

## **NCLB POLICY AND ELL RESEARCH (Panel Presentation TESOL 2005)**

### ***No Child Left Behind: The Trojan Horse of Educational Reform***

#### **C. Harper Talking Points**

##### **Focus on NCLB Requirements**

1. Highly qualified teachers (certified, licensed in *other* content areas)
2. Scientifically based research (empirical, random assignment, control groups)

##### **Introduction**

I've chosen the story of the infamous gift horse as a theme in making several points about the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation and its effects on teacher education and research in general and related particularly to English language learners (ELLs). This part of the NCLB panel discussion might also have been called "One Horse Left Behind." The equestrian metaphor is especially appropriate for a talk set in Texas.

Traditional version: Many of you are familiar with the story of the Greeks' strategy of using an enormous wooden horse to conquer Troy. After battling the Trojans for years, Greek soldiers constructed a huge wooden horse on wheels and left it outside the walls of Troy as a peace offering. They pretended to sail away and the Trojans, thinking that the Greeks had finally given up and gone home, opened the gates of their city and wheeled in the magnificent horse. Little did they know that Greek soldiers were hiding in the belly of the horse, waiting to attack the Trojans from inside the city walls.

Parallel NCLB version: After years of failing to conquer educational inequity and failure and narrow the gap between low and high performing students, a Homeric piece of legislation is drafted and presented as a solution to this longstanding educational problem. The legislation is deceptively named *No Child Left Behind* and is welcomed into the schools where its traitorous nature becomes increasingly apparent. Let's examine some of the dubious implications of NCLB related to the areas of teacher education and research.

## **NCLB and “Highly Qualified Teachers”**

A significant body of research has pointed to the overwhelming influence of teacher quality on student success (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Langer, 2002). Recognizing that teacher quality is a significant variable in student success, and in order to address the problem of a lack of qualified teachers in high-need schools, NCLB requires that all teachers of core academic subjects become “highly qualified” by the end of the 2005-2006 school year. In order to be considered “highly qualified,” a teacher must have earned a bachelor’s or higher degree, obtained full state licensure or certification, and demonstrated competence in assigned teaching areas.

The goal of providing highly qualified teachers (HQTs) is important and especially challenging in classrooms where (language) minority students are at great risk of failure and where teachers are far less likely to be fully certified, experienced, and have formal academic preparation or degrees in the subject areas they are teaching. In response to the HQT requirement, many states (including my own state of Florida and here in the state of Texas) have facilitated alternative licensure/certification. This often means certification through a paper/pencil examination and no requirement of preparation for or experience in teaching.

When prospective teachers visit my office for information on how to earn teaching credentials in ESL, I can suggest three options. First, they can pursue ESL certification through a masters degree in education with a specialization in ESL/bilingual education. Second, they can pursue an ESL endorsement program of 15 credits in five areas: applied linguistics, cross-cultural communication, methods, assessment, and curriculum & materials development. Or third, they can eschew the academic preparation and related classroom experience and simply take the state certification test, which has been recently modified to accommodate graduates of “ESL infused” (non-specialist) teacher education programs in Florida—but that’s another story.

Unfortunately, instead of investing in rigorous and proven teacher preparation programs, alternative certification has been strongly endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education as a quick fix to the problem of underprepared teachers. The report *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Challenge* (2002) criticized teacher education programs and emphasized subject area

knowledge (especially in math and science) over pedagogical skill, assessment, and classroom management. The report concluded, “To meet the ‘highly qualified’ teachers challenge, then, states will need to streamline their certification system to focus on the few things that really matter: verbal ability, content knowledge, and, as a safety precaution, a background check of new teachers.” (p. 40) This streamlining process included cutting out the “lard” from teacher education program requirements, such as teaching methods courses and student teaching experiences (p. vii)

However, focusing primarily on what teachers know rather than on what they can do is misguided and contradicts much of what we have learned about teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002). A significant body of research (including “scientifically based research” conducted here in Texas and in California, Iowa, North Carolina, Alabama and other states) has shown that teachers’ combined professional knowledge and experience are more closely related to student achievement and teacher retention than are verbal ability and content knowledge in math, science, social studies, and English language arts (the “core” academic areas). Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2005) warns that reducing the qualifications of teachers in the name of increasing the number of HQTs hurts schools that need well prepared teachers the most. This is an example of the “diversity penalty” experienced by the very schools that NCLB claims to target for improvement (Novak & Fuller, 2003).

