared them for a certificate program or a four year institution. Further, Conley (2010) underscored the mis-interpretation that high school students had on the open admissions policy of a community college. Conley (2010) argued that certain certificate programs held academic requirements by students and did not accept every student into their programs. The consequences, as proposed by Conley, was that the student with the notion of community college as being an easy process, will ultimately be placed into remedial courses to reinforce high school skills and content. Conley blamed this problem on the demands of high-stakes testing, which forced districts to structure curriculum on these exams. Stone and Lewis (2011) argued the importance of public high schools in assuring that all students are college and career ready upon graduation. Further, Stone and Lewis (2011) believed that high school was the last stepping stone for some students before they entered the career world. Developing a curriculum that would support these students, would better enhance career skills. The question remains, has the CCSS been successful with the incoming college students?

### **The No Child Left Behind Act and the Impact on the Diverse Learner**

The promise of educational equality for all under the NCLB was reassuring for many people. However, Meier (2004) noted that many low-income, and students of diversity, were struggling to meet the demands under this new legislation. Further, Meier (2004) affirmed that the students in poverty stricken school districts were not given the necessary resources to achieve academically under the NCLB, due to low federal funding. This led to failed state exams, and for the secondary student in particular, it left them with minimal opportunity after graduation (Meier, 2004; Fusarelli, 2004).

The NCLB Act was created to close the achievement gap between the diverse student and the general education student. Like Meier (2004), Abedi and Dietel (2004) argued that the NCLB did the opposite. Instead, it increased the achievement gap, particularly the English Language Learner (ELL) population. State assessments do not accurately measure ELL proficiency, due to the influx each year of new immigrant students to the United States (Abedi & Dietel, 2004).

Fusarelli (2004) accentuated that the NCLB had a negative impact on cultural diversity, secluding the student from participation. Further, Fusarelli (2004) noted that state policy officials conceived that the NCLB is unjust by treating all states as having similar standards. Generally, political leadership believes all states have rounded curricula that is aligned to state standards and testing (Fusarelli, 2004). English and Steffey (2001) determined six misconceptions of state wide assessments: (a) “state exams represent the most appropriate content to be taught, learned and tested”; (b) “test content is included in the curriculum”; (c) school personnel understand what is to be tested; (d) the exam is not an aptitude test; (e) low income school districts have equal funding and resources; and (f) effective professional development is provided to all school districts (pp.12-13). What English and Steffey identified was the assumption made by the NCLB, believing that all this criteria is met by state and large districts.

Fusarelli (2004) believed that the failures of the NCLB will ultimately reflect the “lack of curriculum alignment between state tests and the state curriculum, rather than mass failure of schools themselves” (p. 81). The NCLB forced districts to create more significant curriculum with close attention to standards and the diverse population of students which they serve.

Lazarin (2006) would disagree with Meier (2004) and Abedi and Dietel (2004)’s notion that the NCLB increased the achievement gap among ELL’s and other U.S. students.

Lazarin (2004) had a positive take on the NCLB Act and proclaimed that it forced school districts to re-examine curriculum to meet the needs of the diverse learner. Further, Lazarin (2004) contended that school districts now had to increase their standards for ELL’s rather than eliminate them from state assessments. What Lazarin believed was that ELL’s had been previously neglected, and were never held liable for their learning. Interestingly, in my opinion, school officials and educators have, and still are, looking for ways to improve the achievement gap among the ELL population. Lazarin (2004) raised the idea that districts now were accountable for their ELL population of students. Under the NCLB, school districts were demanded to increase accommodations given to ELL’s on state assessments, provide them with maximal support and intervention, and weigh their growth in proficiency each school year. Although Lazarin raises a good point, Fusarelli (2004) would dispute this idea claiming that low-income school districts do not have the necessary funding to support the NCLB’s provisions of ELL’s. To note, Lazarin (2004) did not elaborate on how to effectively implement the NCLB’s provisions, however, it was mentioned that the law did need to be “fine-tuned” (p.9).

### **Common Core State Standards and the Diverse Learner**

The idea that the United States is “falling behind academically” has led policy makers to redesign the national standards. According to McPartland and Schneider (1996), the idea that students are more successful when there is a more critical common curriculum is not beneficial to everyone. More so, McPartland and Schneider (1996) believed that such a curriculum would cause difficulties with implementation, and reaching the needs of every student. Although McPartland and Schneider published this article long before the CCSS were put into legislation for the national standards, the flaws were previously predicted. Constable, Grossi, Montz, and Ryan (2013) asserted that educators who teach the diverse population of students, found it difficult to get their students to meet the high demands of the new standards. Further, Constable et al, (2013) contended that a student who is academically at a disadvantage due to a disability, would find difficulty in the change of structure that the CCSS has put forth. Educators would need to reduce the amount of pressure these students may have, and differentiate the curriculum to the best of their knowledge. Santos, Darling-Hammond, and Cheuk (2012) proclaimed that the CCSS demanded school districts to closely align the content of the new curriculum to the need of the English Language Learner (ELL). More so, Santos et al, (2012) contended that professional development will need to be prioritized to better support teachers in differentiating the new CCSS and curriculum to meet the needs of the ELL student (Guillory, 2015). Meier (2014) would agree that students who were in economically disadvantaged school districts, would lack funding to properly assist teachers in scaffolding the new curriculum to meet the needs of the ELL student. The NCLB and CCSS had similar objectives for the ELL student population, creating more opportunities for these students to reach proficiency rather than being left behind.

Bunch, Kibler, and Pimentel (2012) raised the question of how the linguistically diverse student, or ELL’s as they refer to them, are going to meet the demands of the new literacy standards if they are still learning the English Language? Further, Bunch et al, (2012) affirmed the importance of working with state and local policy makers to help implement the new standards for the linguistically diverse population. Bunch et al, (2012) and Walqui and Heritage (2012) believed that building on the linguistically diverse student’s prior knowledge will better help them adapt and learn the new language and content. More so, incorporating the language and content across lessons is one strategy, or what Schleppegrell and O’Hollaron (2011) call “macro-scaffolding,” to assist the linguistically diverse student in the classroom.

Haager and Vaughn (2013) noted that due to the intricacy of the literacy texts, students who have a learning disability (LD) will likely find it difficult to comprehend, and fall behind. The LD student is mentally grade levels behind and the CCSS calls for complex research and analysis on texts. Instructional strategies are not specified under the CCSS, and educators are scrambling to differentiate and re-develop the curriculum to align with these new standards.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The NCLB and the CCSS have been under the spotlight for years by both policy makers and the districts implementing these legislations. Both legislations had a main objective which was to bridge the gap between the academically and linguistically diverse students from their general education counterparts. The problem that has been consistent through the implementation of these new legislations is continuous professional development for the educators (Santos et al, 2012; Constable et al, 2013; Fusarelli, 2014; Meier, 2014). State and local policy makers will need to accurately provide professional development to assist teachers and school districts on aligning the standards with the curriculum. Further, assistance on creating a curriculum to better serve our academically and linguistically diverse students will need to be re-developed to create successful learning experiences for these students. Further research is suggested on first year college students who have been taught under the new CCSS, and their matriculation throughout college to assess if these new standards are impacting student achievement. Further, it is suggested that researchers gather data on reading and math scores upon entering college to conclude if CCSS has been successful in preparing the high school student for college.

Two questions have arose after review of the literature, 1) Are these new standards preparing students for college? And 2) Do these students have necessary skills to prepare them for the career world? These two questions are important in further developing research on the impact of the NCLB and CCSS on learning and the success of career and college readiness.

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