8-9-2008

No Child Left Behind and teacher morale among African-American teachers in low-performing middle schools

Kim L Wiley

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NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND AND TEACHER MORALE AMONG

AFRICAN-AMERICAN TEACHERS IN LOW-PERFORMING

MIDDLE SCHOOLS

By

Kim L. Wiley

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Curriculum and Instruction
in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2008

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Title of Study: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND AND TEACHER MORALE AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN TEACHERS IN LOW-PERFORMING MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Pages in Study: 112

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With the declining presence of African-American teachers in the teacher workforce, it is necessary to examine plausible causes for this phenomenon. Previous research suggests that most African-American teachers teach in high minority, high poverty schools. Consequently, they face substantial challenges related to student achievement and social and cultural disparities. No Child Left Behind is an education reform policy designed to bridge the gap between the educational disparities which exist, placing emphasis on teacher accountability and student achievement.

The accountability requirements established by NCLB have generated significant pressure for teachers, particularly African-American teachers in struggling schools who must make Adequate Yearly Progress in order to avoid federal sanctions and public labeling as failing schools. Therefore, since African-American teachers often teach in schools most affected by NCLB, an examination of their experiences

regarding various aspects of the law and its affect on teacher morale is essential to understanding the far-reaching implications of education reform.

The focus of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how NCLB has affected teacher morale for African-American teachers in low-performing middle schools. Specifically, a phenomenological, qualitative method was used to capture their experiences in an effort to uncover the realities these teachers face in the classroom. The overall objective of this study was to develop a richer awareness of what it means to teach in underperforming schools, while seeking academic excellence within them.

Results from this study generated five themes related to teacher morale among African-American teachers in low performing middle schools. An examination of these themes indicated that teacher morale among African-American teachers in low performing middle schools was influenced by NCLB due to published test scores and NCLB's inability to address the social and cultural disparities that exist in education. However, despite the challenges of NCLB, African-American teachers remained dedicated to their calling as teachers seeking to help their students succeed despite the odds.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research in loving memory of my father, Gene

Holland Wiley; to my amazing mother, Rose Wiley-Jackson; my beautiful daughter,

Gena Rose Wiley; my big brother, Ryan Wiley; and my grandmother, Lottie Davis –

all of whom have had an integral part in my fulfillment of this degree. Without your

love, support and encouragement, none of this would have been possible. I love you

all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express sincere thanks and appreciation to those responsible for assisting in the completion of this dissertation. First and foremost, I would like to give praise and honor to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for giving me the ability to pursue and complete a doctoral degree. I would like to thank Dr. Linda Coats for serving as my dissertation director and committee chairman and for providing me with an assistantship in the department of Curriculum and Instruction. Her guidance and advice have been invaluable. I would also like to thank Dr. Jianzhong Xu for his expertise in qualitative studies, and for his patience in guiding my research. I wish to thank Dr. Donna Gainer, Dr. Vincent McGrath, and Dr. Burnette Hamil, for their willingness to serve on my committee and for their assistance and encouragement throughout the dissertation process. Finally, I express my sincere gratitude and thanks to Ms. Merrion Johnson, who has helped me tremendously throughout the course of my study.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With the implementation of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, teachers

entered unchartered territory in regard to student achievement and teacher

accountability. New guidelines and requirements designed to increase student

achievement were thrust upon teachers across the nation. As a result of this new

ideology, teachers faced numerous challenges, particularly African-American

teachers in struggling schools. The emphasis on student achievement as mandated by

NCLB has generated significant pressure for African-American teachers, many of

whom pursue careers in education as a way of giving back to their communities. The

pressures of NCLB, coupled with the social and cultural discrepancies in education,

appears to have affected both teacher morale and teacher attrition among African-

American teachers, diminishing their much needed presence in classrooms across the

country.

