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No Child Left Behind: flowers don't grow in the desert

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Abstract

The No Child Left Behind legislation purports to effectively eliminate the long standing “achievement gap” between poor and minority students and their white [sic.] peers. We employ a multi-method approach to investigate (1) the discursive dominance and construction of NCLB, (2) the quantitative validity of the law’s implicit causal model of educational achievement and reform, and (3) the experiences of teachers forced to negotiate the demands of NCLB in “failing” schools. Using data drawn from federal and state policy documents, U.S. Census, the State of Connecticut Department of Education, and interviews with teachers from urban schools, we find that: (1) Through the advocacy of state regulated systems of accountability and the imposition of “scientifically proven” pedagogical methods, NCLB constructs a model that removes the effects of structural inequalities from consideration. (2) Quantitative analysis of data drawn from Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) displays the inadequacy of this model. (3) Interviews with urban teachers further validate the inadequacy of this model and the importance of social structural variables in understanding and/or addressing the “achievement gap.”

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1. Introduction

Hailed as a sweeping educational reform by supporters, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)¹ purports to bridge long standing achievement gaps between poor and/or

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¹ Also known as “The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2002.”

minority students and their largely white peers by instituting a system of “accountability” in education. NCLB mandates that all states design yearly tests through which adequate “progress”² is measured, ideologically and manifestly conflating student achievement with the ability to perform on standardized tests. Policy materials suggest that NCLB is designed to address differential educational achievement by race and class (CSDE, 2004; NCLB, 2004). Still, the discourse and employment of the NCLB legislation do not recognize issues of institutional racism, class, or language disparities as potential causal variables underlying differential performance on standardized measurements (tests). In eliminating social structural conditions as either potential causal factors or targets of social policy, the law and its institutionalization holds “failing” schools and teachers alone responsible for the recognized “achievement gap” (NCLB, 2004). We argue that poor and minority students may actually be harmed more than helped by this legislation, both in its redefinition of achievement as test scores (under the neo-conservative ideology of the standardization movement), and in removing a sociological understanding of structured educational inequalities from our explanation of academic achievement.

In this paper we use a multi-method approach to (1) review the discursive construction of educational reform in both NCLB policy materials and local print media in the state of Connecticut, (2) quantitatively investigate the relationship between race/class inequalities and average standardized test scores in Connecticut, and (3) interview teachers from urban schools labeled as “failing”³ to investigate these potential relationships and teachers’ negotiation of the demands placed on them by NCLB legislation. We begin by deconstructing the key components of the NCLB Act and analyze the manner in which those components have become powerful discursive expressions with very real implications. Having identified (1) “accountability” as a focal point of the legislation and its accompanying public discourse and (2) accepting the ideological discourse of NCLB and the standardization movement as dominant, we then define the causal model of educational achievement articulated by the legislation.

In response, we use data on the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) and from the U.S. Census to construct an alternative causal model. Even if one accepts standardized test scores as a valid proxy for achievement, average scores can be explained to a great extent by the average income, poverty, and current racial composition (% non-white) of that particular local community. Finally, we interview teachers from two “failing” districts (Urban 1 and Urban 2) to (1) “test” our alternative model against their experience and perspectives, and (2) investigate how teachers in “failing” schools negotiate the demands placed on them by NCLB legislation, which targets them as primary agents of reform/change.

² Here we refer to “Adequate Yearly Progress,” (AYP) defined in NCLB policy materials as, “An individual state’s measure of yearly progress toward achieving state academic standards . . . the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts and schools must achieve each year [in accordance with state and federal standards]” (NCLB, 2004).

³ We focus specifically on two communities with high percentages of poor and minority students, which we label “Urban 1” and “Urban 2.”

2. The discourse of NCLB: “accountability,” “failing” schools, and the “achievement gap”

We begin our investigation by seeking to answer the following questions: What problem does the NCLB legislation seek to address? What are the suggested solutions? What is the implicit causal model suggested in the legislation? We address these questions first through an analysis of federal NCLB and state (Connecticut) policy materials as what [Dorothy Smith \(1990a\)](#) calls “textually mediated discourse.” Second, we illustrate how the discourse of NCLB is reflected in local print media, “framing” ([Parenti, 1993](#)) the issue of educational reform in a way consistent with the ideological perspective evident in the legislation.

Discourse, especially policy discourse formally legitimated by the state, must be understood as more than simple interaction. It is one channel through which power relationships are determined, perpetuated, or challenged. The arena of discourse is where ideologies and epistemologies are resisted and/or made legitimate, where the “problems” of public education are constructed and framed, and where “solutions” are presented and legitimated as the dominant approach(es). As [Smith \(1990a, p. 215\)](#) suggests, “discourse develops the ideological currency of society, providing schemata and methods which transpose local actualities into standardized conceptual and categorical forms.” As we suggest, NCLB legislation provides the “ideological currency” for understanding the goals and strategies of contemporary educational reform. It communicates and perpetuates the dominant framework to understanding and addressing “problems” of differential student achievement in all localities.

With regard to policy discourse, such ideology is “legitimated” through its textual mediation—its manifestation as official, written, bureaucratic state documents, or in this case, written law. In this sense, we must consider federal NCLB and state educational policy documents as part of the “textually mediated discourse” ([Smith, 1990a](#)) that defines and shapes how contemporary public educational reform is understood and formally “done.”⁴ To [Smith \(1990a, p. 211\)](#), textually mediated discourse is unique. “(I)n the distinctive formation of social organization mediated by texts, their capacity to transcend the essentially transitory character of social processes and to remain uniform across separate and diverse local settings is key to their peculiar force.” When discourse becomes text, especially official or legitimated text (policy), its literal existence and implicit ideological and epistemological meanings solidify, taking on a kind of inertia—becoming (potentially) the litmus test against which related policy discussion is legitimated or rejected in the dominant arena.⁵

As part of federal policy (formally legitimated), and as textually mediated discourse, we see NCLB as such a “litmus test” for educational reform. As the “law of the land,” it has institutionalized a particular approach to understanding and directing the educational system in the U.S. The effects of such a policy should not be limited to ideology alone—its

⁴ [Jackson \(1995\)](#) also applies [Smith’s \(1987a, 1987b, 1990a, 1990b\)](#) theoretical approach to understanding standardized, “competency based” curriculum reform.

⁵ This is not to suggest that, once written down (even as law), policies and ideas become permanent, static, and impermeable. As [Smith \(1990a, p. 211\)](#) comments, the “transcendence” of textually mediated discourse “is itself an accomplishment of transitory social practices.”

employment “on the ground” has real effects on issues of budget, curriculum, institutional organization (of schools and school systems), and the creation of new educational policies. Still, we must give some importance to what NCLB says about how our educational system is to be understood and “fixed.”

2.1. What problem does the NCLB legislation seek to address?

The manifest goal of the NCLB Act is to “close the gap” (CSDE, 2004) of student achievement among various public school populations in the U.S. The “achievement gap” is explicitly described in policy documents as, “The difference between how well low-income and minority children perform on standardized tests as compared with their peers. For many years, low-income and minority children have been falling behind their white peers in terms of academic achievement” (NCLB, 2004, “glossary”). First, in the ideological discourse of NCLB student or academic achievement is conflated with performance on standardized assessment tools (tests). Second, the tendency for poor populations and populations of color to perform poorly relative to dominant populations is clearly recognized. This relationship is *not* recognized as a causal one, but as simply descriptive of the “gap”—who is succeeding and who is “falling behind.” Third, there is a clear assumption or recognition (matter of interpretation) of the intersection of race and class in describing “gaps” in performance. This is illustrated above in comparing “low income and minority children” to “white peers.” Such a comparison would be analytically inaccurate in describing the racial and class composition of (for example) Appalachia. At the same time, it is potentially accurate in describing impoverished urban districts—especially in states where the effects of (re)segregation, “White flight,” unequal disbursement of educational resources, and urban decay are painfully evident. In short, the NCLB Act manifestly seeks to improve the academic “achievement” of poor populations and populations of color relative to their middle/upper class white peers (*sic.*). Further, “achievement” refers specifically to performance on standardized tests.

