

ESSAI

Volume 8

Article 10

4-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Blanford, Lauren (2010) "An Examination of Essentialism and No Child Left Behind: Creating Excellence in America?," *ESSAI*: Vol. 8, Article 10.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol8/iss1/10>

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An Examination of Essentialism and No Child Left Behind:
Creating Excellence in America?

by Lauren Blanford

(Philosophy 1160)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the federal education act passed in 2002, is the most recent and most widely executed example of an essentialist educational philosophy implementation in the United States of America. The law stipulates specific guidelines and expectations for U.S. public school instruction of the core subjects of mathematics and reading. Schools are held accountable to meet specified expectations, as demonstrated through students' scores on standardized achievement tests. But does this implementation of the essentialist philosophy, which promotes predictable instruction in core academic topics and testing to measure its results, succeed in accomplishing its goal of creating excellence among the American populace?

There are data which shows that, following NCLB's implementation, student test scores have improved and schools are striving to find new ways to achieve the academic expectations set forth. At the same time, educators report that the legislation has required a fundamental shift in focus away from topics and educational approaches which creatively engaged the hearts and minds of students, to those required for successful mastery of academic drills and completion of standardized tests. It seems that, in all its efforts to successfully teach the essentials, the U.S. educational system may lose sight of its unique edge, the individual potential of its people. To fully appreciate how the U.S. ended up at this intersection of the essentialist philosophy and its implementation, one must review its history.

There is a long history of exceptionalism in the United States, the belief that life here is better and that America is the "shining city on the hill" for other nations (Kohut & Stokes, 2006.). With a history of quality of life, economic, and military dominance in the global realm, the populace of the United States has become accustomed to thinking of itself as the best in the world. The essentialist philosophy grew out of this perspective that, in order to maintain its superiority to other nations, the U.S. needed to build an educational approach that would guarantee the transmission of crucial knowledge to its children.

As cited by Gutek (1997), during the 1930's, the U.S. was presented with evidence that the academics of its students were falling behind the standards of achievement accomplished by students in other countries. An unacceptable dissonance was created in the minds of educational theorists and critics, including those who became spokespeople for an essentialist approach. The original doctrine for essentialism was outlined by William Chandler Bagley in 1938. Its formation was Bagley's response to what he perceived to be the ineffective educational methods of his time, including: flexible, child-centered approaches like progressivism and "widespread" social promotion or movement of students to the next grade level whether or not their academic performance warranted the move.

Bagley's essentialism focused on the use of education to develop children into literate and useful citizens. It belied the importance of focusing on "essential" educational elements: literacy and numeracy in elementary school and history, science, math, literature, and language in secondary education. As stated by Edward Power (1996), Bagley's essentialism "stood for...a decent and academically solid educational program for the nation's youth" with a curriculum focused on the basics and a dedication to discipline and obedience in the educational process (p. 179).

More recently, and again in reaction to concern regarding the quality of education provided

in U.S. schools as compared with that of other countries, the essentialist approach to education experienced a revival of interest (Gutek, 1997). In 1981, during the Reagan administration, the Secretary of Education created the National Commission on Excellence in Education to examine the quality of the U.S. school system, define any problems, and recommend solutions.

The Commission published a report titled “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform” which disparaged the ineffective educational processes of the U.S. school system (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report highlighted educational issues among U.S. students such as: widespread functional illiteracy, reduced levels of achievement on standardized tests, and an overall lower level of education among current graduates as compared with those who graduated 25 to 35 years prior.

The report’s authors outlined a recommended response which focused on a mandatory foundation of instruction in the “Five New Basics” of English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science. Further, the report recommended regular administration of standardized tests to identify students’ achievement levels in these critical subject areas. An educational mandate for the American people was created. They were directed to modify the nation’s educational system in order to ensure its citizens continued to “thrive and prosper.” However, the response to the report’s conclusions was not as widespread as was anticipated by the Commission. As stated by John E. Chubb (2009) “by 1990 achievement had not improved materially.”

Then, in 2002, NCLB legislation was passed. Chubb (2009) made the case that the act was at least in part a delayed response to the “call to arms” of the findings of “A Nation at Risk”. He stated that in passing the NCLB, the leaders of the nation raised the role of federal government in the U.S. educational system in “potentially historic” fashion. This new measure was a wide reaching effort to improve the effectiveness of U.S. schools.

In passing the law, the U.S. government demonstrated the nation’s commitment to an essentialist approach to education. It mandated provisions for standards of achievement in the core academic areas of mathematics and reading for every American student. Additionally, it established the far-reaching goal of academic proficiency in those areas for 100% of students by the year 2014. As stated by Chester E. Finn Jr. in a Fordham Report of 2006, “That means nearly every young person must become proficient in the skills and knowledge contained in essential subjects and thus prepared for higher education, citizenship, and the modern workplace” (p. 9).

In “A Nation at Risk” standardized tests were identified as a critical measurement tool. Today, schools’ levels of success or failure in achieving new NCLB benchmarks are evaluated through the annual application of standardized tests to students from third grade through high school. Education administrators and teachers are held accountable for these testing results. If the student body is unable to make “adequate yearly progress” in academic achievement for several consecutive years, as measured by standardized test results, corrective actions are to take place, including, in the fifth year, the potential for state takeover of the school.

