De-essentializing No Child Left Behind

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Abstract

This article articulates a research strategy to examine the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), embracing a critical, non-essentialist perspective. To date, critical approaches to NCLB have been unilaterally negative, based on aggregated analyses that homogenize local responses to the federal policy. I argue that such analyses implicitly essentialize both NCLB and local adaptions, and in the process obscure important variation across scales. My multiscalar strategy included two phases: analysis of policy documents at the federal, state, and school district scales to detect translations that open possibilities for interpretation and latitude for decision making, and ethnographic research in a school district to uncover diverse pedagogical reactions to NCLB. More generally, I suggest that policies or programs conceived at the federal scale undergo translation across scales and among various actors locally. The complexity of actions belies essentialist imaginaries of both policies and their effects.

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Critical studies of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have painted a devastating picture (e.g. Wilson, 2007; Giroux, 2004). Developed in the Bush Administration and renamed Race to the Top[2] in the Obama Administration, NCLB is part of a high-stakes accountability approach to education (Sweet, 2008) that administers standardized exams to a diverse population of children to evaluate school performance and to discipline low-performing schools, irrespective of context-

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[2] NCLB was renamed Race to the Top with minimal changes to the actual policy. For this reason I use NCLB rather than complicate the picture with another name that would suggest a fundamentally different policy. See Riley (2012) for elaboration.

specific constraints and consequences. Such discipline includes school closures. The dominant critical narrative has reported practices in schools in reaction to NCLB that have ranged from cheating to teaching for the test, thereby bypassing important knowledges that are not tested.

As I began my dissertation research on NCLB I concurred with critics about the problems that had been cited regarding NCLB – from the problems of standardized exams to the pernicious effects of school closings – yet the unilateral portrayal of the policy and its effects raised questions for me. I found that critical studies of NCLB are based on aggregated analyses. I asked: how does NCLB play out in specific classrooms? Further, do states and school districts work with the same script, or does policy undergo change as it 'travels' from the federal to the state to the school district scales, and if so, what is the significance? While my political sensibilities connected with critical studies of NCLB, my embrace of a non-essentialist ontology prompted a research strategy that interrogated rather than presumed the ramifications of a federally-conceived policy across space.

My research strategy began not with effects of policy, but with policy itself. Educational policy analyst William Clune (1987) has pointed out frequent disconnects between the writers of federal policy and those who implement it – instances of what he calls 'implementation gaps.'

If, as Bruno Latour (2005) argued, information is mediated and 'translated,' then analysis of policy documents at the federal, state, and school district scales should uncover possibly subtle changes from one text to another. I found that the text of the federal policy (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) actually grants states the authority to define how they will meet the requirements laid out within the 670 pages of the document. States are then required to complete accountability workbooks containing their respective plans to meet and measure adequate yearly progress (AYP); schools that fail to meet minimum standards based on AYP measurements run the risk of punitive action (US Department of Education, 2001).

Given that states can develop their own means by which to comply with federal requirements of NCLB, in theory, we should expect that approaches to implement NCLB vary across states. Although the leeway afforded to states by the federal policy suggests that analysis of variation in texts across states might be fruitful, my project focused on the selection of one state and one district within that state so that I could pursue ethnographic research to document actual implementation. I selected North Carolina, and specifically the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district (CMS) as my case study, largely because this district had been documented as having variable responses to CMS (Casserly, 2004). I found that the NC State Board of Education (North Carolina Board of Education, 2006) delegates responsibility to the districts, and in turn, CMS' strategic plan (Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, 2006) delegates responsibility to principals of schools and their staff to find ways to meet these goals. My plan, then, was to uncover the various strategies used in four CMS schools and their effects.

On the ground, actors interpret policy and make decisions about various components of a policy. Michael Lipsky (1980) called such people 'street-level bureaucrats' – local actors who are authorized to deal with the daily implementation of policies, commonly including police officers, social workers, and, pertinent to my project, teachers and other school officials. My aim was to uncover views about NCLB as well as how teachers engage the policy in everyday life, and the effects on pedagogy and students. This approach embraces what Michel Foucault (1980) called 'ascending analysis,' which, as indicated by Nancy Ettlinger in this issue, takes daily practices as the starting point and then connects with societal-scale institutions and mentalities. At issue, for example, is how teachers' pedagogical practices connect with the mentality of accountability that characterizes NCLB. The dominant critical narrative would predict that teachers change their strategies to meet newly developed educational standards, and given the problems with those standards, we would expect strategies on the ground to be pedagogically unsound. Crucially, ascending analysis allows for findings that may or may not conform to outcomes expected by theory; this connected with my problem orientation, which questions the unilateral nature of apparent effects of NCLB. I was interested in whether teachers as street-level bureaucrats interpret NCLB unilaterally and engage in the practices that might otherwise be rendered invisible by the dominant critical academic perspective. A ground up perspective also owes part of its heritage to feminist scholarship, such as Sandra Harding's (2009, 195) 'studying up,' also discussed by Ettlinger in the introduction to this intervention section. My field strategy generally entailed participant observation in classrooms and interviews with teachers, students, administrators and state and local government bureaucrats. This article discusses interviews specifically with teachers; I interviewed a total of twenty-one teachers.