2.2. What are the strategies for change?

2.2.1. Accountability

In the language of policy documents, the strategies for addressing the above “achievement gap” are based on “four common-sense pillars”: accountability, flexibility, choice, and “teaching methods proven to work” (NCLB, 2004). Before briefly describing each of these four components (below), it is important to illuminate the description of the NCLB approach as based on “common sense.” In part, we wish to describe the discourse of NCLB as hegemonic in the Gramscian (1971) sense. In becoming the “law of the land” and the litmus test against which educational reforms are compared for legitimacy, its ideological assumptions/perspectives (and the ruling relations⁶ they support) become dominant and invisible—as “common sense” rather than a subject of legitimate contention. Here we see an overt attempt at referring to the strategies and ideological assumptions employed in the NCLB legislation as uncontested—“common sense.”

⁶ See Campbell and Manicom (1995) and Smith (1990a, 1990b).

The first, and by appearance most important “pillar” of the NCLB legislation is the establishment of a standard “accountability system.” Under such a system, “each state sets academic standards for what every child should know and learn.⁷ Student academic achievement is measured for every child, every year. The results of these annual tests are reported to the public” (NCLB, 2004). Of course, the measurement, or “assessment”⁸ tools used to set and measure performance relative to set “standards” are standardized tests. As mandated by the Act, “schools must administer tests in each of three grade spans: grades 3–5, grades 6–9, and grades 10–12” (NCLB, 2004) to test student performance relative to state standards in the areas of reading, math, and science. The results of the tests are to be made public on state and district “report cards” indicating levels of performance and “progress” for each state, district, and school.

In Connecticut, the assessment used for grades 10–12 is the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT), purported to measure competency in math, reading, writing, and science. The CAPT, first administered at the 10th grade, is also a “high stakes” exam. Passing the test is the sole criterion for whether or not students receive a “Certification of Mastery” at the point of graduation. Beginning with those graduating in 2006, the test must be included “when developing criteria to be used in assessing whether students have the basic skills necessary for graduation” (CAPT, 2003, p. 8). Students who do not pass the CAPT throughout their high school career may not graduate, or may graduate with a lesser, or relatively illegitimate credential. In this sense, students are potentially “held accountable” to their own performance on “high stakes” tests such as the CAPT. This is potentially problematic with regard to the exacerbation of structured educational/socio-economic inequalities if one were to find the poor and populations of color disproportionately failing such assessments. Still, for other assessments used (such as the Connecticut Mastery Test, or CMT, administered in elementary and middle school), and in the policy discourse of NCLB, students are not the primary focus for “accountability.” Who or what *is* to be held accountable for the achievement gap?

First and formally, the NCLB Act targets *schools* to be “held accountable” for the performance (or lack thereof) of their student populations on state standardized tests. To illustrate this point, take the following excerpt(s) from only the *first two pages* of the NCLB (2004) policy introduction/overview:

Each state **school** district, and **school** will be expected to make adequate yearly progress toward meeting state standards . . . **school** and district performance will be publicly reported in district and state report cards . . . if the district or **school** continually fails to make adequate progress toward the standards then they will be held accountable . . . **schools** will be responsible for improving the academic performance of all students, and there will be real consequences for districts and **schools** that fail to make progress (emphasis added).

⁷ Most states refer, as suggested in NCLB policy documents, to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to design consistent state standards (NCLB, 2004).

⁸ Described explicitly as “another word for ‘test.’ Under *No Child Left Behind*, tests are aligned with academic standards” (NCLB, 2004, “glossary”).

Schools are to be “held accountable” according to each state’s designed “Corrective Action Plan,” which gives each state “increased authority to make any necessary, additional changes to ensure improvement” (NCLB, 2004, “glossary”). Put simply, states are given the authority and motivation to (1) design curriculum, budgets, and assessments in accordance with NCLB guidelines, with an explicit focus on improving test scores, and (2) employ any number of positive and negative sanctions to insure that schools make the improvement of test scores a major priority.

The “ideological currency” of accountability, especially in regard to the evaluation of schools, has clearly been accepted and employed in the local (Connecticut) public discourse surrounding NCLB, standardized testing, and public school reform. Local papers actively publish and discuss area test score results, or “report cards,” with varying amounts of editorial comment. One consistent theme in the public discourse (print media) is the discussion of the “failing school,” used to describe schools/districts that fall well below state (testing) standards. Take the following excerpt from one mainstream Connecticut newspaper for example,

Three years ago, the state began using results to identify a list of 28 **failing schools** . . . (T)hat list of **failing schools** is likely to grow and the consequences could be grave . . . NCLB will allow students attending **failing schools** to transfer⁹ [emphasis added]. (Gottlieb and Frahm, 2002, B1)

The acceptance and use of “failing schools” as a concept in local public discourse is important for two reasons here. First, it reflects and further legitimates the “ideological currency” of standardization and accountability in assuming that standardized test scores are the primary measure of whether or not a school (and implicitly, its staff) succeeds or “fails.” Parenti (1993) refers to this phenomenon as “framing,” where the news media either constructs or reflects a limited perspective on particular issues or representations. This perspective then becomes legitimate and dominant in the public discursive arena, and alternative perspectives are marginalized or excluded. Through employing the concept of “failing schools,” the issue of public school reform is effectively framed in a way that affirms the ideological perspectives of NCLB—student achievement and school quality are conflated with performance on standard assessments.

Second, schools serving predominantly poor, urban, children of color are more likely to post test scores below state standards in Connecticut (discussed in our data analysis below), and are thereby more likely to be labeled as “failing.” As a result, the real or perceived deficiencies of these schools/districts are seen as issues of performance rather than symptoms of structural inequalities. Part of the NCLB design is to hold schools *publicly* accountable regardless of socio-structural factors, and this is in part accomplished through the construction and employment of discursive concepts like the “failing school.”

2.2.2. Flexibility

Where public assessment and its various consequences are the (manifest) “stick,” of school reform under NCLB, “flexibility” is presented as the “carrot” and second “common

⁹ This comment is made theoretically, whereas “choice” programs are not terribly prevalent in Connecticut public education.

sense” pillar. The idea here is that federal funds and rewards should be given to schools that perform well. Schools are then given the “flexibility” to use these resources, however deemed necessary, to continue or increase success on standard assessments (NCLB, 2004, “glossary). At first glance, this would seem to address problems of differential resources among school districts.¹⁰ Upon closer examination, the issue of flexibility becomes somewhat more problematic. First, if only schools that are performing well (or better) on standardized tests may receive funding, how are the potential resource deficiencies of underperforming schools to be addressed? In short, though increased performance is rewarded with resource, *lack* of resource is not considered or addressed here as a substantial causal variable for schools’ initial relative “success.”

Second, it seems that in Connecticut (for example), federal funding meant to increase “flexibility” has been insufficient. In a recent press release (CEA, 2003) the major Connecticut teachers’ union president made the following comments:

We know that our schools need more funding, updated materials, smaller classes and more parental involvement in order to help all of our children learn at high levels . . . Nevertheless, the federal budget for NCLB is \$11 billion¹¹ short of the amount promised in the law. And NCLB forces schools to waste what scarce money they do have on the things they need least: more paperwork, more bureaucracy, and more standardized testing requirements.

Three points should be illustrated here: (1) there is a lack of resources that inhibits schools’ and teachers’ abilities to meet current expectations, (2) promised funding has been insufficient, and (3) the legislation may actually give schools *less* rather than more flexibility in spending local and federal funds.

Third, there are a number of stipulations school districts must follow in order to receive federal funding under the NCLB Act, many of which may be unknown to teachers, parents, and students. One such stipulation that has received some level of resistance and attention in Connecticut (given the current “war on terror”) concerns military recruitment. Specifically, NCLB requires “high schools that receive federal money to give military recruiters the contact information of juniors and seniors without informing them first unless the parent or student specifically asks them to” (Brune, 2003, p. 2). Teachers and activists in Connecticut have seen this stipulation as problematic for disproportionately concentrating on the state and nation’s poor and populations of color—those who populate schools with the least “flexibility” to turn down federal funds (Brune, 2003).

