

***The Concept of Quality Education in the Face of High Stakes
Testing in Texas and Louisiana
—The Impacts of NCLB and Modifications Made by ESSA —***

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Abstract: *Globalization has triggered educational competition between many nations across the world. The desire to compete and compare educational success has introduced the desire to somehow quantify quality education through student intelligence, usually measured through high stakes testing. In accordance with the testing-oriented goal, The American educational system, like many around the world, has been placing growing emphasis on closing the educational gap between students from different backgrounds, thus improving countrywide scores while attempting to provide equal access to societal success and educational prowess. The two most recent amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) both changed the way education is conducted in the United States, while also having different overall impacts on different states. This research will define what quality education is through utilizing educational theories that focus critical pedagogy, analyze the effects of NCLB in Texas and Louisiana, and compare policies from NCLB and ESSA under the same theoretical lens.*

Keywords: *NCLB, ESSA, Quality Education, Testing*

Purpose

The obsession with measuring student learning and school efficacy in the face of globalization birthed the widespread fear that education in the United States was not measuring up to the educational quality of other countries. This panic resulted in the creation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which has become increasingly infamous over the years for changing American education into a curriculum-centered, testing driven education. These changes have been made in the name of fixing the American educational quality without identifying what quality education or quality learning actually looks like. Additionally, this perception of desired education was chased after without effectively identifying what the purpose of education is due to the arrogant desire to come out on top of a measuring contest between states and countries. It has also been done in spite of what educational theorists believe contribute to an equitable education, with both statewide and national government interference only worsening the apparent problem of unequal and irrelevant education, while also limiting student learning potential in many cases.

This is especially important to acknowledge when education is falsely accredited with equalizing the opportunities for students entering society. In fact, the result of this educational trend has pushed many students out of the educational setting, rather than prepared them for societal life. Texas and Louisiana are not different than the rest of the South in that they are well known for having pride in their heritage and culture, which gives them a different daily and educational experience than the rest of the United States. They also have vastly different experiences from more populated and diverse states in the way that high stakes testing impacted them since Texas is the birthplace of NCLB while Louisiana had, at one point, one of the highest ‘success rates’ by the standards put forth by NCLB. In other words, educational failure looks very different in these states than they would in states that are commonly analyzed.

While many studies consider the long-term impacts of NCLB, there are fewer that look at the South to analyze these impacts. Additionally, the rewritten policy concerning NCLB, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), has only recently come into effect in the 2017-2018 school year. This study seeks to define what quality education is through utilizing educational theories that focus critical pedagogy, analyze the effects of NCLB in Texas and Louisiana, and compare policies from NCLB and ESSA under the same theoretical lens.

Methods

This research will utilize literature review in order to create a strong foundational knowledge of the educational policies pushed forward by the No Child Left Behind Act, how those policies impacted education, and if these policies enforced the abstract of ‘quality’ education, as defined by theorists of critical pedagogy. It will also analyze the new version of No Child Left Behind, named Every Student Succeeds Act, to question if the new changes to the educational policies perform better under the definition of ‘quality’ this literature defines.

Literature Review

The idea behind the modern schools is reliant on the image that education is the cure for inequality. More specifically educational institutes should be able to provide students with development, social inclusion, democratization, prosperity, and overall wellbeing (Biesta, 2019, p. 657). Through this, equity in both access to knowledge and learning should be achieved regardless of background so that students can forge their own future. It is important to note that learning does not stop at educational achievement because students are attaining critical thinking skills and developing themselves into well rounded pieces of a society. However, the idea of preparing students for society has become increasingly difficult as society has shifted in the face of globalization.

Globalization has allowed for countries around the world to have a comparative look at the education of other nations. This naturally resulted in a ranking system and competition across the world. In some ways, this comparison could be a good thing, ensuring that countries are held accountable for the quality of education that they provide for their students. In addition to that, educators can learn from each other's successes and failures, ideally consistently improving the quality education for students everywhere. However, the idea of 'quality' in education is an abstract idea that does little to actually define the end goal. Instead, one of most prevalent ways that are used to quantify the quality of education is through the numerical value achieved through high stakes testing. Thus, the goal has shifted from learning or development to competition while having an exacerbated negative impact on what the goal of education should be.

Educational theorists have a number of opinions of what attributes to quality education. Biesta (2019) suggests that there three main purposes of education which describe educational quality inherently promised by today's schooling system. *Qualification* is most associated with high stakes testing because it is the only one of the purposes that can actually be targeted in testing. It concerns knowledge and abilities that are learned and can be applied outside the classroom setting or once joining with the rest of society. *Subjectification* is the access to experiences that they otherwise wouldn't have organically found or interacted with outside of a scholarly setting, and forming an identity from student centered exploration. This also includes creating a setting fit for quality education, like libraries, computer labs, gardens, and anything else that could contribute to daily learning. *Socialization* is the learning of a range of beliefs and behaviors that allow a student to fit into a society. Students need this in order to understand their society's cultures, traditions, the hidden curriculum, and political values. These, together, form a *world-centered* educational format that allows students to recognize the society around them and navigate it.

