

## **No Child Left Behind: Giving Voice to Teachers of Young Children**

**Martha T. Dever**  
Utah State University

**Gary Carlston**  
Utah State University

*No Child left Behind (NCLB), now being considered for reauthorization, may be one of the most significant education policies ever enacted by the federal government. The purpose of this inquiry was to understand the lived experiences of K-3 teachers since NCLB was signed into law in 2002. The data source was focus group interviews with 39 K-3 teachers, from seven school districts in four states. Data were analyzed inductively; verification strategies were employed. The findings suggest that participants felt the intent of NCLB was admirable, but that the law was not achieving its intended goal. Teachers noted the positive impact of increased resources for teaching reading. They raised concerns related to meeting the needs of young children given curricular mandates, and the negative effects of high-stakes testing. While they deemed accountability to be important, they felt restricted control over their actions in their own classrooms created an unfair condition for accountability.*

The No Child left Behind (NCLB) act (U.S. Department of Education 2002), signed into law on January 8, 2002, by President George W. Bush, may be one of the most significant education policies ever enacted by the federal government. This bipartisan legislation is designed to hold schools accountable for defined levels of student achievement or to provide other options for families to educate their children. NCLB requires individual states to establish student-learning standards in reading and mathematics and assess their progress toward meeting those standards on a regular basis. The act requires all students to be proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014, and that schools make adequate yearly progress (AYP) as established and assessed by state standards.

NCLB has its ardent supporters and critics. Supporters view the law as evolutionary change in educational policy, while critics call it a revolutionary federal incursion

into states' domain where historically, they have formed school policy (CQ Press, 2005). Supporters have hailed the notion that schools must be held accountable for the achievement of all students. Reyna (2005) uses the metaphor of triage to explain the spirit of NCLB. That is, the role of the federal government is to support acquisition of basic skills for all students with the nation's limited resources expended first to help children most in need. When those who have not obtained basic verbal and quantitative skills have reached an appropriate level of achievement, then monies can be expended on others.

Critics have called the law unrealistic, underfunded, and an unwarranted federal intrusion into public education. Alexander and Riconscente (2005) note that government efforts to increase student achievement are based on test performance and do not address the highly complex and multidimensional nature of learning. Pressley (2005) suggests that while the government should provide funding for education, the science of best practice should be left to the scientists. Thomas and Bainbridge (2002) characterize phrases like No Child Left Behind as rhetorical and empty, and note that it takes more than phrases and slogans to adequately educate children.

Over the past few years, more than half of the states have requested waivers regarding certain provisions of the law (CQ Press, 2005). Besides seeking exemptions, state legislators are asking Congress for more money to fund the act (CQ Press). There are also stern challenges to federal authority versus states' rights and responsibility. For example, in Utah, the state legislature required state education officials to place state educational goals ahead of federal requirements wherever there is a conflict. Connecticut raised legal challenges to the law. Betty Sternberg (2005), Connecticut's Chief State School Officer, wrote:

Do we want a national policy that causes states to lower their educational standards in homage to some false 'principle': annual, standardized testing? Do we want a national policy that includes requirements that are harmful to students . . .? If we are serious about eliminating all obstacles to each child's aspirations, we must acknowledge that the federal No Child Left Behind law, in its current form cannot do so (p. 32).

### **The Problem**

Scholars suggest that there are factors that influence change in teacher behaviors. Teachers may change as a result of experiences such as professional development activities, mentoring (Dever & Hobbs, 1998), professional reading, or evaluation by an administrator (Richardson & Placier, 2001). Baily (2000) suggests that external regulation influences teacher change.

However, teachers do not always have positive attitudes about external regulation. While public school accountability and curricular mandates vary from state to state and

district to district, top-down directives resulting from the NCLB legislation have, in some cases, left teachers feeling marginalized (Baily, 2000). Calderhead (2001) notes that increased regulation of teachers' work has a negative effect on their professional self-image and many tend to suffer burnout.

As teacher educators, we regularly spend time in public schools visiting students enrolled in practicum and student teaching experiences. Our perceptions of increasing concern about NCLB in many public schools led to our interest in this study. In this era of NCLB, teachers appeared to feel excessive pressure to teach mandated programs in the interest of obtaining high test scores from their students. While many factors may have influenced this attitude, they often lead back to NCLB.