2.2.3. Choice

The third “pillar” of NCLB is to provide “public school choice” for students and parents. In short, the NCLB act supports the use of school vouchers, or other mechanisms that allow students to leave “failing schools.” This fits into the framework of school accountability—where students are treated as customers who choose between competing

¹⁰ This is typically explained by the “leftovers” of segregation, or “resegregation,” and the primary use of property taxes to fund public school districts (see Feagin, 2001 and Kozol, 1991 for some illustrations).

¹¹ A recent article (Goodman, 2004) approximates the budget shortfall at \$9.4 billion, or 27% of the full funding amount.

educational providers in a sort of “free market” environment. Seeing as our study focuses on Connecticut, and that voucher and “school choice” programs have yet to take root (locally), we only mean to mention “choice” as another central component to the discourse of NCLB.

2.2.4. *Emphasis on teaching methods proven to work*

The fourth and final pillar of the NCLB strategy concerns curriculum, and the training and pedagogical practices of teachers. Policy materials stress the standardization of teacher training and classroom curriculum as the primary areas of concentration for ensuring educational quality in the classroom. Under NCLB, teachers should be trained to employ “scientifically proven” (NCLB, 2004) pedagogical methods (such as phonics rather than critical literacy programs). Further, teachers and schools are directly (in policy discourse) and indirectly (through holding them “accountable” for test scores) required to develop substantively (“teaching to the test”) and organizationally (putting students in “test” situations) test-based curricula. We will return to a discussion of these issues shortly, but for now only wish to make one crucial point: the discourse of NCLB suggests that schools *and teachers* are to be “held accountable” for the “achievement gap.”

In short, according to the textually mediated discourse of NCLB, schools and classrooms are where success or failure happens—and these terrains are largely (though not exclusively) negotiated by *teachers*. Further, we see this perspective reflected in public discourse on NCLB and how to fix “failing” urban schools. In an article on one “exceptional” urban school¹² the reporter comments,

[Principal] knows all the pitfalls that can make urban education so difficult—crime, poverty, drug abuse, broken homes . . . the veteran principal has no time for excuses. He expects his high-powered staff of experienced teachers to produce students who achieve [on tests] at a level far above that of similar schools. (Frahm, 2003, A7)

Aside from the principal, teachers are seen as the primary agents of change in affecting how students perform on standardized tests. Further, here we see the effects of structural inequalities as unacceptable “excuses” in explaining how students, teachers, and schools perform. Additionally, in a recent communication with a Connecticut Department of Education official, the current state policy towards progress is made clear:

The current No Child Left Behind legislation makes it clear that background variables such as race, gender, ESL and poverty are not legitimate dependent [sic.] variables for supported research and analysis. This means that these variables cannot be justified as causing performance gaps. All students must perform at a high level, regardless of personal background including poverty. (personal email correspondence, March 23, 2004).

This is a fundamental ideological assumption of the causal model presented in the NCLB Act for explaining and addressing educational deficiencies and the “achievement gap.” In refusing to consider the background of students, the social structural context of the

¹² This particular elementary school received a great deal of attention as one of the only schools in its poor, urban community of color to meet state standards on the CMT.

community or broader societal dynamics, NCLB places sole responsibility for educational achievement and lays the foundation for culpability for failure schools and teachers.

2.3. *What is the implicit causal model presented in the NCLB legislation to explain and address the “achievement gap”?*

The implicit “causes” or causal variables of interest in determining the “achievement gap” may be extrapolated from the NCLB legislation’s proposed solutions (four pillars). As suggested in the discourse of NCLB, the achievement gap is addressed primarily through the establishment of a system of accountability. In other words, the achievement gap may be measured and monitored by comparing test scores to established standards in order to identify successful or “failing” schools. Successful schools are applauded and given the resources and “flexibility” necessary to continue success. “Failing” schools are “held accountable” for their performance via public recording of scores, and are expected to employ testing/standardized curricula, pedagogical methods “scientifically proven to work,” and further restructuring to increase testing performance. If adequate yearly progress (as measured by test scores) is not demonstrated, corrective action must be taken by schools, and enforced by the state. The resultant causal model (Fig. 1 below) holds the achievement gap (operationalized and defined as differential performance on standardized tests as a proxy for student achievement) as the dependent variable, to be substantially affected by the educational quality of schools. The educational quality of schools is then measured by student performance on standard assessments (accountability/adequate yearly progress) and operationalized as the degree to which teachers and administrators employ pedagogical techniques “scientifically proven to work.”¹³

The central role of accountability as a policy strategy implies that educational quality causes educational achievement, unmediated by the social structural conditions of the community, its students, or the available resources of the schools themselves. Furthermore, in foregrounding accountability and instituting increased supervision, standardized curriculum, and specific teacher training as the methods that (if and when employed, i.e., corrective action) will impact the achievement gap, teachers are among those primarily held responsible.

In looking at the model a few points deserve further illumination. First of all, social structural variables are absent from the model. As such, the effects of structural inequalities on students, communities, and schools are omitted. Although we believe and support the notion that all students (regardless of race or ethnicity) can learn and perform at high levels, we cannot deny the effect of social context as this model implies. Our position places the responsibility for group “failure” squarely in the domain of structural inequalities, not in the inherent ability or character of the individuals making up the group. Second, in that “all students must succeed,” student preparedness, whether in terms of ascribed or achieved attributes, is also eliminated from consideration. In fact, students remain in the model only as data generators—not as important and variant contributors to the dependent variable. In

¹³ Since we have already problematized the roles of choice and flexibility in the context of Connecticut as limited if not inapplicable, they drop from the model proposed here.