Teaching has historically been perceived as an honorable profession among

African-Americans, and one in which many minorities have excelled. With the

Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954 and the subsequent desegregation of

American schools, African-Americans entered the teaching field in increasing

numbers. Torres, Santos, Peck, and Cortes (2004) explain that prior to the Civil

Rights Act of 1964, the majority of college educated African-Americans were in the teaching profession. However, in recent years, the number of African-American teachers in American schools has dwindled significantly. Over the past three decades, white teachers have made up between 87% and 90% of the national teaching workforce, with typical students in American schools being taught by teachers who are white, middle-class, and female (Wilder, 2000). Accordingly, the percentage of minority teachers is not increasing at an equal rate to the number of minority children in public schools (Bolich, 2003). Enwefa, Enwefa, Banks, Jurden, and Buckley (2002) explain that "By the year 2020, children of color will make up approximately 46% of the public school population, yet fewer than 5% of teachers will be teachers of color." The number of African-American teachers who leave the profession is significant, with the National Center on Education Statistics (2005) indicating that African-American teachers had the highest number (11%) of 'leavers' in the teaching profession based on the National Schools and Staffing Survey.

Research suggests that most African-American teachers choose to teach in schools that primarily serve minority students. In Mississippi in 2002, 68% of African-American teachers worked in schools whose minority enrollment was more than 50% (Enwefa et al., 2002), with the average black teacher teaching in schools where nearly three-fifths of the students are from low-income families (Frankenberg, 2006). Yet, African-American teachers opt to teach in these schools for reasons beyond salary or other extrinsic factors. Many minority teacher candidates express concern for the conditions of education for poor and minority children and are drawn

to the teaching profession because of inequalities that exist within the educational system (Su, 1997).

King (1993) discovered in a 1992 study of 41 African-American prospective and beginning teachers and their decision to teach, that 83% of teachers chose teaching as a career because they wanted to work with young people; 78% felt they were capable of teaching effectively, and 73% wanted to teach in order to impact society. For many African-American educators, teaching is viewed not only as an opportunity to give back to the community and serve as positive role models, but also as an attempt to help eliminate the educational injustices that exist. Unfortunately, the desire of African-American teachers to 'make a difference' is often overshadowed by the requirements and sanctions they face in efforts to meet the goals of NCLB, which Frankenberg (2006) describes as an added layer of stress for teachers in minority schools. Therefore, NCLB appears to stifle the purpose for which many African-American teachers desire to teach in the first place. As Gerstl-Pepin (2006) explains, "Teachers who work in economically challenged communities do not teach so they can test students, but because they have a social justice interest in making the world a better place for children" (p.153).

According to Sunderman and Kim (2004), the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is one of the most significant and controversial changes in federal education policy since the federal government assumed a major role in American education. One of the main goals of NCLB is to level the playing field for all learners in order to achieve equity in education. This is primarily accomplished through

NCLB's extensive accountability measures, which include requiring the states to define students' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) based on statewide assessments. While the premise of the law is admirable, the reality of how it has been implemented and the effect it has had on educators has been questionable.

NCLB assumes that schools by themselves can achieve drastic, totally unprecedented levels of educational achievement for all racial and ethnic groups in a short period of time (Sunderman & Kim, 2004). For teachers in high poverty, high minority schools, making AYP is often a difficult challenge, with many teachers experiencing significant pressure to improve test scores or face federal sanctions and public labeling as a 'failing' school. This increase in pressure has had a serious effect on teacher morale, causing many educators to transfer to better schools or simply abandon the teaching profession altogether.

According to Orfield and Lee (2005) many of the teachers in low performing schools are not planning to remain there long and believe the increased pressure will encourage teachers to leave more rapidly. Researchers have discovered that veteran teachers have a 20% probability of departure from schools labeled low performing, while new teachers have a 36-39% probability of departing from low performing schools (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Diaz, 2004).

A study of 102 teachers from four low performing schools in the Mississippi Delta by Al-Fadhli and Singh (2007) reported more frustration and lack of empowerment among teachers in low performing schools than teachers in high performing schools. Likewise, teachers in low performing schools felt discouraged

and frustrated when their schools did not meet accountability targets, with blame, pressure, lack of support and unnoticeable results influencing teachers' expectations about meeting accountability targets and decreasing their morale (Finnigan & Gross, 2007).

Similarly, Minrop and Trujillo (2005) explain in their examination of evaluative reports and policy documents from Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, California, Florida, New York, and Texas, that increased pressure on teachers can lead to dissatisfaction, exit, and disfragmented schools. Thus, the accountability system discourages the best teachers from working in schools with large numbers of low performing students, which could affect the ability of those schools to raise the achievement of their students (Clotfelter, et al., 2004).