While extant educational literature is replete with articles related to NCLB, only a few include the voice of teachers. Authors have illuminated teacher's perspectives on standardized testing (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Brown, 1993; Cimbricz, 2002), a major component of NCLB, and shared anecdotal comments from teachers regarding NCLB (National Council for the Social Studies, 2003; Starnes, 2004). Researchers from the International Reading Association (2005) surveyed teachers about their opinions on various aspects of NCLB. Valli and Buese (2007) examined the changing role of teachers since NCLB.

Our study provides an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of teachers of young children in classrooms today. The focus was on kindergarten and primary grade teachers as we addressed the broad research question: How do kindergarten and primary grade teachers in public schools experience teaching in the post NCLB era? Findings are of interest to teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers, and illuminate the voice of teachers as we debate the reauthorization of NCLB.

## **Review of Literature**

Policy makers view NCLB as important legislation. According to Reyna (2005):

The status quo of low achievement can be changed, it is argued, by basing educational practices on scientific research demonstrating effectiveness of those practices, assessing academic achievement reliably, and holding educators accountable for results (p. 4).

NCLB has successfully led schools to focus on student achievement. At the heart of the debate, however, is whether raising standards and increasing school accountability will lead to increased student achievement, particularly for struggling schools (Noguera, 2005). Noguera asserted that for some of the neediest schools, more than pressure to raise scores is needed. For schools with large numbers of English Language Learners (ELL) and children with disabilities, there is little hope that they will make AYP. (It should be noted that NCLB was amended in February, 2004, to provide more

flexibility in the case of ELLs (Zehr, 2004). Even in schools that provide extra support for ELLs, provide test prep classes, and have faculty committed to achievement gains, making AYP may be a tall order (Noguera).

A central issue is using standardized test scores to measure achievement and, subsequently, AYP. Laitsch (2005) identified several considerations related to assessment of this nature and school reform in general. He noted first that assessments can be valid measures of achievement if used appropriately. However, they should not be used as a single measure to make high-stakes decisions (e.g., retention, AYP). On-going formative assessments (e.g., observation, artifacts) should also inform high-stakes decisions. Laitsch also suggested that using assessment to garner diagnostic data rather than for accountability should be a priority for school reform. He noted that until assessments align with best teaching and learning practices, they will continue to corrupt the educational system.

### *Research Findings*

Valli and Buese (2007) studied the impact of policy implementation on the roles that elementary teachers fill inside and outside the classroom by examining the changing roles of fourth and fifth grade teachers over a four-year period of time. Data sources included interviews and observations with the teachers and principals between 2001 and 2005. The teachers were all appropriately licensed, their experience ranged from 1 - 40 years, many had advanced degrees, and they were primarily white women.

Their findings suggest that teachers' roles did change in the politically charged era of NCLB (Valli & Buese, 2007). They found that as policy carried increasing high-stakes, teachers' lives were more hierarchically controlled. Teachers were asked to engage in more tasks, and in tasks with broader scope. Policy mediated other influences on teacher behaviors. For example, demographic changes such as increasing numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs) led to more teacher collaboration and shifted instruction to more strategies for ELLs. Teachers had to balance this instructional shift with their obligation to align instruction with the state test (Valli & Buese).

Scholars from the International Reading Association (2005) surveyed a random sample of 4,000 members to learn about their attitudes regarding NCLB. Based on the 39% return rate from this segment of the population of reading teachers, members generally supported the basic premises of NCLB, but had various concerns related to its implementation. In general, respondents felt that implementation of research-based reading instruction and assistance for such instruction would improve reading achievement. However, most felt that the NCLB initiative was inadequately funded to support reading achievement. Survey respondents noted that reading instruction has received more attention since NCLB.

Responses were bimodal, some favoring and some not, regarding the NCLB assessment requirements to provide a basis for assessing students' reading proficiency, identify students needing additional reading instruction, and monitor student progress. Respondents were overwhelmingly negative regarding using NCLB to evaluate teacher

performance and rate school effectiveness (International Reading Association, 2005).

Regarding the consequences imposed by NCLB for failure to make AYP, teachers' responses were generally negative. The only consequence they thought would support achievement was provision of the supplemental educational services for students (International Reading Association, 2005). Most did not feel that public school choice, extending the school day, reducing local management authority, replacing school staff, converting to public charter schools, employing outside consultants, or giving full autonomy to the state would improve students' reading achievement (International Reading Association).