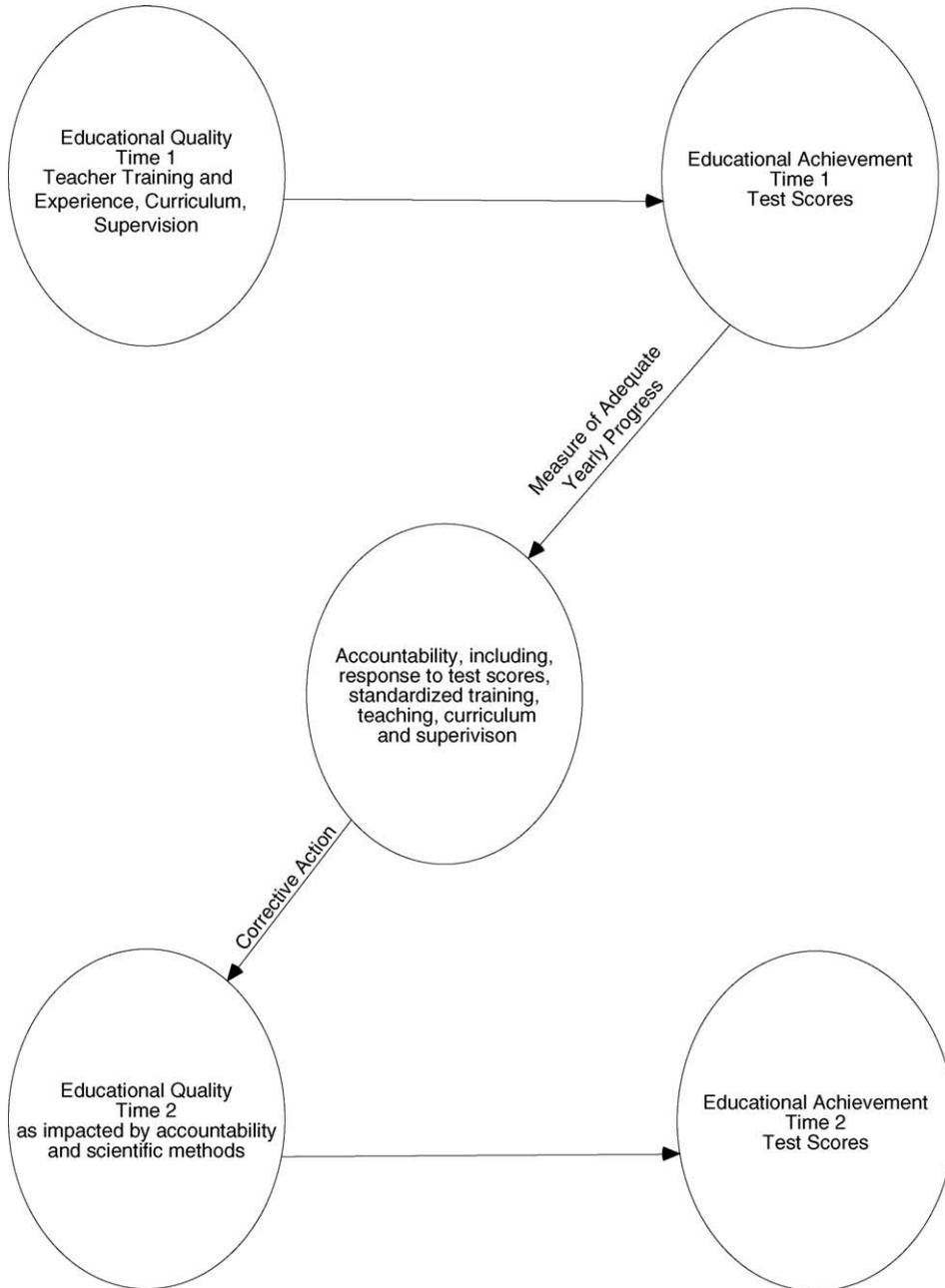


Fig. 1. NCLB-implicit causal model.

an ironic twist so as to leave no child behind, NCLB leaves students as real people operating in real social contexts, oddly out of its model.

The simplified resultant model of change leaves only educational quality (operationalized as teacher quality, curriculum, and supervision at time 1) as the primary cause of educational achievement (measured by test scores at time 1). Test scores at time 1 are assessed to determine adequate yearly progress. Schools that fail to demonstrate AYP must be held accountable and accountability as a treatment is imposed as corrective action by addressing teacher quality through curriculum, training, and supervision that have been “scientifically proven” to work. The model’s supposition is that as a result of corrective action, teacher quality at time 2 will improve which in turn will generate an increase in educational quality—test scores at time 2. As this cycle repeats, test scores will (theoretically) continue to improve, thereby eliminating the achievement gap.

The suggested (NCLB) model becomes an essentially simple one, in that educational quality yields educational achievement. Further, the simplicity of the explanation plays into the common sense quality of NCLB. Students in poor communities are “underperforming” on standard assessments because they go to bad schools with bad teachers—structured inequalities are not causal variables (in themselves) in producing/affecting the achievement gap. In this sense social context, including the effects of institutional racism and poverty, have been “left behind” in the causal model suggested by the NCLB legislation.

2.4. *An alternative model*

How might structural inequalities fit into a causal model explaining “educational achievement,” however defined,¹⁴ in the U.S.? As illustrated in Fig. 2 (below), we propose an alternative model of educational achievement that views students as real, active human agents that operate within and are affected by socio-structural variables (structural inequalities). It is by no means a “complete” model in explaining either the effects of structural inequalities on student populations, or in explaining all contributing variables for the determination of educational achievement. We only seek to suggest how such social structural variables (effects of poverty, institutional racism, etc.) might fit into a model for explaining educational achievement and the exacerbation or minimalization of “achievement gaps” as a point of contrast with the NCLB model.

In this hypothesized model, educational achievement (which remains intentionally unoperationalized, problematic, and contested) is a function of student preparedness which itself depends upon a combination of social structural factors including but not limited to the income, poverty and racial makeup of the community in which the student lives. Additionally, those contextual variables impact the educational resources in terms of facilities, materials, and teacher recruitment. Teachers teach in this very specific concrete environment and interact with students that are, if not a product of that context, at least affected by it.

¹⁴ We mean to suggest here that even if one accepts test scores as the most important measure of educational achievement (we do not), one may develop a hypothetical model that includes the effects of structured inequalities as significant independent variables.

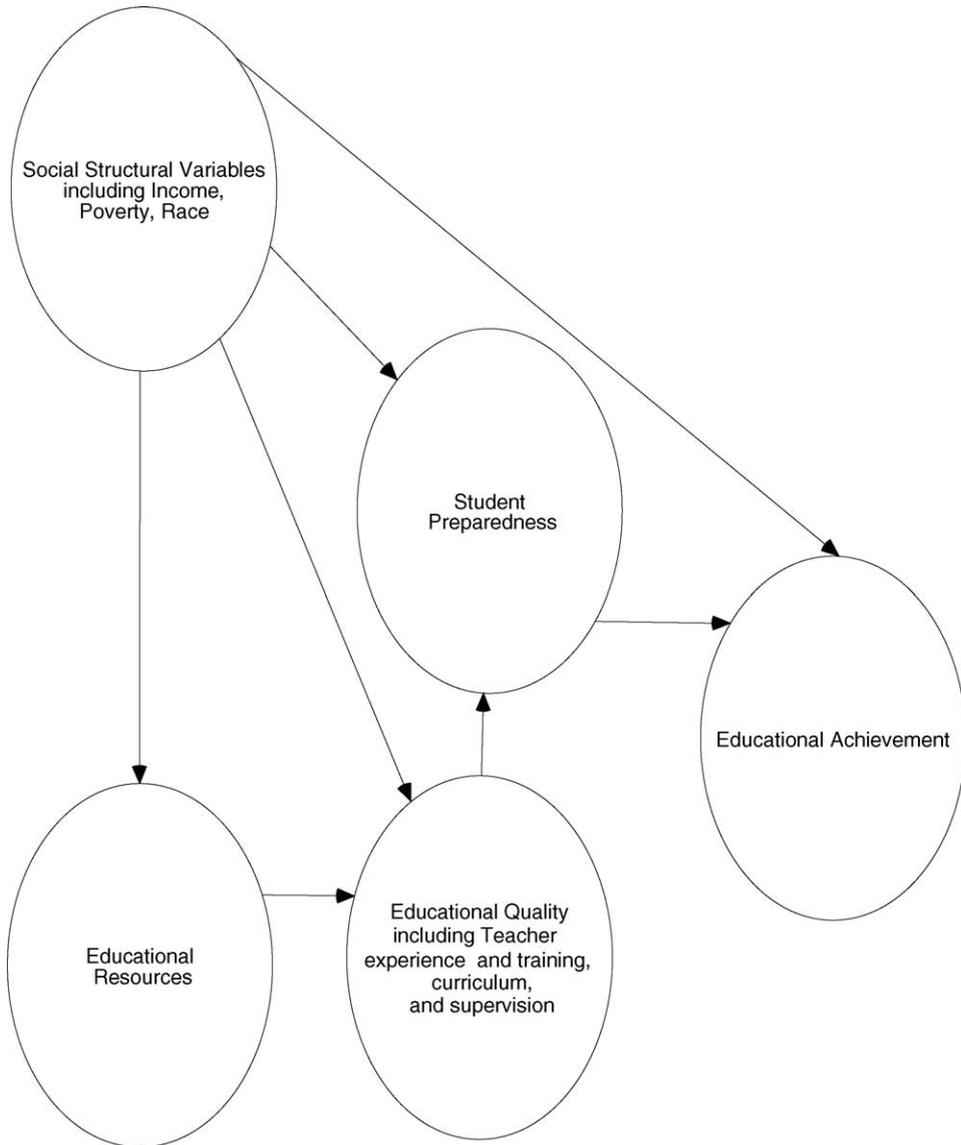


Fig. 2. Alternative causal model.

Although NCLB does not explicitly claim to explain the cause of the longstanding achievement gap, in proposing to resolve it with accountability and “scientifically proven” methods, the implication is that educational quality (bad schools and bad teachers) is to blame rather than educational resources, social structural conditions, or inadequate measurement of the dependent variable. This argument is lacking in several ways. First of all, as we have noted the treatment of race, class, and ESL as extraneous variables is sociolog-

ically uniformed. Second, as several researchers suggest¹⁵ it may be inappropriate, biased, and potentially oppressive to conflate educational achievement with test scores. Third, in dropping social structural variables and students from the model, the responsibility for alleviating the achievement gap falls squarely on teachers. Finally, and most insidiously, NCLB may serve to perpetuate covert racist and classist ideologies when its “common sensical” approach to solving the achievement gap fails to achieve that end.