My ground-level findings revealed wide-ranging engagements with NCLB. On the one hand, teachers who view NCLB positively followed a well-known strategy, teaching-for-the-test.[3] I also found strategies that revealed a form of underachievement on the part of teachers. For example, one teacher commented that the devolution of responsibility for accountability to teachers created conditions for teachers to do *less* work if they chose. This teacher often used class time to give students the chance to talk about themselves, irrespective of relevance to course material, and she rarely assigned homework; the net result was a significant reduction in work for her regarding class preparation and grading. Another example, beyond strategies of a single teacher, entail curricular changes that exclude low-performing students from courses in which testing occurs; this type of strategy results in spuriously conceived test scores as a strategy to evade failure per accountability measures. Teaching-for-the-test and strategies that result

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[3] Teaching-for-the-test entails spending classroom time exclusively on material that will appear on required state-sponsored standardized tests, limiting curricular focus to a small subset of testable topics (English and Steffy, 2001; Gunzenhauser, 2003; Schoen and Fusarelli, 2008).

in cutting corners at the expense of students and their education are predicted by critical approaches to NCLB and suggest validity of deterministic frameworks that cast local flexibility as impossible. Indeed, I found these strategies to be common: more than three-quarters of teachers I interviewed pursued teaching-for-the-test.

On the other hand, however, I found teachers who regard NCLB critically and strategies such as teaching-for-the-test insufficient. These teachers developed alternative pedagogical strategies to teach *beyond* the test, interweaving critical thinking projects or other projects that meet alternative pedagogies while staying on pace with core standards. When asked how she prepares her students for the test, one teacher whose class produced particularly good scores responded: "I'm harder than the test." This teacher expects her students to know which box to check for the standardized test, as well as the knowledge to explain why that box contains the right answer – a teaching strategy known as 'stretching it.' What gets 'stretched' is students' knowledge well beyond the test by developing higher-order thinking projects to enable critical explanation. Another teacher I interviewed extended course material beyond tested subjects. For example, he had students in his social studies class engage multiple perspectives on the famous historical site and battle of the Alamo. This teacher explained to me that he regards history as socially constructed, and that his aim was to clarify history-as-constructed to students and also convey principles of global citizenship. About one-third of all teachers I interviewed and observed pursued some strategy beyond teaching-for-the-test, although only about one in ten focused primarily on those types of strategies. In most cases, positive strategies that produce critical thinking were utilized as occasional extensions of predominant teaching-for-the-test.

The variety of strategies overall presented a mixed bag of apparent effects of NCLB. Conventional field analytics such as triangulation, often associated with mixed methods, lead to the development of a singular truth and violate a non-essentialist ontology (Elwood, 2010). Accordingly, I turned to crystallization to preserve messy realities. Ellingson's (2009) development of crystallization focuses on representing multiple voices, and she presents a multi-genre research strategy as the means to this end, using mediums ranging from photography and poetry to interviews, narratives, and field notes. This multi-genre mandate would cast the range of my field strategies – participant observation and interviews – as narrow and outside the crystallization approach. However, I suggest that the way I *used* my field notes from participant observation and interview data do indeed respond to the ontological basis for crystallization, namely the importance of representing multiple voices. Ellingson's (2009) rendition of crystallization also explicitly rejects explanation as a research goal and instead focuses on documenting different perspectives, and I depart from this aspect of her approach as well. Inspired by feminist scholars such as Sandra Harding (1995) and Donna Haraway (1988) who have argued against relativism and for explanation that recognizes the politically charged nature of knowledge, as well as poststructuralists such as Foucault (2000), who argued for non-totalizing explanation, I wanted to move beyond

documentation to interpret the various views of NCLB I found among teachers as well as the range of practices I observed as reactions to NCLB.