A report from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (Barton, 2003) highlighted the challenges faced by small rural districts regarding the NCLB Act. Based on surveys and interviews with teachers and administrators in rural Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Montana, and Washington, several challenges were identified. First, one or two outlying assessment scores can be both deceptive and debilitating (Barton). That is, a very few low scores earn schools a failing status. Other challenges include: difficulties recruiting and hiring highly-qualified staff, difficulties providing staff development opportunities, the impact of declining enrollments, and small budgets (Barton).

### *State-Mandated Testing*

Based on their nation-wide survey of teachers, Abrams et al. (2003) found that high-stakes, state-mandated testing may lead to instructional practice that is not aligned with teachers' beliefs about best practices. Teachers also reported that in this era of high-stakes testing, they often teach to the test and feel compelled to spend valuable instructional time preparing students for testing.

Cimbricz (2002) reviewed studies to examine the relationship between state-mandated testing and teachers' beliefs and practices. She found that state-mandated testing is only one of many factors that influences what teachers do. Other influential factors include teachers' knowledge of subject matter, their beliefs about and approaches to teaching and learning, their experience and their status in the school community. Furthermore, the culture of particular educational contexts influences practice. Cimbricz concluded that testing does not appear to provide primary impetus for change; in fact, the impact of testing on change may be very minimal.

Barbara Knighton, a first/second looping teacher noted that, since NCLB, an increased amount of classroom time is spent teaching test-taking skills. She noted further that more instructional time is now required for teaching math and literacy; the net effect of this is usually decreased time teaching social studies. Knighton declared that social studies and science are often either forgotten or taught at a minimal (National Council for the Social Studies, 2003).

## **Design**

This inquiry followed the tradition of phenomenology, which is designed to understand how people experience a particular phenomenon. In phenomenology, researchers attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions for people in particular circumstances. They seek to apprehend the emic perspective or the meaning that people attribute to events in their daily lives (Bogdan, & Biklen, 2007).

The data source for this inquiry was interviews with 39 kindergarten and primary grade (1-3) teachers. With the exception of one individual interview, focus group interviews were conducted in a location of the participants' choosing. Focus groups serve to induce talk from multiple perspectives. They are desirable when the topic is public and participants are likely to talk easily about the phenomenon. The advantage of focus groups is participants have more time to reflect and recall experiences. In addition, one person's comments often spur comments of others.

### *Researcher Frame of Reference*

As teacher educators, we teach students who are enrolled in practicum settings in many different schools. We each spend several hours per month in various schools observing and interacting with our students, their mentor teachers, and administrators. Since the reauthorization of ESEA to include the NCLB Act, we have noticed a negative attitude in the climate of schools in which we work. Increasingly, teachers talk about being told what to teach and reminded of the importance of test scores. These observations led to our study.

### *Participants*

Participants in the study were 39 teachers (K-3) from seven different schools (and districts) located in four states in the west, south, northwest, and southeast. Desiring multiple and diverse perspectives, we sought a maximum variation sample of participants. We purposefully sought variation on characteristics including participants': geographic location, school type (rural, city, urban), gender, years of teaching, ethnicity, highest degree earned, and grade level taught (K-3). We also sought participants from schools that both did and did not achieve AYP. Table 1 provides the demographic information of the participants.

The demographics of the student populations in the schools varied broadly except that consistent with the national demographics of K-3 teachers the participants were primarily White women. To provide context for the study, a description of each school follows.

School #1 was a primary school in a city located in the Rocky Mountain West. It served 510 students in grades K-2. The student population was 98% White and 2% other, primarily Hispanic. Spanish versions of materials were provided to native

Spanish-speaking families. Families were primarily middle-class and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The school had met AYP. With the exception of one White male, all participants from school #1 were White females. The school was in close proximity to a large state university which provided many professional development opportunities for teachers.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information for Participating Teachers*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Percent of Participants in Schools That did/ did not make AYP</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Years Teaching</b>	<b>Degrees Earned</b>	<b>Grade Taught</b>
98% female	86% Made AYP	28% Urban	84% White/Non-Hispanic	29% 5 Years or Less	53% BS/BA	24% Kindergarten
2% male	14% Did Not Make AYP	42% City	11% African American	11% 6-10 Years	21% BS/BA plus 45 credits	32% 1st
--	--	28% Rural	5% Hispanic	38% 11-20 Years	24% masters	27% 2nd
--	--	--	0% Other	22% More Than 20 Years	2% doctoral candidate	15% 3rd
--	--	--	--	--	--	2% Reading Coach

School #2, located in a high-poverty rural community in the southeast, was a Title 1 school that housed 248 children in grades K-8, one class of each grade. It was located in an area of extreme poverty. The student population was 98% African-American and 2% other, primarily White and Hispanic. At the time of the study, the school had not met AYP and the district had deemed it in high need of support to raise test scores. Teachers in the school were primarily White women and there was high teacher turnover. Interview participants were White, African-American, and Hispanic.