Similar claims have been made against the broader standardization movement, designed primarily by the neo-conservative right around “raising academic standards” (“raising the bar”) for students in the US (Spring, 1997, 1998, 2002). The standardization movement has been historically problematic for students in relatively poor, urban communities of color. In response to supporters of raising academic standards and student/school accountability,

there has been criticism of the assumption that high academic standards and achievement tests will overcome educational problems . . . For instance, high academic standards will not solve the problems for New York City public schools which, because of student overcrowding in 1996, had to operate classrooms in a converted World War II torpedo factory, a renovated department store, aluminum trailers, and in school hallways and auditoriums. (Kozol, 1991; Spring, 1997, p. 37).

Urban education reform movements based on raising academic standards and accountability through testing (NCLB) have historically ignored the devastating effects of unequal resources, poverty,¹⁶ and differential (along lines of race, class, and gender) socialization through curriculum and tracking.¹⁷ As a result, policies such as NCLB exacerbate *and mystify* the effects of institutional racism and poverty on the poor and students of color. As demonstrated, NCLB policy as dominant in the textually mediated discourse of public educational reform excludes the possibilities of addressing racism and poverty.

In light of the preceding discussion, it seems that an alternative “causal model” for understanding and addressing the “achievement gap” might need to include the role of structured inequalities as (substantively) significant independent variables in describing performance disparities among school districts. In the following sections we build and begin to investigate such a model through an analysis of CAPT test performance in the state of Connecticut.

3. Using race and class to explain test scores

In this section we show that CAPT scores can be explained using social structural variables including poverty, income and race. Additionally we call attention to one urban town, that despite being identified as “last” or “failing”, may actually be over performing rather than under performing. Finally, we review and compare the training and experience of

¹⁵ See Apple (1997), Feagin (2001), and Spring (1997, 1998, 2002) for some examples of this critical research.

¹⁶ See Anyon (1995a), Feagin (2001), Kozol (1991), Neubeck and Cazenave (2001), and Spring (1990).

¹⁷ For examples of research on the reproduction of capitalism and race, class, and gender inequalities through curriculum and schooling see Anyon (1995b, 1980), Apple (1997, 2000), Bowles and Gintis (1976), Carnoy and Levin (1985), DeMarris and LeCompte (1995), and Spring (1998).

teachers in two urban cities with that of all Connecticut teachers. Findings in this section further support the need to include social structural variables in any understanding of the extant achievement gap.

In Connecticut, high school students take the CAPT near the end of their sophomore year. Using town average scores on the CAPT supplied by the Connecticut Department of Education, we find that the four tests: math, science, reading and writing, correlate with one another at no lower than 0.89. Therefore, we have condensed the four scores into one averaged score for this analysis. Averaged raw scores for 2002 and 2003 range from a low of 208 to a high of 291 with a mean of 257.

In previous research (Levy, Rodriguez, & Villemez, 2004) 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census data were used to reconceptualize Connecticut into five analytically distinct groups of communities based simultaneously upon their income, poverty and density. The five groups were labeled: wealthy, suburban, rural, urban periphery and urban. In Table 1 we show the 2000 averages of median family income, poverty rate, and density by town, the three variables used primarily to determine the groupings. Additionally, we show the average percentage White non-Hispanic of each group as well as their average CAPT score and approximate percentage of students meeting state goals.

In reviewing these figures, the positive relationship between income and educational achievement and the inverse relationship between poverty and test scores are both apparent. Additionally, we see that more densely populated communities, especially the urban communities, tend to have the lowest incomes, highest poverty, highest percentage of non-white residents, and post the lowest average test scores.

In Connecticut, urban communities are disproportionately populated by people of color, primarily African-Americans and Hispanics. According to 2000 U.S. Census figures, African-Americans and Hispanics each comprise approximately 9.4% of Connecticut's population. In comparison, the towns of Connecticut identified as urban house 18.8% of the total population but 54% of all Hispanics and 55% of all African-Americans. Both African-Americans and Hispanics account for nearly three times the population percentage within urban Connecticut (27.3% and 26.9%) as compared to the overall state average. Although these figures demonstrate the overall segregation of the state and the concentration of African-Americans and Hispanics in Connecticut's urban communities, the concentration of African-American and Hispanic students in urban schools is even more striking. In this article we focus on two of the seven towns identified in 2000 as urban. In one, African-Americans and Hispanics account for 67.8% of all students (17.4% and 50.4% respectively) and in the other 92.9% (African-Americans 39.7% and Hispanics 53.2%).

In order to make sense of these figures we treat average CAPT scores by town as the dependent variable and we seek to explain scores in terms of poverty, income and racial composition. In Table 2 we show the results of four regression equations. They are all versions of an alternative model of educational achievement in which either 2002 or 2003 CAPT scores are the dependent variable. In the more simple model for each year, only median family income and poverty rate are used as independent variables. We then add the percentage of the population white non-Hispanic for both years. In every case each independent variable is statistically significant. Controlling for both poverty and race, income has a positive effect upon test scores. This finding provides an explanation for the higher scores of the wealthy as opposed to the suburban groupings despite identical poverty and

Table 1
Comparison of five groups of towns in Connecticut

	Median family income (\$)	Percentage of population in poverty (%)	Average town density	Percentage of the population white (non-Hispanic) (%)	Average 2002 and 2003 CAPT scores	Approximate percentage of students meeting state goal (%)
Wealthy	151,026	2.6	885	94	280	81
Suburban	83,885	2.6	542	95	266	62
Rural	64,735	4.6	230	95	256	56
Urban periphery	60,932	6.6	1923	81	244	40
Urban	39,500	17.7	5841	48	219	22

Table 2
Regressions of CAPT scores on income, poverty and race

	2002 CAPT score average	2002 CAPT score average	2003 CAPT score average	2003 CAPT score average
Constant	246.91	199.98	236.38	194.17
2000 median family income	0.0002652**	0.000283**	0.0003844**	0.0004046**
2000 population below poverty	−195.71**	−68.69*	−191.23**	−78.68*
2000 percentage of the population white non-Hispanic		44.18**		39.34**
R^2	0.695	0.746	0.736	0.768

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$

Table 3
Comparison of predicted and actual CAPT scores by town groups

	Average predicted scores	Average actual scores
Wealthy	285.94	280.01
Suburban	263.67	265.98
Rural	254.72	255.69
Urban periphery	247.9	243.79
Urban	218.91	219.38

near identical racial composition. Similarly, both income and poverty contribute to rural towns having a score lower than suburban ones. From these regression coefficients we would surmise that non-whites must have a higher rate of poverty than whites in Connecticut. The inclusion of race in the model reduces the effect of poverty more so than income, but both race and poverty remain statistically significant. The resultant equations generated by this model are not surprising. That is, income and increasing percentage of the white population coincide with increasing test scores while increasing poverty deflates scores. On the other hand, we were surprised by the degree of variation in test scores that these models appear to explain. In each case the models provide predictive efficiency of no less than 83%.¹⁸ This suggests that CAPT scores can be reliably predicted using only income, poverty, and racial composition.

We further tested the achievement gap(s) in test scores by comparing the values generated by these regression equations to the average actual CAPT scores in the five groups of Connecticut towns (Table 3). The test scores not only follow the same pattern as the relative income and poverty of the five groupings of towns, but the near coincidence of predicted

¹⁸ Predictive efficiency is determined by correlating the CAPT score predicted by the regression equation and the actual scores for each town or district in Connecticut for which we had data ($n = 135$). This is simply another way of stating the model R or reviewing the R^2 , which is representative of the percentage of variation of the dependent variable explained by the model. In either case, each instance of the model including social structural variables is a highly efficient predictor or test scores.

and actual scores demonstrate the predictive value of income and poverty, as well as racial concentration upon student performance as measured by these tests. In fact, it appears fair to say that CAPT scores measure a clustering of income, poverty and racial concentration (that is, social context) more than student performance.