Indoctrination is theorized by some to be essential to a student's learning experience, with some also believing that it is a moral responsibility of schools (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2019). Although Biesta argues that a student cannot be the center of education if they are being indoctrinated, Freire suggests that

indoctrination is essential to education. Similar to Biesta's theories on *Socialization* and *Subjectification*, *Indoctrination* interacts with education in that it teaches students politics, knowledge, and social relations. In addition, Freire states that *Indoctrination* should include aspects of critical thinking, presented in a way for students to find determination within themselves and engage with society, both understanding historical events and reproducing that thought towards a future problem (Freire, 2000). Effectively *indoctrinating* in this manor is theorized to keep education's promise to free students from oppression through their *world-centered* education.

NCLB Drastically Modified Education in the United States

The main target of national standardized high stakes testing was said to be closing the educational gaps between students of high and low financial backgrounds. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), passed in 1965, was the first of many bills to target educational improvement in the United States. Since the bill's creation, ESEA was modified multiple times by congress and the standard-based reform movement grew in popularity as a response to a widely held view that the United States was facing "extreme economic risk, largely because of bad schools" insinuating that "dumb teachers, uncaring mothers, social promotion, and general academic permissiveness" were mainly to blame (Meier, 2000, p. 9). Eventually, it was overtaken by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, which lasted from 2001 to 2015, with NCLB aiming to accomplish closing the educational gap by the year 2014. Since the bill was implemented, NCLB has been met with continuous and widespread scrutiny for a variety of reasons, namely over-standardization and the threat it had on public schools' funding.

Texas in particular had an important history with NCLB: In the late 1980s, Texas took educational matters into their own hands, aiming to improve their educational standing by adopting a minimum competency test for school graduation in order to rate districts and schools, dubbed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 81). The graduation rate did not increase by much as time progressed: for students who started the 9th grade in 1997, only 40% ever passed the reading, writing, or math section of the TAAS (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p.81). However, absurd practices were adopted to artificially inflate graduation rates for students, like pushing students out, holding them back, transferring them to other schools, or even rejecting entry of students (Darling-Hammond, 2010, pp. 87, 90, 94). On the other hand, students who were not pushed out were punished for staying in the school system as families were fined up to \$500 a day for unexcused absences over a set number (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 89). By 1997, numerous studies raising questions concerning the validity of Texas's statewide scores increasing while their college entrance examination and SAT scores remained overall stagnant (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p.71). In spite of the outcry and obvious threat to the student education, Texas became the posterchild of 'testing success', thus triggering Texas's state governor, George Bush, to nationally implement NCLB once he

became president of the United States. Testing success brought little improvement to educational quality throughout the time NCLB was in place because ‘success’ often occurred because of corners that were cut to inflate numbers, including falsifying reports stating that students transferred even though they dropped out (Domina et al., 2010, p. 324).

NCLB functioned under the assumption that it could identify ‘low quality’ schools, which were already well known, and those schools would be motivated to change if they were identified, shamed, and punished for failure. However, in order to evaluate and grade the educational institutes, a nationwide standardized test was required to be taken annually by every elementary school, middle school, and once in high school, which was then judged solely by the scores achieved by specific groupings of students (Meier et al., 2004; Meier et al. 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2004). These groups were mainly decided by race, and if a single grouping of students fell short of their specific target, the entire school would be listed under “needing improvement” and moved down to “failing” if the scores did not improve within the next three years. Under these conditions, most of the nation’s public schools were in danger of failure, regardless of scoring highly or consistently improving scores annually. Failing status meant ‘corrective action’, including vouchers for supplemental tutoring services, funding cuts, replacement of school staff, and “reconstruction” meaning that the state could take over schools or impose private management (Meier, 2000, p. 54).

This government interference brought to light to the disconnect between what the people thought quality education meant, what states called quality education, and what society’s idea of quality education was (Biesta, 2019; Meier, 2018; Meier, 2004). The NCLB testing system undoubtedly measured student achievement and educational quality through *qualification*, but it is necessary to question the validity of the results of a test that solely identify math and reading ability as quality education. The fact that PISA rankings in every area tested declined only highlights that there was an issue with what students were learning in school (ESSA Implementation: Perspectives..., 2016). Neither Texas nor Louisiana were not hit quite as hard as some of the other states in terms of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) defined by NCLB. By 2011, Louisiana only failed to meet AYP in 22% of schools while only 28% of Texas’s schools failed to meet AYP, which sounds encouraging in relativity to other states, but this fact has more to do with outside factors rather than quality of learning or quality of schools. In fact, states that used more ambitious tests and have higher educational standards experienced more failure than those with low standards (Meier et al., 2000, p. 15). For Example, Massachusetts, with the extremely high state standards, reported failing to meet AYP in 82% percent of their schools and 91% of their school districts, regardless of scoring highest in the country by NAEP standards in 2011 (Usher, 2012).