School #3 housed about 420 students in grades K-6 in an urban area in the northwest. There were two sections of each grade level. The school also housed an ESL center which meant that students from other schools attended this school until they had adequate command of English to be successful with their academic work. In that sense, it was a somewhat transient school. The ethnicity of the student population was 18% Asian, 2% Hispanic, 1% Black, and 79% White. The 79% White included

## *Dever and Carlston*

native Russian speakers (about 3%). The student population was also diverse in terms of SES. One attendance area housed highly affluent families while the others house lower income families. The school's Title I status changed often depending on how many students from each attendance area were enrolled at the time. At the time of this study, the school had met AYP, although in prior years, it had not. The interview participant from this school was a White woman.

School #4 was a K-2 school with an enrollment of 608 students; ninety-two percent were White students. American Indians made up 2.6%, 4.3% were Hispanic, and the remainder of students were of other ethnicities. This school was located in the Western United States in a rural region. Just over 49% of the students were reported in the lower socio-economic status level. The school met AYP. The teachers who participated in the interviews were all White female teachers with the exception of one Hispanic female.

School #5 was also located in the western United States and considered to be in a culturally and ethnic diverse city of medium size. This K-5 school had not met AYP. Just over 82% of the 507 students enrolled in this school were Hispanic and 12% were White. The remainder was American Indian and African American students. This school had just over 85% of its students designated at the lower socio-economic status level. Interviewees were all White females.

School #6 was located in a large metropolitan district in the southwestern United States. This large urban school served 1100 students in grades K-4 and had met the AYP requirements. The ethnic background of students in this school was: 46% African-American, 33% Hispanic, 18% White and 3% other. Participating teachers were White and African-American females.

School #7 was also a K-5 school located in the western United States with a total enrollment of 420 students in a mid-size city. This school enrolled 61% White students, 34% Hispanic students, 1.5% African American students, 1.6% Asian students, and 0.9% were Asian students. Nearly 77% of the students in this school were identified at the lower socio-economic level. This school had met AYP. All teachers interviewed at this school were White females.

## *Data Collection Procedures*

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed immediately following the interview. Characteristic of phenomenology, we used open-ended questions to guide our interviews.

## *Entry and Reciprocity*

We began each interview session with unrecorded dialogue about the purpose and the intent of the research. Participants were not reluctant; in fact, most seemed very anxious to talk with us and share their views. To further enhance trust, we assured



participants that involvement in this study was both voluntary and confidential. Each participant provided informed consent.

### *Verification Strategies*

Qualitative data and interpretation are, by definition, subjective. We do not claim that the findings are generalizable but acknowledge potential transferability to individual readers. Furthermore, we employed strategies to ensure that the data were believable and truly reflected the perspectives of the participants.

Verification strategies included: thick description-teaching contexts have been described and the report is replete with the voice of teachers to ensure that our interpretation is grounded in our data and not our personal perspectives; member checks-participants were invited to review drafts of the written report; data triangulation-multiple informants participated; and bracketing our bias. Our specific bracketing strategies included: (a) confronting our biases through dialogue and journaling, (b) minimizing our talk during focus group interviews so we would not influence responses, (c) having our interviewing skills critiqued by an expert observer (one interview), and (d) reviewing interview transcripts to be certain we were listening and probing emergent themes that came from the participants.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed inductively in two phases. Phase 1 began as soon as the first focus group interview was transcribed. We read through each focus group interview making notes about emergent themes. As themes emerged, they were probed in subsequent interviews. Phase 2 of data analysis began after the interviews were completed and transcribed. During this phase, we sought to better understand the themes. We listed all non-overlapping statements that illuminated the participants' experiences with the phenomenon, a process known as horizontalization (Creswell, 1998). Then, we grouped these statements into meaning units and wrote brief textural descriptions of the participants' experiences. Groups of meaning units were eventually named and used for further analysis. We reviewed our data several times seeking all possible meanings of the data (Creswell).