We continue this analysis at the town level and compare the predicted and actual CAPT scores by town. Given the explanatory power of these models, it is fair to expect the ratio of actual to predicted scores to be very close to 1.0. That is, towns perform on the CAPT very close to where their income and poverty would predict. Clearly this finding does not resonate with the NCLB model of change but speaks more readily to a model of change that considers income, poverty, and segregation as potential factors in need of policy interventions. It may be useful to consider schools that fail to approach a ratio of actual to predicted of 1.0 as in need of assistance and to label those schools or districts that exceed 1.0 by a significant margin as especially successful. In that way, town-wide performance on standardized tests would be considered in light of the average income, poverty, and racial makeup of a community rather than exclusive of those material conditions.

We have selected two urban schools, both of which include “failing” schools for a closer analysis. The first town has the highest rate of poverty and the lowest income in the state. For years, this town scored lowest in Connecticut on the CAPT and its superintendent vowed to “never be last again.” As we will demonstrate in our interviews with teachers from this community, this public discussion and stigma is well known. In contrast, our research indicates that despite the public stigma, these urban districts are at least performing as well as can be expected or in one case overperforming. In fact, after controlling for income and poverty, we find that Urban 1’s ratio of actual to predicted CAPT scores is the highest in the state. Rather than last, Urban 1 is first.

In Table 4 we provide the scores, ratios, and demographics we have discussed, the percentage of population using English as a primary language, and a measure of adult educational attainment. It is most noteworthy that teachers in both Urban 1 and Urban 2 have the same number of years of experience and credentials as the average teacher across the state. This further supports our assertion that social structure and social context matter as key factors in determining educational achievement.

Table 4
Comparison of two urban towns and state average

	Urban 1	Urban 2	Average of all state towns
2002 CAPT scores	208.73	230.33	257.67
2003 CAPT scores	207.98	219.13	255.93
Ratio of actual to predicted	1.08	0.99	1
Percentage of pop white (%)	19	60	90
Poverty rate (%)	29	16	5
Median family income (\$)	27,051	41,056	73,962
Percentage English primary (%)	53	57	89
Adult educational attainment	2.09	2.29	2.95
Teacher years of experience	14.2	13.2	13.5
Teachers: percentage with master’s degree (%)	67.3	78.0	77.8

NCLB stipulates a model of change that ultimately foregrounds the manner and content of educational instruction as the necessary causal determinant of educational achievement measured by test scores. In Connecticut, we have shown that existing standardized test scores can be reliably explained using a model of town income, poverty and racial composition predicting town average test scores.¹⁹ In fact, one town in particular with high poverty, low income, and high percentage of non-white students is leading the state in outperforming these reliable predictions. Rather than the implication of poor teaching, poor administration, or unfocused curriculum implicit in the accountability model, this analysis foregrounds the deep-seated structural factors that explain test scores. In Urban 1, teachers may be generating successes that not only go unappreciated but completely unnoticed given the NCLB/accountability model. In reviewing the teacher training and experience through the gross statistics, we find that teachers in Urban 1 and Urban 2 have just as much if not more experience than the average teacher across the state. Using these data alone it is impossible to support a model that would cite teacher quality in terms of either experience or training as responsible for poor educational achievement.

Still, the discourse generated by NCLB in both public venues (newspapers, curriculum manuals, vision statements, etc.) continue to reflect and promote the NCLB/accountability model. As such, teachers must negotiate both the effects of various “corrective actions” (designed to increase test scores) as well as their implied culpability. We now review our interviews with teachers from the towns of both Urban 1 and Urban 2.

4. Interviewing teachers: the voices of experience

Having analytically differentiated two opposing models for explaining the “achievement gap,” we wish to find whether or not *teachers* perceive social structural factors as “causal” in creating the “gap.” Whereas the discourse of NCLB centers around “failing” schools and teachers as both responsible and accountable for the “achievement gap,” we seek to investigate how they negotiate these implicit (and explicit) demands.

To that end, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with teachers from two schools (6 from Urban 1, 6 from Urban 2).²⁰ Teachers were recruited for interviews both through distributing general fliers on the research during faculty meetings and through limited, single level “snowballing” techniques. All interviews were conducted in person, tape-recorded, and transcribed for coding and analysis.

¹⁹ Given that these equations are cross-sectional and not longitudinal, we argue that we are measuring the effect of social context. In no way are we supporting a culture of poverty or biological essentialistic argument. On the contrary, we simply show that test scores are more a measure of income, poverty and racial composition, i.e., social context than of educational quality, innate ability or even educational achievement.

²⁰ We interviewed six men and six women, only one of whom was a person of color (African-American). Whereas statistics on the racial and gender composition of teachers in Urban 1 and Urban 2 are unavailable, it is difficult to determine whether or not our sample is sufficiently representative in these respects. Still, it was clear through attending faculty meetings in both districts that a vast majority of the teachers were “white,” and that men and women were both substantially represented.

Not surprisingly, all the teachers we interviewed voiced a deep commitment to educating and helping their students. However, with striking unanimity they felt as though their potentially helpful experience, insights and recommendations were either ignored or overlooked by both administrators and policy makers. They are fully supportive of accountability. Yet, we found that they experienced accountability as constructed by NCLB as restrictive and misguided, while the accountability they endorse focuses on directly enhancing student welfare. Concurrently, these teachers face the very real repercussions of the social context in which they teach and their students live on a daily basis. The experience of these teachers supports a model of educational achievement in which social structural variables are prominent, not ignored.

4.1. Tests are important, but . . .

The teachers we spoke to are highly committed and dedicated professionals. As we noted, teachers in Urban 1 and Urban 2 have training and experience approximately equal to the state (Connecticut) average. One Urban 2 English teacher described her feelings about teaching in this way:

I see a lot of very, very troubled kids, and I look to myself . . . Its almost a life calling, but it is frustrating. It is pretty much my life goal and it really is my purpose for being around on this planet is to bring positive feedback and positive environment to kids, in addition to helping them improve their reading skills.

Her level of commitment is striking and her goal clear. She approaches her work as a “calling,” that is, as not only a primary identity (teacher), but as her most salient reason for existence. Teaching her students to read is important, but secondary to the construction of a nurturing environment in which student welfare is central.

An Urban 1 teacher notes that his initial motivation has carried him through over 30 years as an educator:

The time of John Kennedy . . . that was my generation. What are you going to do to better the world? Teach in the inner city. Been there ever since. (33 years at same school)

For 33 years this teacher has been dedicated to teaching in an urban setting. He, like the other teachers we interviewed, is aware of the “achievement gap,” and is committed to working toward its elimination. Other teachers argued that their colleagues, fellow urban teachers, could “hold their own” with any other group of teachers. They not only became teachers in order to help students, but also continue to hone their skills and expand their abilities through ongoing training. Additionally, some teachers we spoke with further demonstrated their dedication by mentioning the various sacrifices they make on a regular basis, including purchasing supplies with their own money.

The teachers we interviewed showed concern about educational achievement and awareness of the continuing “achievement gap.” In keeping with our previous discussion, these teachers hold experience and credentials on par with the state’s average. If teachers are to blame for the achievement gap, it does not seem from our investigation to be a function of training, experience or motivation/dedication. Nonetheless, these teachers work within

an educational system dominated by the discourse and ramifications of NCLB. As such, they must somehow reconcile their experience with the legislation that, as we have argued, points to teachers and the schools in which they work as being primarily responsible for the extant achievement gap.

Teachers with whom we spoke demonstrated the ubiquity and dominance of NCLB by prefacing their insight into NCLB's inadequacies by first asserting their acceptance of the dominant discourse. Asked to voice his opinion of NCLB, one teacher said:

I understand the reasons for it. Having it be mandatory for graduation, I understand the reason for that too and a part of me really agrees with that, but on the other hand I look at my students and they will never, never, well some may be borderline, but the majority will never score high. Does that mean they shouldn't graduate?

We asked another (Urban 1) teacher to assess the contribution of standardized tests.

[Is the CAPT in the end a good thing for your students?]

I think it's a good thing for the kids. But is it fair to give a kid with sixth grade math skills a test and beat us down—to beat down all the teachers and beat down those kids?