The extensive requirements of No Child Left Behind have created considerable challenges for African-American teachers, both personally and professionally. According to Frankenberg (2006) over a quarter of black teachers teach in schools that did not make AYP. He further explains that teachers in schools with high minority populations are more likely to face sanctions and be publicly branded as a 'failing' school. Hunt (2006) explains that such labeling depresses the job quality of teachers in struggling schools, increasing the likelihood that teachers will leave schools with high percentages of poor, minority students.

According to a 2006 analysis of emerging trends in the No Child Left Behind Era, Spradlin and Prendergast (2006) discovered that nearly 40% of all teachers leaving high poverty schools reported job dissatisfaction. Therefore, African-

American teachers appear to face greater pressure than most teachers from accountability standards, since they often teach in low performing schools. This in turn may impact both teacher morale and teacher attrition among African-American teachers.

McKenzie (2006) explains that teacher morale is extremely overlooked at this stage of educational history, with so few studies of teacher morale and retention in this century, that it is often no longer perceived as an issue. Yet, no aspect of education can be effective without paying substantial attention to the perspectives and experiences of teachers responsible for the success or failure of education initiatives and policies.

The National Center for Education Statistics (1997) reports that teacher satisfaction is an important policy issue, since it is associated with teacher effectiveness, which ultimately impacts student achievement and teacher retention. Therefore, in order for No Child Left Behind to succeed at the school level, it must take into account the attitudes of teachers (Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield, 2004), particularly those who face the greatest challenges in improving student achievement.

An examination of how NCLB has affected morale among African-American teachers is important since few studies have been conducted examining teacher morale, and even fewer conducted on the morale of African-American teachers. A significant gap of knowledge exists as it pertains to education reform and its influence on teacher morale.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine African-American teacher experiences regarding NCLB, to determine how these experiences have impacted teacher morale, and to examine the influence of teacher morale on teacher attrition among African-American teachers. The findings provided insight into the experiences of teachers working in low-performing schools and how they have experienced the effort to improve student achievement according to the accountability measures established by No Child Left Behind.

Research Questions

This study examined the impact of NCLB on teacher morale among African-American teachers in low performing schools. The research questions generated for this investigation were:

1. What are African-American teachers in low performing schools general perspectives regarding NCLB?

2. How has NCLB affected teacher morale among African-American teachers in low performing schools?

3. How has NCLB affected teacher autonomy for African-American teachers in low performing schools?

4. How likely are African-American teachers in low-performing schools to remain at their current school and/or the teaching profession as a result of NCLB?

Justification of the Study

According to Finnigan and Gross (2007), NCLB builds on previous education policies by applying assistance and consequences to schools in an effort to hold educators accountable for student performance. However, if teachers do not think the accountability targets are valuable or attainable, and if they do not think their teaching methods will improve student achievement, teachers cannot be expected to change their effort or practice at all (Finnigan & Gross, 2007). For teachers in low-performing schools, failed attempts to achieve success could undermine the purpose of NCLB and negatively impact teacher morale. Most teachers understand the need for accountability and standards, but feel that the way in which the policy has been carried out has not considered the challenges they face.

The increased pressure to improve student achievement in struggling schools has decreased teacher morale and motivation (Franklin, Snow-Gerono, 2005). And while morale is considered an abstract concept, its implications for education are concrete and poignant. According to Bivona (2002) when a healthy school environment exists and teacher morale is high, teachers feel good about each other and feel a sense of accomplishment from their jobs. However, when teachers do not see the purpose or meaningfulness of new initiatives, their internal motivation, work satisfaction, and high-quality performance decreases.

Teacher morale is critical to the success of any school, and teacher attitudes and experiences directly affect teacher morale. This study was designed to determine the extent to which educational policy and reform directly affects teacher morale and

possibly teacher retention. Specifically, the experiences of African-American

teachers in low-performing middle schools were examined to determine the impact of

NCLB on teacher morale. Research has shown that many teachers in low-performing

schools experience low morale as a result of feeling devalued and from a perspective

that they, as individuals, or their collective voice as teachers do not matter (Finnigan

& Gross, 2007).