## **Findings**

Following informal talk to develop rapport, we began each interview by asking participants to share their understandings of NCLB. This initial question provided a safe place for the conversations to begin and allowed the participants to set the direction and tone. Overwhelmingly, the teachers felt that the intent of the NCLB legislation was admirable. They believed that teachers should be accountable and try to do what is best for all children. "I think it is everything that we have been trying to

do the years we've been in teaching and now somebody put a name to it. It was always no child left behind; that's what teachers do." Another teacher lauded the purpose of the legislation, "The purpose is to bridge the achievement gap for all students, on the premises that all children can learn." Teachers knew that the intent of NCLB was for "all children to be on grade level by third grade." They were aware of AYP and, the consequences of not meeting AYP. "There's Annual Yearly Progress and if you don't meet that, you go on probation."

We identified three broad themes that emerged from our inquiry: Considerations Related to the Children, Feeling Disenfranchised, and Focus on Tests. We achieved data saturation; eventually, no new themes emerged. The broad themes reflect experiences across schools, although specific contextual issues varied. Differences across schools are illuminated in the many sub-categories that emerged. Furthermore, implementation strategies to comply with NCLB varied across the seven schools.

### *Considerations Related to the Children*

Teachers noted some positive impacts of NCLB for children; they also raised several concerns related particularly to English Language Learners and other children with special needs. Subcategories include: meeting all children's needs, need to focus on annual growth, and inappropriate expectations.

*Meeting all children's needs.* Teachers noted some positive happenings since NCLB related to meeting the needs of children. One commented, "NCLB has really brought attention to helping children learn to read." In a district that added paid preparation days and hired reading coaches, a teacher noted, "We got paid for two extra days this year. We would have never had that or our [reading] coach, I don't believe, if it hadn't been for NCLB."

The following dialogue suggests they were pleased that NCLB led to increased emphasis on professional development:

T1: I think that even with my objections to NCLB, I can see that it has made us move quicker and faster in the direction of professional development than anything else has. And, we're more together on it. And, we're still in the infant stages of this collaboration that is being encouraged. But, that's good stuff.

Interviewer: What collaboration?

T1: We're supposed to study together.

T2: We have committees at our grade levels. Like we have 9 first grade teachers [in the district] so we have two groups and we talk about what we're using, and what's been working. That's been good.

Teachers also had concerns related to meeting the needs of children. They noted the fact that children come to school with differences that impact their learning. In the words of one teacher, "What the federal government doesn't take into account is that all children learn differently and at different rates." She suggested that the impact

of NCLB is becoming a “civil rights [issue]. We’re leaving children behind who are ethnic minorities because [the federal government is] not recognizing differences and is using tests that do not recognize differences.”

The comment of one teacher working in a Title I school suggested that some teachers felt they were held accountable for children’s different backgrounds:

A teacher that’s working in a school district where kids, from babies on, have been read to, they’ve had help at home and parents are involved, Ya, that teacher might look a whole lot better than I’ll look. I can work just as hard, but they will come out shining because their test scores might be higher. . .

Another teacher from a Title I school criticized the NCLB directive. “The standards [for meeting AYP] are fairly rigid, not very flexible, and do not take into account individual children’s differences.” Her colleague, a kindergarten teacher, added:

Our kids on every campus have different needs. . . We’re accountable for teaching [the children] academics when they don’t know how to hold a pencil! They don’t know what scissors are for! Those things are not factored in when they say, ‘This teacher is accountable for this.’

Several teachers commented about the challenges of helping English Language Learners achieve grade level reading skills. They realized that while it would be laudable to accomplish that, it was not realistic. One teacher commented:

I think it is frustrating taking the ESL endorsement and the whole time you are just taught so much about those children and how there’s a five to seven year period of time before you can expect them to assimilate into the culture and adopt the academic language. . . They’re telling us about the seven years and yet something like this comes out and we’re supposed to pull miracles.

Teachers felt that achieving grade level expectations for other children with special needs was unrealistic too, but they felt tremendous pressure to achieve that goal. One commented, “[Responsibility] is put totally on us as teachers, where maybe there is some other learning disability or something like that, that is keeping [children] from succeeding.”

A participant was concerned that teachers were being asked to teach children concepts and skills before they are ready to learn them:

I think we sacrifice a lot of the needs of our students because we are looking at the results without looking at the kids. And when I am given a list of – these are the things you need to have covered by the time they take the ITBS in March or April – and I get my students, I realize they are not ready to learn multiplication. They don’t have the basics of addition down. Yet, the district is dictating that I

teach multiplication prior to ITBS. So, I can teach it, but they are confused.