Teachers, it appears, recognize that they must accept NCLB and its textual mediation in the form of testing, curriculum and an ever-increasing volume of internal and external written discourse. They endorse the stated goal of increasing educational achievement and in urban schools lessening the "achievement gap." However, their concrete experience indicates that it is unrealistic to mandate achievement without considering social context. As illustrated in the following passage, these teachers express anger at being scapegoated, and more importantly at the lack of student centeredness of the legislation:

It is very frustrating. I think we're doing a good job but we still have so many that are failing . . . Kids are learning. I see progress in kids but many won't pass the CAPT. They are going to look at my scores and say 'look, they're not doing well', but hey, they learned in my class. That's what is important and that's not reflected in those scores.

In fact, the test may not only fail to adequately measure student progress, but these teachers point out that in valuing the test so highly, "educational achievement" may be damaged rather than assisted. They question the long-term value of "teaching to the test." One teacher aptly captured the feelings of many of her colleagues in saying:

I think the CAPT test takes away from my individuality as a teacher. And I don't like teaching towards a test. I'd prefer teaching skills that will help with any kind of test or other challenge, not just this one test. Now its like I have to teach to this test because these kids have to pass this thing.

The CAPT potentially takes away teacher autonomy and room for creativity, lessening teacher quality from their perspective. In its support for standardized curriculum, the CAPT may encourage learning that is of little comparative value. Teachers point out that the

importance placed upon the CAPT is an opportunity cost expressed at the expense of precious classroom instructional hours. As one teacher reflected:

The CAPT test is a valid test, but it's administered in a rotten way. If you can do the SATs in 4 hours, you should be able to do the same thing with the CAPT test. Here it lasts 12 days . . . you can't get ADULTS to sit down for 350 minutes for 4 days . . . This is an entire month that I can't cover any material, and you're asking me to get students prepared for the SATs. It's like robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Although the teachers we interviewed are not against testing per se (“tests are important”), they indicate that the current effects of tests such as the CAPT (1) lessen their classroom autonomy, (2) curtail pedagogical creativity, and (3) deprive students of instructional time. In other words, educational quality is lessened rather than enhanced. Consequently, teacher morale may be eroded due to the effect of the implied model of NCLB upon students and teachers. Teachers are becoming progressively more frustrated by the failure of policy makers to include them or their experience in the attempts to address educational achievement:

Lately the morale has been really low. And we are not getting asked for our opinion. Why, I have a masters degree, I've been teaching. I had a Fulbright scholarship. I'm not an idiot. Ask me my opinion. Don't I count for something? You know, and no one asks. I told them last year, you are taking away my autonomy. You need individuality in the classroom.

Teachers in all classrooms know a great deal about how to educate students. They resent not being included in the determination of policy. In this section we have argued that teachers in the urban schools that we studied are dedicated professionals. Given the dominance of the discourse and institutionalization of NCLB, they express tacit acceptance and acquiescence while simultaneously (drawing from contextualized knowledge and experience) expressing doubt as to whether NCLB as currently espoused and practiced adequately measures or increases “educational achievement.” Teachers and the contextualized knowledge/insight that they could contribute are ignored and neglected. In response to being identified as partially responsible for “failing” schools, the teachers we interviewed seemed frustrated, and perhaps angry. The “common sensical” approach of NCLB appears to leave teachers “out”, as one teacher reiterated:

It is so easy to mandate. Teach them and be accountable. Where are you? Why aren't you in our classrooms? Why aren't you visiting? Why weren't educators included in this? That is a cry that teachers make. Administrators and politicians make decisions and leave teachers out of it. And we're the ones doing the teaching; we're the ones that know what's going on in those classrooms. But they don't come. They have been asked but they don't come.

4.2. *It's not our fault*

Not only are teachers frustrated, but they also have come to recognize, as our model of NCLB suggests, that they are being blamed for poor achievement on the part of their

students as measured by the tests.

It's clear we're judged by the CAPT. Now you're hearing, 'this year you had 5 pass the CAPT, or you had 7 pass the CAPT.' They're tracking [teachers] now. Things that they [administration] weren't going to do but they **are** doing.²¹

The teachers we interviewed showed discomfort and anger concerning the potential for their worth to be measured (directly) by the test scores of their students. Another (Urban 2) teacher commented:

It is really bothersome that my success as a teacher is based on who passes the CAPT exam as this one and only thing. These kids don't pass and they come back and say you must not be doing your job.

Teachers' relevant insight on this matter is not limited to issues of learning methods or scheduling practices. Teachers know a great deal about the communities in which they teach and the lives of their students. They listen to and interact with the community and their students each and every day. They directly experience the social context that contributes or forms the foundation upon which they strive to teach. Below we highlight several teacher quotes that give voice to how teachers experience and come to understand their students' lives. The teachers we interviewed from Urban 1 and Urban 2 understand that social structural variables including poverty, crime, linguistic barriers, and (student) transience impact their students in highly significant ways. At times their students simply do not see the immediate relevance of school when faced with dire physical needs or other fundamental responsibilities. The following stories suggest their recognition of the relationship between social structural variables and educational achievement:

I'm not saying that some students can learn and some students can't—all students can learn. In the past few years we had a huge influx of students from Bosnia in [Urban 1]. These were kids who weren't in a formal educational situation because **they were fighting a war** . . . now you're asking them to sit in a class for 35 minutes periods when 6 months ago they were shooting at each other, or from refugee camps. So we had kids acting out—violently. 'I've been on my own since I was nine years old, who are YOU to tell me what to do?' you know? . . . Six months ago, I had an Algebra one class with 15 or 16 different nationalities—no one was a native American [sic.] . . . it was like the UN. You have to try and relate these things to their lives, so I'd ask, 'what were you doing last year?' and one girl said, 'I was in a Cambodian refugee camp. My father was killed in Vietnam, and my mother was raped and beaten, so we had to live in the camp for 7 or 8 months, and we're lucky we're here . . . I've been here for a month.' And now she's sitting in my Algebra class.

You tell [students] to come in to take a high stakes test and last night they had to take care of their mother, or their brother was shot—or even killed, or they have to take care of their other two siblings in the mornings and are late to school or don't eat.

²¹ In multiple interviews, teachers mentioned the use of "ID" codes that connect students and their scores with specific teachers for the express purpose of enhancing accountability.

Kids in the suburbs don't have those sorts of things attached to them. What's more important?! That's not graded in these tests.

I hear this all the time; the inner city teachers just aren't any good. I hear that in the newspapers and that's sad. They think we're not doing our job because the scores are so low. That's part of it but what about the community, the parents, trying to get everyone to show up on the first day of school and making a big deal out of it that shouldn't have to happen Some of these parents are very young themselves. Or single parents, and some work two or three jobs, and it's not that they are not concerned about their child but with working that much. So when they come home they are tired and they don't ask did you do your homework? Did you go to school?

In the above excerpts we see that the teachers we interviewed recognize and suggest the many effects of social structural variables (such as poverty) on the academic performance of their students—especially as measured by standardized tests. As primarily demonstrated in the third quote (above), the teachers we interviewed did not espouse a “culture of poverty” argument—which suggests that poor, urban, communities of color are culturally opposed to schooling and “hard work.” Teachers know that poverty, crime, family structure and hardships, work demands (of parents and students), and English proficiency affect students' ability to academically perform and develop sound strategies for self-empowerment. Teachers know that the NCLB model of educational achievement is, in this sense, inadequate.

In contrast to their contextualized knowledge, the teachers seemed to substantively reject the ideological assumptions of NCLB, presented as hegemonically dominant, or as “common sense.” As one teacher suggested:

I think there is an issue of common sense, and we are losing our common sense. It's like we're trying to grow a pretty little flower garden in the desert without understanding how to irrigate it first. We're stepping through gutters of starving people and saying testing them will educate them. We're losing our common sense.

As Smith (1987a, 1987b, 1990a, 1990b) repeatedly argues, dominant ideology communicated through discourse may neither reflect, nor be successfully called into question by situated knowledge generated through everyday experience—typically from the perspectives of non-dominant populations/community members. So, despite teachers knowing that the implied NCLB model is insufficient, and despite their support for a model explaining the “achievement gap” that includes social structural variables, teachers have no choice but to find ways to negotiate and make sense of NCLB.

