

Evaluating The Theory Behind “No Child Left Behind” by Victoria M. Young (Originally published on educationnews.org, 3/20/10)

Whether or not you see No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as improved by the newest proposals, or just more of the same re-packaged and re-worded, depends on the perspective from which you are observing and evaluating the issue. Let us apply what we all learned in school and assess it using the scientific method. Let’s try to address this question; in general, are we taking our education system in the right direction and specifically are we doing justice to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 which is currently referred to as NCLB?

State the Observation or Problem

The original ESEA was authorized because our federal government recognized the inequalities existing in our public schools that state and local governments were failing to properly address. However, as the law was executed, the practices put in place to correct the problems failed to receive proper federal funding. Over time, vigilance of the issues surrounding the inequalities waned until the topic of education was refocused in the 70’s by political and business leaders purportedly worried about our future economic competitiveness. By 1980, those individuals and organizations took the lead in education reform with the introduction of the “outcome-based education” theory of reform.

“Outcome-based education” is reasonable terminology to describe what we want. We all want a good outcome for our children. But as the business-model for education was developed around the outcome-based idea it spawned a re-emergence of a “standards and testing movement” and the largest experiment of its kind upon which to test those theories and we call it “No Child Left Behind.”

Research the Problem

Historical research and observations of the past definitively pointed to unequal access to quality education. The opportunities offered to children varied greatly from place to place and were outright denied in far too many instances. Research on the issues of inequalities continued and over the years has been demonstrated and re-demonstrated in countless ways using a myriad of tests and other indicators. Having enough data to document and monitor inequalities is not the problem.

The standards and testing movement indicates that our leaders believe the issue of educational inequalities and some areas of substandard education quality will be “fixed” through higher standards and the testing of those standards. This theory, in addition to all aspects of secondary schools effectiveness, was evaluated previously through the Cooperative Study of Secondary Schools Standards in the late 1930’s because at that time, they were concerned about the underperformance of their middle schools and high schools.

That study’s final recommendation was that “large-scale testing not be used as a method of accreditation or of similar widespread comparisons.” Three factors were used as the basis for this decision. One, it would bring about a “rigid” curriculum focused on “testing programs rather than toward true pupil needs.” Two, when test scores were thoroughly analyzed, they seemed “to have little validity for identifying superior and inferior schools.” Lastly, “a better method of

evaluation” was available and it was painstakingly outlined in the publication down to the minutia of what to look for in a good secondary school assembly. All their conclusions were drawn from seven years of what appears to be excellent research methodology by excellent educational researchers.

We should ask; did our current educational leaders skip the research step in the scientific method?

State the Hypothesis

Through the use of subject standards and by monitoring the results of tests based on those standards, we will leave no child behind in the United States of America K-12 education system.

At this point, I can only speculate as to what our leaders were thinking when they formed their hypothesis for the NCLB act. In my mind, research had already demonstrated (at least once in our history) the flaws in using standardized tests for either accountability purposes or to improve instruction. Perhaps our leaders needed a refresher as to what a hypothesis should be. It is “a tentative assumption made in order to test its logical consequences.”

What logical consequences did we hope to obtain with NCLB? We are now told that there are four pillars to this law: stronger accountability for results, more freedom for states, proven education models, and more choice for parents. This is the point where logically one would go back to the fact that the reason for the law was that we the people “recognized the inequalities existing in our public schools that state and local governments were failing to properly address.” Ask yourselves if these “pillars” are really what is needed to fulfill the original intent of the ESEA in building a strong educational foundation for all.

Test the Hypothesis

The consequences of NCLB were not well thought through last time and it would be in the nation’s best interest on behalf of our country’s children to do so this time. I believe our leaders saw standards and testing as a theory by which we could achieve school improvements. A theory is an unproven assumption. The fatal error in our latest experiment has been the fact that standards and testing as a means to improvement in schools has already been proven flawed. That experiment in the 1930’s failed.

Scientifically speaking, you learn from failed experiments just like you do from successful ones. And many times you do go back and repeat the experiment, which we have now done. We have tested and re-tested “the theory of standards and testing” as a means to school improvement.

Analyze the Results

Most experts will agree and observation and statistics will tell us that the costs in education have risen dramatically while improvements have been minor in comparison.

After this last 30 years of experimentation with our schools, it is fair to say that we should pause and pay respect to the design of the scientific method of problem solving and the necessary step of analysis of results. We claim as one of our pillars that we will use “proven education models” but we ignore much of our own research. Please, stop and think.

State the Conclusion

I assume we do not want to leave one child behind, intentionally or un-intentionally. We want every child in America to receive a quality education. The question has always been, how? What is the conclusion?

Our predecessors in the 1930's, only took seven years to conclude that standards and testing as an accreditation (accountability) mechanism would drive and narrow curriculum by forcing the tendency to teach to the test. Perhaps seven years was not a long enough study for us to believe the results but we followed the doctrine provided by those conclusions for 40 years quite successfully. Now, three decades after turning away from that doctrine and running this current experiment, when will we demand to hear our current conclusion?

Please don't tell me that different standards and different tests are the "new" way to go?

State a New Potential Solution Based on the Former Experiment

Today, I have the same concern about this law and our system as I did originally; where is it taking us? Look hard. Fair evaluation still makes the time and money spent worthwhile if we have learned what does not work, critically evaluate the results, and drawn conclusions based on both observations and evidence. We must grasp the ideas laid out before us and think critically.

The hypothesis in this experiment was that NCLB based on the doctrine of standards and testing will reform the practices that failed to educate all children adequately and failed to keep our education system revered by the rest of the world. It is a hypothesis that has been tested in multiple ways and in multiple decades and now centuries. Could 2010 be the year we put a stake through the heart of the test-reliant beast and proceed with improvement of the schools that so desperately need it?

With the re-authorization of the ESEA overdue, requiring that NCLB be re-written by congress, it is time to begin the education system improvement process anew. In order to propose solutions based on our knowledge, we must ask congress, what problem are you attempting to address?

If it is to provide a good education to the "educationally deprived children" as was the intention of ESEA, then the goal will only be achieved when children come to school ready to learn (requiring parental and community support), teachers are ready to teach (requiring proper course development of training and re-training through accredited facilities), and the material support to achieve the required "tasks" are in place (requiring fair funding).

If it is accountability you want, that will only be realized through the re-establishment of trust in our government and the watchful oversight of the people. Student outcomes judged by tests can never replace faithful vigilance by the people.

Note: Posted on 4/8/13 unchanged.