*Need to focus on annual growth.* Teachers wanted children's adequate growth to be recognized in addition to performance relative to grade level. They wanted to focus on "what [children] come with, and where they are after a year." They hoped to see "at least a year's growth" for each child in their classrooms. "A low student will work so hard, and maybe they are in third grade but they went from [grade] one to [grade] two. That is A effort for that child and I like that focus!" A teacher added:

I've got documentation of beginning year scores, middle year scores, and ending year scores. And, I may have kids who still aren't top of the notch but I can show you over three different times over the year where they started, where they were in the middle, and where they ended. And, every one of my kids has shown growth, probably 100% of my kids. . .

Teachers again expressed concern for the well-being of ELLs. "The law doesn't reflect the developmental levels or taking kids where they are and moving them along. You know a year's growth for somebody who comes not speaking English is wonderful—much less that they should be [on grade level]!"

*Inappropriate expectations.* Kindergarten teachers in particular were concerned about curriculum expectations being pushed down. One pointed out, "All the things they should be doing in kindergarten, they aren't getting in kindergarten because now they are focusing on first grade curriculum as far as I'm concerned." Her colleague concurred, "And when you look at the curriculum they've given us in kindergarten, you can't tell me that isn't teaching a little bit to the high kids."

Kindergarten teachers particularly noted the developmental inappropriateness of group administered achievement tests. One commented, "We had kids with fine motor problems so they are bubbling (refers to filling in bubbles on scantron sheets) like this [makes a broad sweeping gesture]. [I said to my colleague], go down now and get George Bush and have him come and give this test!"

A conversation among members of one focus group implied that perhaps children were being over-referred to special education to get them on grade level:

T1: With No Child Left Behind, we're holding a lot of children behind.

T2: And putting them in Special Ed . . . instead of being able to hang on to them, and remediate with them and help them, [Special Ed] is pushing them off places they shouldn't be, I think.

Interviewer: Do you have a large SPED program?

T2: It's grown.

Interviewer: Since NCLB?

T1: I think they've done a lot more. It used to be just the severe profound but now, anybody who has a little problem goes.

*Feeling Disenfranchised*

There was an overwhelming feeling of professional disenfranchisement among the teachers who participated in this inquiry. Teachers shared their vision of the NCLB legislation. “We didn’t ever want children to be left behind.” One teacher noted, “I think we should be held more accountable than maybe we have in the past. We all want 100% of our children to succeed.” Analysis of teachers’ feelings of disenfranchisement resulted in subcategories including: tension, lack of autonomy, time issues, and coping strategies.

*Tension.* Teachers across districts felt a lot of pressure to succeed as defined by district expectations and this created professional tension for them. “I do feel the pressure and you know when you get in the 90s (percentile) as a class average, and you don’t feel like it is good enough . . . ! They want more; they want it higher.” One teacher felt that her daily behaviors were over scrutinized, “I’ve never felt so under the microscope and so insecure about teaching methods that I know are good for children.” Another teacher also felt scrutinized:

All [NCLB has] done is cause extra undue stress because these kids are not ready and we’re worried about making AYP because if we don’t, we’re going to get the brunt of it, especially the lower grade levels. “You didn’t prepare them the way they should have been the first year to be ready for that third grade test. Well what did you do?”

In one district, salary bonuses were tied to student achievement. Bonus indexes were determined by “. . . AYP, how many children are tested in general education, how many are tested in special education. . . .” Another teacher continued, “It’s not fair to the teacher to state that you’re not going to get your bonus because this child didn’t make it and you had X amount of kids that didn’t pass. . . .”

Some participants felt their teaching environments were negative. One raged, “We don’t celebrate or learn from our successes with this law. It is all about what you did wrong! . . . [Our] school made AYP. . . and nobody’s coming saying ‘let’s find out what these guys are doing’.” A teacher from another district lamented, “I haven’t felt this insecure since the first year I taught . . . I just don’t feel like I can win; nothing is good enough.”