How are schools performing under the rigor of this new legislation? Are education professionals able to rise to the expectation levels set? A December 2008 report from the U.S. Department of Education indicated that the law has been successful in raising test scores among students. “Math scores for 4th- and 8th-graders rose to record highs in 2007, according to the nations report card (NAEP); Reading scores for 4th-graders rose to record highs in 2007” (<http://www2.ed.gov/nclb>).

The Department of Education (2008) further reported that some international academic measures also demonstrated improved results. For example, “U.S. students in grades four and eight showed steady improvements in mathematics since 1995, according to the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)” (<http://www2.ed.gov/nclb>).

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is a non-profit “think tank” focused on excellence in education for primary and secondary schools in the U.S. and a common proponent of the essentialist

educational approach. Fordham (2008) reports that NAEP data indicated test results of subsets of low performing students, those in the bottom 10th percentile, significantly increased between the years of 2000 and 2007.

While some statistical progress is being made, clearly the stakes are high for U.S. public educators facing the unprecedented standards set forth by NCLB. One could ask, and many have asked, whether or not it is within human capacity to reach the goal of 100% proficiency defined by the act. Perhaps the more important question, however, is whether or not achieving the standards set will help achieve the stated goal of an educated populace and a thriving, successful nation.

In a book promoting the reauthorization of NCLB, Chubb (2009) argues that “weak achievement in school translates into weak achievement after graduation” (p. 11). By way of example, Chubb laments the low percentage of U.S. students pursuing degrees in engineering, 6.4% in 2005 as compared with the percentage in Japan of 38.5%. He states that performance on standardized tests predicts income levels later in life and he promotes the position that continued low levels of achievement would ultimately affect the well being of our society as a whole.

George Wood (2004), in the book, “Many Children Left Behind”, disagrees stating that he has been unable to find research that supports the linkage between test scores and later performance in life. Susan Ohanian, author of “What Happened to Recess and Why are our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?”, concurs, explaining that test scores are not good predictors for a successful adulthood or even for achievement in college. At best, Wood argues, the increasing test scores are demonstrating a “better ability to take tests” (p. 35). According to Wood, the focus dedicated to successful testing requires schools to narrow their curriculum and their classroom practices.

He further states that with the implementation of NCLB, teachers recognize the critical importance of students’ test scores and they “teach to the test”. In response to NCLB, in some cases the nature of teaching itself has been minimized to fact retention drills. Students who successfully learn or commit to memory the content presented in these review sessions should certainly perform better on standardized tests. And the U.S. government will look at those higher scores and laud its success.

Should this rigor around core subject testing truly be the key focus of a premiere educational system? Will this approach promote the excellence of U.S. students and the nation? Can the measurement of a school’s success be reduced to scores on standardized math and reading tests? William J. Mathis (2004) encourages educational theorists to broaden their definition beyond the “essentials” of reading and math. He states, “The value and meaning of a school lies in the quality of the experiences of the people who go there” (p. 150). Schools must engage students in the process of learning, helping them to make connections between academic content and their daily lives, and fostering involvement in the broader community.

An exceptional educational system must identify the unique gifts, talents, and strengths of learners. Howard Gardner, a professor of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, identified seven categories of intelligences, termed “multiple intelligences”. The categories include: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (2006). Gardner’s theory posits that each individual has a different areas of “abilities, talents or mental skills” in which he or she naturally excels. An educational system that promotes excellence in human potential will find ways to more effectively leverage and nurture those strengths.

Susan Ohanian (2002) agrees that children’s success on standardized tests measures only a small portion of the extraordinary gifts they can use to contribute to society or to their own future well-being. Among the characteristics that the tests do not measure Ohanian includes, “creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, ambition, persistence/perseverance, humor, attitude, reliability” (p. 130). A school system which creates exceptional future citizens should necessarily value and grow these positive traits in its students.

As Aristotle taught long ago, happiness, or the full realization of one’s potentiality, is the

greatest good one can achieve in life (Guttek, 1997). Per a realist perspective, the purpose of the educative process is to live with excellence and take action in life consistent with the goal of happiness. Aristotle expected humans to act with purpose, with the end in mind, and education played a key role in this vision (Adler, 1978).

So, yes, it is important, even critical, that students today develop an essential level of knowledge and ability in math and reading. And standardized tests provide one measure of students' level of success in these areas. However, the teaching of core subjects and preparation for subsequent tests to the masses cannot override all endeavors to create a curriculum and an educational process that identifies and nurtures the best in each student. The U.S. is a large country with a multitude of industries and career opportunities. Future citizens will need to have a wide variety of academic and functional strengths to find their niche within this variable framework.

In order for our schools to truly excel and create excellence they need to help students identify their gifts and their interests. Students need to understand their own potentiality, what they can become and what strengths they have to contribute to the country and to the world. Schools need to have the flexibility to move beyond the standard requirements of essential topics and testing to find ways to engage students in a broader educative process.

This more holistic approach to education is not as straightforward and clear as an essentialist approach which clearly outlines a specific curriculum and its measures. However, the inclusion of individuation and flexibility into a rigorous academic process can develop students' abilities in their areas of interest while fostering a lifetime love of learning and accomplishments that no standardized test results could ever deliver.

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