4.3. *Teachers: accountable to students, affected by discourse*

As professional educators, the teachers we interviewed endorse and invite accountability, but accountability for them is based upon a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that takes children as they are and seeks to promote their welfare. Teachers are in favor of methods that have been “scientifically proven” to work. Unfortunately, they often cite examples where they were forced to abandon methods that they thought to be innovative and educationally productive. In their interviews teachers expressed the desire

to develop students as life long learners rather than as simply test-takers. The teachers we met are unhappy about NCLB. They resent the law and its model's implications about them, but more importantly the deleterious effects it is having upon their students and their own professional lives.

Accountability for the teachers in Urban 1 and Urban 2 seems to reflect a philosophy of teaching and measuring student achievement that is contextualized rather than standardized. The teachers we interviewed viewed themselves as accountable for promoting student learning that translated into future success—such as getting a desired job, or getting into their desired university. When asked about her philosophy of teaching one Urban 2 teacher said of her approach:

Student-centered, more discovery oriented. My focus, the way I teach is student centered. I see myself not as a giver of skills, of information, but someone who helps the student learn those things on his [sic.] own—I teach how to learn. Creating dependence is a disservice.

Teachers overwhelmingly defined their own accountability by whether or not their students met varying definitions of “student success” or “academic achievement.” As one teacher put it, “their success is my success.” They admittedly gauge their own success and the success of their students in part through direct interactions and (qualitative) observations. As one (Urban 1) teacher explained in telling the story of a current student,

It's not just big ticket testing . . . This boy, [Joe] . . . that young man has struggled all year long, and twice he's given up on himself [failed]. Now I've got him convinced to come in for extra help. This is the 6th or 7th day in a row that he's come in for extra help. Have I had success—you bet. If I can get [Joe] to feel good about his success—his math, and that he can learn mathematics, then I'm successful—TO ME.

We did not find that teachers were opposed to accountability per se, but that they simply approached it differently—as a subjective measure that takes into account their own situated knowledge of the lives of each student, and the social structural context in which they both operate. In fact, these teachers seemed to *invite* accountability. One science teacher in Urban 1 said,

You want to evaluate me, come on in and see what I'm doing. And see if I'm doing my job. I've got an open door, you can come in any time.

Further, these teachers do not believe that high stakes testing, and standardized curriculum and instruction (as proposed under NCLB), will serve the students they teach. They unanimously expressed the need for support in the form of resources and recognition of the social structural factors (such as the effects of poverty, institutional racism, and “urban decay”) that they and their students face. As one (Urban 2) teacher said in obvious frustration,

The people who wrote this—who set policy—have no idea what is going on in education. Walking through a school one day to get a photo op, is not reflective of what education is. Education is a reflection of society. I don't think societally we are doing very well.

At the same time, many of the teachers we interviewed felt as if their pleas fell on deaf ears, or that they were dwarfed by the ideological and political dominance of NCLB. In a poignant statement, one African-American teacher from Urban 1 summed up her feelings about NCLB:

The government does what they want to do, when they want to do it, how they want to do it, where they want to, and to whom they want to do it. We get left behind.

In sum, we have attempted to illustrate a variety of points here, with a particular emphasis on the following: (1) As shown in the narratives of teachers from “failing” urban schools, based upon their direct experience in the classroom and the communities in which those classrooms are situated, they seem to reject the NCLB model in which teachers are foregrounded as primarily responsible for the “achievement gap.” (2) The insights of the teachers we interviewed seem to lend support for employing a broader, sociologically inspired understanding of differential achievement that incorporates the roles and effects of structured inequalities. Further, teachers seem to suggest that any attempt to lessen differential student achievement must address the related issues of poverty, linguistic barriers, lack of resources in the home and school, student transience, etc. (3) Teachers endorse accountability and sound pedagogical practices, in so far as those strategies and methods reflect and respond to the goals of and structural barriers faced by their particular students.

5. Conclusion

NCLB, as dominant in the textually mediated discourse of public educational reform (now the “law of the land”) is presented as an intelligent and common sensical “new” approach to eliminating the longstanding educational achievement gap between minority and poor children, and their mostly white [sic.] student peers. Policy makers join educators, parents and others in specifying differential academic achievement (defined in NCLB legislation as the “achievement gap”) as a significant social problem. In order to “fix” the problem, NCLB mandates and enforces a system of accountability including the imposition of curriculum and pedagogical methods “scientifically proven” to work.

Although we share one manifest goal of NCLB—eliminating the correlation between income and/or minority racial status with poor educational achievement, we demonstrate the inadequacies and perhaps covertly racist/classist, or simply sociologically uninformed implications of the legislation and its powerful accompanying discourse. In fact, we argue that NCLB as enacted and practiced may serve to legitimate and reproduce existing educational inequalities by race and income rather than progressively overcome them.

Based upon four “common sense” pillars of accountability, flexibility, choice, and “scientifically” supported teaching methods, NCLB has achieved discursive dominance in the public (media) and policy arenas. In employing the policies of NCLB, educational achievement has been defined and is now measured primarily through standardized, “high stakes” tests. In basing its strategies for change around these four pillars and employing “accountability” through standardized testing, NCLB divorces the “achievement gap” (the legitimated measure of differential academic achieve-

ment) from the overlapping effects of institutionalized racism and the reproduction of poverty.

We graphically translate the implicit understanding of NCLB into a model in which educational quality (with an emphasis on teacher quality) primarily determines educational achievement as measured through test scores. Alternatively, we show that in Connecticut, a simple model in which the variables of income, poverty and racial composition are included as predictors of educational achievement (operationalized as test scores) explains its variation²² (as the dependent variable). We argue that in leaving social structure out of the explanation of, and political solution to the achievement gap, NCLB is both inadequate and potentially oppressive.

Further, we find that the continued ideological and political dominance of NCLB could have additional socially oppressive effects. If the NCLB model of educational achievement remains dominant and the “achievement gap” persists (as we suggest, it most likely will), we fear that NCLB may serve to perpetuate and legitimate longstanding explanations of differential achievement purported to be based upon racial or cultural characteristics. That is, if one accepts the notion that “accountability,” properly structured and regulated, *will necessarily lead to improved educational achievement, then continued failure must be something inherent to the population that underperforms.*

At the very least, we demonstrate that NCLB as the dominant discourse and law, places inordinate pressure upon the teachers working in “failing” schools. Our interviews with teachers from “failing” urban schools show that they experience NCLB as holding them responsible. At the same time, these teachers draw from their situated knowledge as urban educators to suggest that that social structural variables *matter*. To them, NCLB is a “bad joke,” that blames teachers (and schools) for educational disparities, strangles their creative and professional autonomy in forcing them to use teaching methods that they see as relatively ineffective, and masks the “real problems,” such as linguistic barriers and poverty, that present challenges to the academic success of their students.

Having (1) demonstrated the inadequacy of the NCLB model of educational achievement and (2) in finding that the experience of teachers in urban schools validates our alternative model, we argue for including a sociologically inspired understanding and approach to defining and addressing differential educational achievement. We advocate listening to teachers in an attempt to resist the dominant discourse of NCLB. As sociologists, we know that societal institutions are interdependent. The attempt to solve a complicated and entrenched social problem by regulating components of *one* institution (education), will clearly fail in this case. In listening to teachers, we can bring social structural issues into the discussion and redirect any legitimate progressive efforts.

In so doing, we support a reevaluation of the allocation of resources within the enactment of NCLB. Instead of testing, testing preparation, monitoring, reporting, and evaluation—all unproblematized components of this misguided policy and discourse—we endorse a redirection of resources that focus on the real material needs of children and schools, and the indefinite suspension of “high stakes” tests. Additionally, we support teachers in calling for explicit resistance to the dominant discourse of NCLB. Poor and minority children are capable of learning and their families share the dream of advancement through education. The

²² Of course, this variation is somewhat synonymous with the “achievement gap.”

“achievement gap” is a result of deeply rooted structural factors—not simply the inadequate efforts of teachers, or the (in)capabilities of students. By exposing the insidious implications of NCLB, we promote resistance to the current hegemonic public and policy discourse. It remains our hope that a radically different approach to bridging the achievement gap will result. Capable, but institutionally thwarted students, aided by committed teachers, would be joined by a society that holds *itself* accountable for inequalities, and now participates in the demanding process of change.

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