Failure to acknowledge teacher experiences and perspectives can significantly

impede the effectiveness of education policies and student achievement. Although

the level of morale in schools is important, morale is not a common topic in

educational literature (Briggs & Richardson, 1992). Yet, low levels of satisfaction

and morale can lead to decreased teacher productivity and burnout, which may result

in a lack of concern for and detachment from colleagues, decreased teacher quality,

depression, increased sick leave, an exit from the profession, and a cynical perception

of students (Lumsden, 1998). Likewise, low teacher morale can lead to confusion,

insecurity, frustration, lack of confidence, fear of supervision, and an attitude of

futility (Briggs & Richardson, 1992). Therefore, ignoring teacher morale as an

important facet of education may result in both failed policy efforts in the future and a

serious oversight of vital participants in the educational process – teachers.

Definition of Terms

The following is a list of terms related to the purpose and design of this study:

No Child Left Behind: the latest amendment to the original Elementary and

Secondary Education Act of 1965 which provides a framework by which American

public school systems may accurately determine student competency and school effectiveness. It is built on four concepts: accountability for results; an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research; expanded parental options; and expanded local control and flexibility. School administrators, educators, and learners must maintain improving test results each year, or school districts and their schools will undergo sanctions connected to federal funding (Lamb, 2007).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): a component of No Child Left Behind which states that schools must improve the proficiency rates of different subgroups of students on a yearly basis or face federal sanctions.

Autonomy: dimension of empowerment that refers to teachers' beliefs that they can control certain aspects of their work life; the freedom to make certain decisions. (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

Morale: a feeling, a state of mind, a mental attitude and an emotional attitude. (Lumsden, 1998)

Low-Performing School: a school identified as Level 2 or below based on test scores derived from the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT).

Urban School: The National Center for Education Statistics defines a small urban school as one that resides in a territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with a population of less than 100,000.

Rural School: The National Center for Education Statistics defines a rural school as one that resides in a territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Mintrop and Trujillo (2005) discovered that most educational policies, past and present, have created heightened pressure for teachers, exacerbating severe teacher commitment problems in many low performing schools. Therefore, the review of related literature for this study focuses primarily on two aspects related NCLB and teacher morale; the AYP accountability measure of NCLB and the relationship between NCLB and teacher autonomy. Both of these concepts appear to be significant factors related to teacher satisfaction and motivation, which ultimately affects teacher morale and possibly teacher retention. Examining these aspects is necessary in order to understand the impact of NCLB on teacher morale among African-American teachers in low performing middle schools.

Adequate Yearly Progress

The first line of literature focuses on the Adequate Yearly Progress component of No Child Left Behind. This accountability measure has significant implications for teachers, since it is the determining factor for which schools succeed or fail. Schools are rewarded or sanctioned based on their yearly performance, with low performing schools facing extensive pressure to improve. Teachers in struggling schools that fail to make AYP experience significant challenges in trying to boost

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student achievement. As Haretos (2005) points out, the AYP requirement has negatively affected teachers who serve in high minority, low-SES schools. And this negative effect may in some manner significantly impact teacher morale. Therefore, previous research has been examined to determine the extent to which teachers are affected by the AYP accountability measure.

One of the most significant aspects of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act is the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) accountability measure. Kim and Sunderman (2004) explain that AYP is a test-based accountability measure that relies on proficiency targets to measure progress. They further explain that test based accountability incorporates a "set of policies and procedures that provide rewards and/or sanctions as a consequence of scores on large-scale achievement tests" (p. 10). NCLB uses proficiency targets to compare school performance based on state standards and requires that schools make academic progress for at least two consecutive years or face federal sanctions for school improvement.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2003) schools must demonstrate that each subgroup of students (race/ethnicity, SES, disability, and ESL status) meets or exceeds statewide objectives, with 95% of students enrolled in each subgroup participating in the assessments. Kim (2003) explains that the purpose of the subgroup goals is to focus on improving poor and minority student achievement. Likewise, Kim and Sunderman (2005) state that this subgroup accountability system means that each subgroup of students must meet a separate test score target. They further point out that since NCLB establishes a single performance standard for all

students, schools with lower-scoring subgroups will face greater pressure to raise test scores and avoid federal sanctions. Therefore, schools with high percentages of minority and low-income students are most affected by this aspect of the law based on their demographics, and generally are labeled as failing or underperforming for this reason.