*Lack of autonomy.* Teachers felt they lacked autonomy as decision makers in their classrooms. One issue for teachers was the fact that districts were mandating particular instructional programs and in some cases, mandating the amount of time spent on those programs. “My biggest frustration is that people who have never taught six year olds how to read are telling me how to do my job!” Another shared:

The district, in a knee-jerk effort to meet AYP brings in stopgap measures and programs that they think are going to fix everything. . . . This is what you are going

to do.’ And I know from experience that it’s not going to work, yet doing what I know will work has me feeling very insecure and like one day I’m going to have my head on the line for what I’m doing if my scores aren’t where they should be.

Teachers commented further:

T1: It’s taking the choice away from the teacher. “You have to teach this objective, this knowledge at this time” so certain things you would teach in the spring; those options are taken away. They want it organized at the district level because they are accountable to make sure they get everything done. So, they’ve taken away our freedom. They are almost dictating every minute of every day.

Interviewer: How many minutes a day would you say are ‘I get to decide now’ minutes?

T2: none!

T3: When I come to school and when I go home!

T4: The last 10 minutes of the day, maybe!

A teacher from another school responded to district mandates about how to teach. She noted:

For things like reading, I have been given a very prescribed curriculum. “You will follow this, you will do this for one and a half hours per day.” You basically read from the teachers’ manual; you read something and the kids are supposed to respond. This is not teaching; that is [just] reading.

Some teachers were enrolled in university classes and noted incongruence between district mandates and what they were learning at the university. Referencing her reading assignment in a graduate reading course, one commented,

They gave us [a particular phonics program], which has some good [strategies] . . . but a ton of rules . . . In the chapter we just read, it said the rules are not helpful for children. They learn by using word chunks and things. . .

A teacher from another school was also concerned about incongruence between mandates and research-based best practices:

Congress is telling us that there are things that we absolutely positively have to accomplish but there is no money to accomplish those in the way universities and researchers have decided are best practices. We are just knocking our head against the wall, and jumping through hoops without a plan.

In one district, teachers are required to document students' progress to an extent they viewed as excessive:

I've taught long enough to know documentation is important but you all just would not believe the paperwork, the amount of paperwork we have per day. I probably have 30-40 sheets of paper per child in my room, and that's not work samples. . . You're trying to do too much paperwork in one day and you're just to a point where you don't care.

*Time issues.* Participants noted changes in their use of time for both teachers and children. One teacher reflected on how she used to spend time after school preparing for the next day. Now her time is taken up with mandated professional development activities. She said, "Almost every single night we have either a meeting, have to read a professional book, have somebody come in . . ." In another district, the teachers' prep time had been turned into additional instructional time. A teacher elaborated, "We don't have time to think. . . I know I have to cover this many benchmarks . . . but what's the quickest way to get it done?" She added, "I'm here until 6:00 in the evening and I'm here at 6:45 every morning."

Time was a factor for children's learning experiences as well. Reflecting on prep for testing and curriculum mandates, a kindergarten teacher commented, "[The children] have no time to develop anything. It's rush, rush, rush. My kids this year need to color and use scissors. We don't have time to do that!"

One teacher expressed feelings of guilt for doing activities that she had always done such as art and music. She commented, "We have to have our three hours of literacy, we have to have the hour of math. There is not time for P.E.; there is not time for art; there is not time for music."

*Coping strategies.* Teachers talked a bit about how they coped with changes that have come about since NCLB. One teacher indicated that she sets a limit on her time at school. "So, a half hour before school and a half hour after school makes it doable because then I don't get angry about spending so much time."

The following conversation shows how one teacher coped by bucking the system:

T1: I'm the one who bucks the system; I don't teach [the mandated phonics program]. I tried it the first year and six weeks later my little children were so lost and confused that I couldn't do it anymore. And my other kids were bored to tears and I was bored to tears. . . So I quit, quietly at first; and then they wanted to come and watch us teach phonics and I wasn't so I had to come clean. And it's been tough.

T2: Now wait, clarify that because you do teach phonics. You just don't teach [the mandated phonics program].

T1: I don't teach [the mandated phonics program]; you bet I teach phonics!

T2: And her scores are the highest 'cause she won't do what they tell us. But that

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is why the rest of us don't dare do what [she] does. We better do this because if our scores aren't high enough, it's because we didn't teach [the mandated phonics program].

T1: But I feel I'm walking a thin line.

## *Focus on Tests*

Issues related to testing emerged in all interviews. Teachers were unhappy about the prominence and high-stakes nature of testing. The subcategories included: narrow curricular focus and feeling threatened.