The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality (SECTQ, 2004), with support from the Ford, Rockefeller, and Smith Reynolds Foundations, conducted case studies in four southeastern states in order to study the question of whether NCLB’s efforts to place HQTs in every classroom were effective. Their report indicated that in each of the 24 schools in the 12 districts studied, “NCLB’s narrow emphasis on content knowledge and its lack of financial and technical assistance have driven states to lower standards for teachers.”

Like other complex professions such as medicine, law, law enforcement, content area knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for teachers. Good doctors, lawyers, police officers, and other skilled professionals including teachers use content knowledge and expertise developed through experience to communicate with others, assess complex situations, plan responses, and adapt

these plans to evolving circumstances. Diagnosing and responding to individual and group needs in dynamic contexts cannot be adequately measured by a standardized test. Alternative certification plans that certify teachers on the basis of a test are overly simplistic and simply inadequate. Just as we should not evaluate student progress on the basis of a test alone, we should not evaluate teacher qualifications solely on the basis of a test. Rather, teachers of ELLs (and teacher education programs) should be evaluated using performance-based standards of professional knowledge, skill, and disposition such as those developed by TESOL in collaboration with NCATE (2002).

However, the use of a set of teacher standards does not ensure quality instruction for all learners. Many of the professional teaching standards (e.g., ABCTE and those developed for core content areas such as English language arts, social studies, math, and science) do not acknowledge the language demands of school for ELLs or address the characteristics and needs of ESOL teachers and learners in any meaningful way. The invisibility of ELLs in these standards documents instigated the development of standards specifically for ESL learners (TESOL, 1997) and for teachers (TESOL, 2002). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has developed standards and a certification process for accomplished teachers of learners of English as a New Language (2005).

Although NCLB claims to address the instructional needs of all children, ESL and bilingual education are virtually invisible in the legislation. NCLB requires only teachers who teach in core academic subjects to be “highly qualified.” NCLB guidance documents state “The highly qualified teacher requirements apply only to teachers providing direct instruction in core academic subjects” (U.S. DOE, 2004). Core academic subjects are defined as English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography. ESL is not specified as a core subject area. Many sheltered science, math, social studies, and English language arts ESL teachers are required to meet the HQT criteria through their assignments in other content areas, but this leads us to question why ESL/Bilingual Education should not also be recognized among the areas in which teachers must be “highly qualified.” To address this issue, the TESOL Board of Directors recently approved a position statement on NCLB’s highly qualified teacher requirements. The statement argues that

inasmuch as ESL and bilingual teachers must possess the competence to teach challenging content to ELLs, and have been prepared in general education foundations as well as specialized curriculum, instruction, assessment, language acquisition, and cross-cultural communication among other areas, “those ESL and bilingual educators who are fully credentialed by their state be recognized as and considered highly qualified under NCLB.”

One of the anticipated benefits of NCLB for ELLs is that it should become less and less common for teachers of ELLs to engage in what a colleague calls “a capella” teaching (a curriculum built around holidays, favorite foods, and fairy tales). The curriculum of ESL and bilingual programs must address the both oral language development and the academic language skills and content objectives described through grade level benchmarks and language proficiency objectives. However, achievement norms based on the performance of native speakers of English and measured through English language tests is inappropriate. No army of HQTs can make this happen (as we have learned from Jim Crawford, Jim Stack, and Jamal Abedi on this panel).

The irony is that if NCLB requirements were implemented sensibly and flexibly and provided with adequate funding, the quality of classroom instruction (and student learning) could be significantly improved. But the emphasis on teachers’ verbal ability and subject matter knowledge measured through certification tests will not likely have this effect. As Sarah Hudelson eloquently described in her panel presentation, the devaluing of teachers and the substitution of meaningful instruction with mindless skills work make NCLB a hollow and misleading educational “reform.”