According to Kim and Sunderman (2005), high poverty schools face the greatest challenges of meeting AYP due to their large enrollment of minority students, who usually score lower on standardized tests. Likewise, a national study of state and local implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act by LeFloch, et al. (2007) found that AYP was directly related to the percentage of low-income and minority students in a school, with schools with higher percentages of minorities and low income students less likely to meet AYP requirements. They also discovered that 36% of high poverty schools were identified for improvement, compared to 4% of low poverty schools, and 34% of schools with high concentrations of minority students were identified, along with 22% of urban schools (LeFloch, et al., 2007).

Similarly, Harris (2007) discovered in his analysis of a series of reports on NCLB by the Education Trust and Heritage Foundation that low poverty and low minority schools are 89 times more likely to be high performing than high poverty, high minority schools. Haretos (2005) explains in her examination of statewide AYP data in Tennessee that the subgroup rules generate negative, unintended consequences for the students they were designed to help by disproportionately subjecting racially diverse schools to sanctions under NCLB. Diverse schools have more subgroup

targets, which makes them less likely to meet AYP requirements (LeFloch, et al., 2007) and places them at a statistical disadvantage (Kim & Sunderman, 2005).

In an analysis of assessment data of 352 schools in Virginia and 403 schools in California, Kim and Sunderman (2005) revealed that schools which failed to make AYP did so solely because they had to meet three or more subgroup targets. They further revealed that in schools with a single subgroup target, only 22% failed to meet AYP, while over 50% of schools with four or more subgroups failed to make AYP (Kim & Sunderman, 2005). The percentage of school failures increased as the number of subgroups increased. Likewise, Balfanz (2007) examined the extent to which AYP is a valid and reliable indicator of improvement in low performing high schools from 202 randomly selected high schools and discovered that the amount of subgroup accountability in a school strongly determined whether a school made AYP.

Since NCLB requires all schools and students to meet the same mean proficiency level, many have questioned the fairness and equitability of this standard. A study by Raudenbush (2004) analyzed student achievement scores from three data sets in Washington, D.C. public schools and found that "accountability systems based on mean proficiency levels were systematically biased against high poverty schools" (p.36). Kim and Sunderman (2005) analyzed these results and concluded that mean proficiency measures would treat numerous high poverty schools as failures even if their scores improved at an equal rate of low poverty schools. They also concluded that AYP and subgroup accountability rules can over-identify racially diverse schools as failing.

According to Finnigan and Gross (2007) NCLB is based on "the theoretical assumption that consequences will motivate school staff to perform at higher levels and focus their attention on student outcomes" (p. 594). The AYP accountability measure of NCLB is designed to push teachers towards ensuring academic progress for their students. Gerstl-Pepin (2005) explains that NCLB seems to assert that if teachers simply worked harder and had greater student expectations, the achievement gap would be eliminated.

The heightened pressure to improve test scores in order to make AYP has had a devastating effect on teachers, particularly as it relates to teacher morale. Finnigan and Gross (2007) explain that an unintended consequence of accountability policies is that it decreases teacher morale, especially when teachers cannot reach their targets. In their study of teachers from 10 schools, they discovered that schools with the lowest morale among teachers were those who had been under sanctions from NCLB.

According to Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus (2003) and their national study of teachers in high stakes states (Kentucky, Vermont, Washington, Maryland, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia), 77% of teachers surveyed in North Carolina indicated decreases in morale and 76% reported that teaching had become more stressful since implementing the state testing program. Likewise, over half of teachers in Maryland and 75% of teachers in Kentucky reported that morale had declined as a result of state testing.

The excessive pressure generated by NCLB creates a teaching environment that can easily undermine teacher motivation and dedication. Abrams, et al. (2003)

explains that the pressure is most acute for teachers in high stakes testing environments. Results from their survey of teachers in high stakes states indicate that compared to 17% of teachers in low stakes programs, 41% of teachers in high stakes programs were under significant pressure.

Moore and Waltman (2006) surveyed 1300 teachers within 131 schools in Iowa to examine the effects of pressure to increase test scores. They discovered that teachers were losing their enthusiasm about being educators and contemplating leaving the profession. The study implied that if teachers do not support an initiative, it is unlikely that the goals of NCLB will be achieved.

In a study by the Rand Corporation (2005) teachers in three states (Georgia, California, and Pennsylvania) were surveyed regarding teacher attitudes about accountability. The study revealed that a significant number of teachers reported that the morale of the school staff had changed for the worse, with few reporting a change for the better. These sentiments were echoed in a subsequent study by the Rand Corporation (2006) examining teacher responses to accountability within the same three states. Through survey data, the study revealed that over 40% of teachers in all three states felt that the state accountability system had changed teachers' morale for the worse.