Because of the threatening nature of NCLB, schools also were forced to become curriculum-centered, barring elements that would lead to positive student

development in that would contribute to *indoctrination, world-centered, or student-centered* educational styles. This educational environment *subjectifies* students in incredibly unnatural but historically common ways: designing a ‘proper’ set of ‘personality traits’ within the student, teaching them to be invisible in the crowd, keep information secret, and to sit down and be quiet (Giroux, 1978). This curriculum-style learning hinders a student’s experience with *subjectification* by not allowing them to experience the world around them in order to find a sense of self. Schools with lower funding needed to cut extracurricular activities and elective classes in order to redesign their curriculum to cut corners and target achievement in subjects that appear on the upcoming standardized examinations rather than well-rounded education that prepares students for life after schooling (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Meier, 2004). Cutting funding would also lessen access to school facilities like libraries, school labs, textbooks, and computers. Each of these items contribute to the beauty of a school and especially in access to the things that a student may not have had the experience to see without school assistance.

NCLB was an extremely inflexible piece of literature passed by congress, with the over-standardization leaving little room for democracy in the classroom, also limiting the amount of *socialization* a student receives from their education. As a result, people sought more control over their children’s education in the form of an influx of Charter schools being brought up in both Louisiana and Texas, with New Orleans having the highest concentration in the United States (Holley-Walker, 2007) and Texas having some of the most charter schools in the country. The families of these students get more control over what their students learn, as well as who and what they’re *socialized* with. Democracy and familial involvement in education is seen as an asset in the United States, but in the case of charter schools with likeminded families, it acts almost like a bubble for students who are surrounded by people just like themselves. In this case, students do get *indoctrinated* by their education, but without having the experience of seeing the outside world, shutting out their ability to receive a *world-centered* education or create an identity through *subjectification*.

Even though many schools succeeded in that Texas and Louisiana passed AYP under the pressures of NLCB, it failed in allowing schools to complete their promise to liberate students from whatever shackles society could have placed on them. It did not provide equivalent outcomes for students, nor did it provide equal access to adequate educational facilities. The schools that performed best were the schools with the least diversity and the schools that students learned in were the highest determiner of student success on the examinations, leaving the schools that needed the most help, ironically, being both consistently and increasingly damaged by the punishments the tests brought on. Over-standardization pressured for schools to test well, clearly promoting the type of environment solely that targeted student *qualification*, but it lacked any real substance because education that revolves around testing cannot fully encompass all the information needed for a student to move into society. It also did not prepare students to move on to college because especially in

lower income areas, the curriculum-centered, testing driven education, was not well rounded enough to increase student abilities to a college level competency. Students could have been challenged to a greater degree with a curriculum that was designed to help them grow as learners and people rather than to help them test well, but instead schools were forced to focus on arbitrary numbers in order to prove that they deserved funding.

Policy Changes in the Every Student Succeeds Act and State Plans

The Obama Administration updated NCLB to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, which was received far more openly than its predecessor. This was in large part due to the newly found democracy and freedom each state was awarded concerning their education and educational improvements. This also means that there is far less standardization and more democracy included in the state control. Texas American Federation of Teachers commented that ESSA will award Texas “plenty of flexibility to create something that focuses resources on struggling students instead of labeling them as failures and prescribing punishments” (Sharp, 2016, p. 12). Individual state’s finalized ESSA plans were submitted to the government and approved by mid-2017 through late 2018 depending on the state.

There are numerous changes to the bill to target the areas of the NCLB Act that contributed the hindrances of learning brought forth by testing implementation in the United States, that are being addressed on ESSA. The first is in how they define the purpose of each bill with NCLB placing emphasis on “providing students a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education” while ESSA stating that it intends to provide students with “significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps” (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). NCLB did fail in providing equal education to students in Texas and Louisiana, but it never claimed to attempt equity or justice amongst students as a main goal. This highlights a clear deviation in intent as ESSA focuses the result of closing the educational gap between students.

A clear attempt is being made by ESSA to understand that students and their education are impacted by more than race. Accountability included in ESSA’s report cards include subgroups of all of what was required with NCLB, such as racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged, and students who are learning English and ESSA. In addition, Accountability Report Cards must include students’ major racial and ethnic groups, economically disadvantaged students as compared to students who are not disadvantaged economically, children with disabilities as compared to children without disabilities, homeless students, English proficiency status, gender, and migrant status (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2017). Information on the report cards also analyzes the *subjectification* of a student’s educational experience, asking for actual school quality, climate, safety, and data on per pupil expenditure (ESSA, 2017).