The SECTQ (2004) reported that administrators in the districts they studied were concerned that NCLB’s emphasis on “scientifically based” professional development would lead to the use of “canned” staff development programs, as it has in the area of reading and the “evidence based” reading instruction advocated for all students (see Hudelson paper). Administrators worried that the local expertise of teachers would be discounted as publishers pushed “scientifically based” professional development materials. This disregard for teacher experience has indeed occurred. A colleague who works with “failing” schools in urban districts in New York and Florida recounted recently that school district administrators could not commit funds to after-school

reading tutoring programs using their own instructional staff (the students' teachers and paraprofessionals) because NCLB reserved the use of Title 1 funds for tutoring by commercial programs. These commercial programs (including those with no educational history or expertise in reading) are allowed to compete for exclusive contracts with schools through demonstrations of glitzy tutoring packages to parents and administrators. Incredibly, there are no accountability requirements attached to these lucrative tutoring contracts.

It is ironies such as this that add insult to injury and contribute to the problem of teacher retention—a much more serious problem than a simple shortage of teachers. Nieto (2003) cites Haycock (1998) and Education Commission of the States (2000) in reporting that nearly 50% of new teachers in urban schools leave in their first five years of teaching. This staggering rate of attrition, along with research characterizing “highly qualified teachers” as both knowledgeable and experienced (Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, and Orfield, 2004) are a clear signal that we must improve the quality of the conditions in which teachers work as well as ensuring that they are highly qualified to teach at the outset.

## **NCLB and SBR**

Escamilla, Chavez, and Vigil (2005) correctly note that test scores create a “façade of science” (p. 134). We have heard other panelists’ concerns regarding the logical and statistical problems with measuring student progress through standardized tests and the “stick” consequences (as opposed to “carrot” incentives) attached to such measures. I’d like to speak briefly now about the implications of the empirically definition and restrictive nature of “science” in the scientifically based research requirements of NCLB.

NCLB calls for “scientifically based research” (SBR) to study educational issues and interventions to serve as the foundation for “evidence based instruction.” NCLB defines SBR as the use of quasi-experimental and experimental research methods involving control groups and random assignment to treatment groups, and the use of valid assessment tools to measure evidence empirically and test hypotheses. The methods should be replicable, the results reliable, and the conclusions generalizable to a larger population.

However, just as tests (and the numbers associated with tests) portray an objective reality, experimental research and quantitative data portray an image of absolute validity and reliability. The use of empirical design and statistical tests are inappropriate in much educational research. Few authentic learning contexts lend themselves to random sampling or assignment of subjects, isolation and control over potentially confounding variables, and valid and reliable assessments with quantifiable results that have normal distributions. Students, teachers, and classrooms are more complex environments than the cornfields and laboratories in which clinical trials are most appropriate. The complexity of teaching and learning cannot be reduced to a simple statistical formula or result specifying “what works.”

My own experience directing a cross-age tutoring project and conducting research on ESL students’ reading strategies and English oral language and literacy learning with hundreds of students over a 4-year has period taught me first-hand about the constraints of empirical design, the limitations of standardized testing, and the painfully incomplete picture that test scores provide. Combined with rich qualitative data describing the diverse contexts in which learning

occurs, tests can provide a small piece of the picture in helping us understand what students are really learning.

Unfortunately, research using empirical design and test dependent “evidence” is not only encouraged but targeted for priority funding by NCLB. It is sobering to contemplate the enormous impact a single piece of legislation can have on the knowledge base of a profession. When I think of the primary research that has most profoundly influenced my understanding of language teaching, learning, and use, I think first of Shirley’ Brice Heath’s work on language use in communities, Kenji Hakuta’s study of bilingual children’s language development, Sarah Hudelson’s work with bilingual children learning to read and write, Linda Harklau’s work with teenagers in American high schools and community colleges, Merrill Swain’s research in immersion classrooms, and Louis Moll and colleagues’ work studying funds of knowledge. It is difficult to overestimate the impact on our profession if this body of qualitative research had not been conducted or published.

The TESOL Board also has recently approved a Position Statement in direct response to the consequences of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation and to what counts as valid research. The statement affirms that there are many valid approaches to research. “In a field as diverse and multifaceted as TESOL, research must be epistemologically flexible and inclusive. ... Many types of research can contribute to knowledge in TESOL provided that the research is conceptually and methodologically sound, open to critical peer review, and the results are accessible to others. In turn, such research findings can serve as the basis for sound educational policies.”