My approach was to conceptualize disparate data in terms of different types of resistance to the pressures and consequences of NCLB to interpret the relation among different views and practices. Evading the pressures or consequences of NCLB materializes in different ways, including pedagogically destructive and unethical responses predicted by the dominant critical narrative such as teaching-for-the-test and cheating in a variety of ways, but also critical responses to NCLB on the part of teachers that foster constructive pedagogies to teach beyond the test. Constructive strategies that produce critical thinking beyond once-in-a-while events may be statistically insignificant, but they represent a stunning instance of agency and an important 'minority politics' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) that can make a difference in people's lives and would otherwise be obscured in the absence of a ground up field strategy. For example, the approach to history in the aforementioned social studies class enabled a Mexican student who had just migrated from Mexico to have a respected voice as she clarified the considerably different representation of the Alamo in Mexican history books.

Agency is something that can be studied as well as enacted by researchers, as in participatory action research (PAR), whereby the research process becomes part of social change (e.g. Kindon et al., 2007; Fraser and Weninger, 2008). My initial plan was to engage in PAR and do what I could to become involved in strategies to develop and reward constructive pedagogies and minimize destructive reactions to NCLB. Yet once in the field it became readily apparent that the structure of authority in CMS meant that district and school officials controlled my access to documents, classroom participant observation, and interviews among teachers and students as well as the dissemination of my findings, and further, that PAR might easily be interpreted negatively. Taking a cue from Fran Klodawsky (2007), who clarified that PAR is suited to some but not all contexts, I reframed my overall strategy while remaining open when context-specific possibilities emerged that would permit action that would be palatable to district and school officials. For example, student interviews uncovered anxiety about being out-competed by Indian and Chinese students for future jobs, [4] while an interview with a teacher revealed a motivational strategy to present CMS students with a sense of the competitive stakes. At an opportune moment I conveyed the students' anxiety to this teacher, who then brought the issue to the attention of other teachers as well as the principal. As a result, teachers were cautioned about the negative unintended effects of this motivational strategy. This instance signified a context-specific opportunity to become part of change, albeit small, without rocking the boat to the point of throwing myself overboard.

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[4] Asians represent a small minority of the students in CMS. While it would have been interesting to hear from Asian students regarding this motivational strategy, unfortunately, no Asian students returned parental permission and assent forms, disqualifying all from being interviewed.

Conclusion

I have recounted my dissertation research strategies to articulate more generally how non-essentialist principles can be engaged epistemologically. The problem at the outset was that my sensibilities about the problems with NCLB were consistent with the dominant critical view, yet the homogenized nature of previous critical analyses prompted me to think about ways to de-essentialize critiques of the policy. Beginning with policy texts, I found that NCLB conceived at the federal scale delineates requirements for educational standards while delegating the responsibility to states of how to meet those standards; this devolution of responsibilities to states suggests leeway for variation in implementation, although policy alone does not necessarily predict actual practices. I focused in particular on North Carolina and the CMS school district, and found that the North Carolina policy further devolves responsibilities to principals and their staff at schools to develop strategies to meet federal expectations.

I followed policy analysis with ethnographic research in CMS to interrogate rather than assume practices on the ground. From a non-essentialist vantage point I pursued crystallization rather than triangulation to preserve multiple, including minority, voices. I found wide-ranging strategies to resist the pressures of NCLB. Consistent with the dominant critical narrative, many of these strategies were destructive, such as teaching-for-the-test and various forms of cheating. However, at least a third of the teachers developed pedagogies that in different ways enabled them to teach beyond the test. On a less optimistic note, these more pedagogically constructive strategies were more of a once-in-a-while than a common approach to classroom teaching. Yet I also found some teachers who continually pursued a rigorous, teaching-beyond-the-test approach.

My view is that alternative pedagogies matter, to students and the teachers that step in to create such alternative spaces. Despite my initial intention to become part of change, I pursued PAR in a limited, piecemeal fashion to avoid messy political relations with school and government officials that might thwart my study. What became most important to me was to offer hopeful possibilities by representing multiple trajectories in the implementation of NCLB, some of which are consistent with the dominant critical narrative as well as others that are not. More generally, the research strategies I pursued helped me to deliver on non-essentialist principles, recognizing that policies or programs conceived at the federal scale undergo translation across scales and among various actors locally. The complexity of actions belies essentialist imaginaries of both policies and their effects.

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