*Narrow curricular focus.* Many teachers noted that high-stakes testing narrowed the curriculum to predominately reading and math. One commented on the limited breadth of her teaching:

I'm just a first year teacher but I walked in and I'm teaching reading and math. And all those other things that the kids need are put into a block of a half an hour once every two weeks, and are considered not as important because that is not what we are tested on.

The narrowed curriculum is reflected in the following exchange among three teachers:

T1: We don't teach anything that is not tested anymore.

T2: There's no science; we don't teach a whole lot of science anymore.

T3: We don't teach science; we don't teach social studies. . .

T1: We teach reading, writing, and math, whatever's on the test; that's all we have time to teach. You do all other things. . .

T3: You sneak it in. I sneak it in!

Another teacher noted that the implementation of NCLB has had a narrowing effect on the curriculum when she passionately declared, "You know, before NCLB, . . . you could rearrange the curriculum some to meet the children's needs. Now, it's getting worse and worse every year. Those curriculums are being designed strictly towards the test."

*Feeling threatened.* Some teachers were concerned about how the test scores would be used, particularly as it related to their job security. One commented, "Administrators look at whose class had what scores. It's by your name; bam-boom, you're tagged." She continued, "It's all going to be based on this test score. We judge children on one day's performance, once per year. And you're going to accredit me with that! What about the other 190 days of school?!"

Following is an exchange between the interviewer and two participants:



T1: They threatened scores will be [made public].

T2: But they told us they could do that, put our names, and the class scores. . .

Interviewer: Who comes and tells you they will do that?

T1 & 2: The district, central office. . .

T2: They have to make it public, our tests could be posted in the paper!

## **Discussion**

Findings from this inquiry give voice to K-3 teachers regarding their lived experiences since NCLB. Consistent with the findings of the study done by the International Reading Association (2005), teachers in this study agreed with the basic premise of NCLB. They noted that increased attention to reading and additional resources (e.g., professional development opportunities, reading coaches) for reading instruction were positive outcomes of the legislation. As with the IRA sample, these teachers were opposed to the use of test scores (required to establish AYP) to evaluate teachers citing concerns like test scores being printed in the paper.

Reyna (2005), in her argument in support of NCLB, suggested that the policy places accountability on teachers and an emphasis on educational programs and practices that have been clearly demonstrated to be effective through rigorous scientific research. Conversely, teachers in this study are more aligned with the position of Pressley (2005) who noted, that government should be in charge of funding, but the science of best practice should be left to the scientists. Teachers in this study wanted to be acknowledged as experts in their own classrooms. They felt they should be the decision makers about practices specific to their classrooms. In many cases, teachers wanted to focus on the needs of the children, but felt compelled to teach and document as they were directed by authorities.

Abrams et al. (2003) found that high-stakes testing may lead to instructional practice that is not aligned with teachers' beliefs and practice. Valli and Buese (2007) found that teachers struggled to align best practice with feeling responsible to teach to the test. Participants in this study echoed these sentiments. Many noted that the focus on tests constrained their ability to do what they determined was best for their students. Instead of providing learning experiences that addressed children's needs, teachers felt compelled to teach to the test and teach children skills needed for test taking.

This study has several implications. The implication for teacher educators is that they must be aware of public policy and prepare their teacher education students to balance best practices with federal and state mandates, a topic that is increasingly appearing in professional journals. For example, when particular programs are mandatory in the curriculum (phonics programs for example) teacher education students must learn how to balance the dosage and pacing of mandated programs with other developmentally appropriate activities. Teacher educators must also prepare future teachers to document students' progress using multiple assessment measures and appropriate interventions to demonstrate accountability.

The implication for school administrators is the importance of understanding and recognizing best practice in classrooms in their schools. It is critical for them to provide support for best practice through professional development activities for teachers and education for parents. They must advocate for teacher autonomy, consider the social and economic cultures of children in their schools, and consider children's individual needs. They must be able to connect teachers to resources that will support the growth and achievement of children in their classrooms. Furthermore, they will illuminate the perspective of teachers by involving them in building, district, and state decision making.

The implication for policy makers is to consider the perspective of teachers as they develop policy, perhaps by appointing them to decision making groups. The findings from this inquiry suggest that teachers agree with policy makers that the intent of NCLB is laudable, but that teachers must be included in the dialogue to more reasonably achieve the highest degree of accountability and levels of achievement for all students. The on-going debate about the reauthorization of NCLB will be greatly enriched by including the voice of teachers.

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