## **Conclusion**

When NCLB was rolled out in January 2002, few educators were prepared for the kinds of changes that were about to take place. This revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has resulted in the biggest “incursion” (and I use that word deliberately) of the federal government in education in the 40-year history of the ESEA. Like the Trojan Horse, NCLB has revealed itself as a cleverly disguised act of war on our public schools, with private and corporate takeover of those that “fail.” The accountability trappings of NCLB are deceptive in

that they do not truly hold schools accountable for providing quality instruction for all learners, nor do they set realistic or meaningful targets of achievement for students (and especially not for ELLs). NCLB does not ensure that teachers are truly qualified for the complex roles they must perform, nor does it provide guidelines for research that will help us to better understand the types of instruction needed in diverse classrooms. With both *No Child Left Behind* and the “one horse left behind” in Troy, the consequences have proved devastating. And as districts struggle to comply with NCLB requirements (through legitimate and illegitimate means) there is little evidence of meaningful improvement for *any* students, and particularly not for ELLs.

Before NCLB appeared on the scene, Laurie Olsen conducted an ethnographic study of a high school in California. In describing the immigrant students and their learning environment (including the teaching faculty and administration), she concludes in her wonderful book *Made in America: Immigrant Students in our Public Schools*, (which should be required reading for all secondary teachers and school administrators):

A commitment to serving “all” students is reiterated over and over. The “all” is intended as a sufficient term to imply inclusion. But beyond the insertion of “all” in statements about serving students, there has been little leadership or explicit reform dialogue addressing exclusion, equity, and the needs of students related to language and color. (1997, p. 246)

## **Recommendations**

As professional educators of ELLs, we are especially concerned with equity issues related to language diversity. However, because NCLB will almost certainly fail to meet its goals for all or even most (language majority) students, it will ultimately be challenged as a fraudulent, dangerous piece of legislation and politically abandoned. But before it is toppled and dragged away, we should consider taking advantage of the chaos it has created to move the essentially invisible and still marginalized language minority student population into a much more visible and central position.

The current “policy churn” (Sunderman et al, 2004) in schools may be an opportunity to include and empower ELLs—for example by insisting that ELL issues be included in all required

inservice for teachers (such as Reading First training that currently has little to say about ELLs); or highlighting excellent work of ELLs in content areas to show learning gains and the gaps between test scores and performance; by working with grade level, curriculum, and assessment faculty teams to integrate ELL issues with other student concerns (such as achievement on standardized tests); by consistently pointing out where existing standards or expectations or instructional or assessment practices are inappropriate and why; and by using standards appropriate for ELLs to target their needs. Also, teachers of ELLs should join their professional associations and advocate for the recognition of ESL and bilingual education as legitimate content areas along with Foreign Language, Reading, Language Arts, and other certification areas. Teachers of ELLs (and all teachers) should push to be evaluated as “highly qualified” using professional and performance criteria that make sense for them.

**Teachers Need to:**

1. Implement, study, and advocate for informal (classroom based) assessment and research to supplement and substitute for formal assessments (tests).
2. Systematically collect and document data on student performance and conduct classroom-based, case study, and other qualitative research that can tell a more meaningful story than standardized assessments and statistical tests.
3. Closely examine content instruction and teacher standards used in their school/district/state. If these do not explicitly or adequately address the needs of ELLs they should be modified or supplemented.
4. Take leadership roles in schools and districts, serving as mentors for new teachers and assisting other faculty in studying and addressing the needs of ELLs.
5. Get involved in long-term school reform projects (No “quick fix” interventions will provide a solution.)

**Teacher Educators Need to:**

1. Prepare teachers who understand assessment issues and can document student *progress* in meeting language proficiency and academic standards.
2. Need to prepare teachers to understand, value, and conduct qualitative as well as quantitative research in their schools and classrooms.

3. Need to prepare teachers to think critically and evaluate curriculum, instruction, and assessment from a critical perspective—how do school “reforms” really help ELLs?
4. Prepare ESL and bilingual education teachers to serve as advocates, mentors, and resource teachers as well as classroom teachers.
5. Be vigilant and vocal about certification and professional qualifications for teachers of ELLs as specialists (ESL is not just good teaching!)

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