The most important aspect of ESSA is arguably that schools are not punished for failing to meet their standards. Targeted supports are decided by each of the states in terms of how they will support their schools and what areas they will support (ESSA, 2017). Allowing states more control over their education allows more democracy, less standardization, and more family involvement. It is for this reason that ESSA has also improved on the way that educational value is grouped together by involving itemized score analyses (ESSA, 2017). If it were the case that only summative scores existed, that could limit a state's ability to provide the data needed for schools and families to identify problem areas. Access to this information gives schools and state ability to act wisely on behalf of the families and students while also assisting parents in "advocating wisely and well on behalf of their children" (ESSA Implementation: Perspectives..., 2016). This includes each state's educational standards, how each state will help each individual 'failing' school, and the ability to decide how many students are required to participate in the test. The evaluations on schools have become more flexible because their quality and academics are evaluated, with academic evaluation including things like high school graduation rates, state standards, and English language proficiency, among the reading and math scores that were mainly used during NCLB evaluations. Most noticeably, the punishments that NCLB enforced on teachers and schools have been removed.

Louisiana has overall been meeting their standards set for ESSA, with a curriculum that has become much more rigorous since NCLB. Thus, theoretically, the *qualification* area of quality education should be improving. The standards that Louisiana has set are areas that they have been struggling with, which would indicate that they are focusing on improving the quality of their schools and providing equity. Louisiana uses an A-F rating system to rank their elementary and middle schools on factors such as achievement gap, student achievement, student dropout/reenrollment rates, and credit accumulation through the 9th grade. High school is rated on achievement gap, college entrance examination participation and achievement, high school graduation rates, and student achievement. From 2010 to 2017 Louisiana had fewer dropouts, however there is still a large gap between dropout rates of White or Asian students and Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English abilities (IES: National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Likewise, Black and Hispanic students scored drastically lower than White and Asian students on the NAEP (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

The ESSA standards that Texas has been implementing appear to have come in an essential time for Texas, because Texas was accused of cutting corners by making their state test overly simplified, just like how they did before NCLB became a countrywide policy; In 2017, the disparity in data between NAEP testing and Texas state tests, was the highest in the United States, ranging from 33 to 56 points below NAEP proficiency rates (Achieve. Inc, 2018). ESSA standards being implemented are expected to lead Texas in a much more positive direction. Their factor based

ranking views elementary and middle schools through the achievement gap, student achievement, and student growth, while high school looks at the achievement gap, college and/or career readiness, student achievement, and student growth. They have also highlighted areas in their ranking that could be strengthened such as closing the achievement gap. From 2010 to 2017, Texas had been raising their graduation rates, but have noticeable gaps in the same areas that Louisiana does, in both graduation rates and NAEP snapshots for students of color (IES: National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The fixation on overall global ranking created an over-standardized, curriculum driven education that ultimately neglected all of the important qualities that society considers intelligent people to look like. Countrywide, during NCLB, it was visible that students weren't learning aspects of education that contributed to critical thinking, and were cutting portions of education that would assist creativity and enjoyable learning in their educational facilities, with specifically less economically affluent schools cutting the most to focus testing and curriculum-centered education. Students from these schools were dropping out of school or being forcibly removed which effectively ended the education of those who need it most. This was all while students in wealthier areas could attend schools with better teachers and newer equipment, while restricting their experiences to economically and racially homogeneous students. The result was an environment void of quality education by standards set through qualification, subjectification, and socialization.

The idea behind the modern schools is reliant on the image that education is the cure for inequality. More specifically educational institutions should be able to provide students with development, social inclusion, democratization, prosperity, and overall wellbeing (Biesta, 2019, p. 657). Through this, equity in both access to knowledge and learning should be achieved regardless of background so that students can forge their own future. It is important to note that learning does not stop at educational achievement because students are attaining critical thinking skills and developing themselves into well rounded pieces of a society. However, the idea of preparing students for society has become increasingly difficult as society has shifted in the face of globalization.

NCLB did not improve quality of education in Texas, nor Louisiana, as was seen throughout the rest of the country. It forced schools into a seemingly moral dilemma between effectively educating students and keeping government funding due to the over-standardization of its policies. As a result, students dropped out or were pushed out, many schools lost funding, teachers changed their teaching methods to teach to the test, students ultimately learned less, and schools became increasingly segregated. ESSA is being praised for the overall democratic way the law was designed, giving each individual state far more control over their curriculum, and the penalties for schools being overall retracted. Although results of ESSA are limited in terms of

quantifiable testing results, there are clearly still students who have not received quality education that brings equity in result, chance, or academic achievement. However, ESSA has made large leaps forward in terms of policy, focusing equity rather than closing gaps, and it prepares schools for quality learning much better than NCLB did.

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