Finnigan and Gross (2007) explain in their qualitative examination of teachers from 10 low performing schools in Chicago, that teachers felt blamed for social factors beyond their control when it comes to state testing. According to Jones (2007) prior research from various school districts in various states revealed that 30-

40% of the variation in test scores in Kentucky were the result of factors beyond direct control of teachers and administrators. Similarly, 50% of the variance in test scores in Virginia was due to factors unrelated to schooling.

According to Gestl-Pepin (2005) while the social justice premise of NCLB is noble, it fails to acknowledge the serious challenges teachers face. For African-American teachers in under-performing schools who tackle other issues, such as poverty, lack of parental involvement, and poor or dilapidated facilities, failure to make AYP is yet another obstacle to overcome, and as a result teacher morale often plummets.

Failure to make AYP for teachers in low performing schools does more than simply identify schools in need of improvement. This failure also ignores the progress that teachers make, despite falling short of AYP goals. McElroy (2005) explains that numerous schools have made commendable progress, yet they have been targeted for NCLB's sanctions because some of their students started farther behind, making it more difficult to reach the law's arbitrary benchmark.   There are thousands of teachers working diligently to improve student growth and achievement, yet their efforts often go unnoticed and unrecognized year after year. Little praise is offered for their gains, even if small by accountability standards, in bringing their students closer to the goals of NCLB.

Sunderman, et al. (2004) describes the challenge teachers face in schools with lower-scoring students, explaining that these teachers must work to make substantially larger gains to meet AYP than schools with higher performing students,

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using the same performance standards for all students regardless of where they start, while having farther to go to meet the cut-off scores. This often means African-American teachers must face the harsh reality of having to win the race with a late start, enduring frustration along the way. Haretos (2005) explains that over two-thirds of the schools that are closing the Black-White achievement gap are subjected to penalties instead of rewards. She points out the negative, unintended consequences of the current definition of AYP, which include frustration, discouragement, and additional work for high-minority low-SES schools that are working hard to make at least one year's gains.

For African-American educators facing this kind of daunting task, it is evident that teaching can easily become a burdensome and unsatisfying career, one in which many may simply choose to leave. Jones (2007) explains that 85% of teachers surveyed in Texas believed that teachers were leaving the profession as a direct result of high stakes testing, with 52% of teachers surveyed in Florida opting to leave teaching altogether or transfer to grades that were not tested. Finnigan and Gross (2007) point out that 27% of teachers in schools on probation agreed that they would consider leaving the teaching profession, while others stated they would leave the school, not teaching.

Along with teachers facing a lack of recognition for their efforts, failure to meet AYP requirements often results in public scrutiny and negative publicity from the community at large. Kruger, Wandle, and Struzziero (2007) explain that in addition to local and federal sanctions, public scrutiny from the mass media has

increased pressure and competition among schools.   Failing schools are labeled 'under-performing' or 'low-performing' and teachers must deal with the humiliation of these labels. With such stigmas attached, schools identified as 'failures' can lead to teachers who believe they are 'failures' as well.

Ambrosio (2004) conducted a case study of Roosevelt High School, a school with a high percentage of low-income students in Oregon, to examine the punitive effects of NLCB. He found that having a school repeatedly labeled as 'needing improvement' and teachers identified as 'not highly qualified' was humiliating and demoralizing. Likewise, Hunt (2006) conducted a study using an online survey of 240 Illinois public school superintendents whose districts had failed to make AYP for two or more consecutive years. He discovered that students, teachers, and administrators all suffered morale problems in lower performing schools, with labeling negatively affecting the job quality of the teachers and administrators in those schools. Jones (2007) explains that "limiting a schools quality to a rating oversimplifies the complexity of factors that contribute to a quality education" (p.68).

AYP appears to affect African-American teachers with greater intensity than other educators in the field since they generally teach in high minority, high poverty schools that are most affected by this aspect of NCLB. Frankenberg (2006) explains that teachers of color are generally concentrated in schools with more disadvantaged children, lower levels of average achievement, struggling to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, while facing sanctions; which makes the teaching context for minority teachers more difficult during a time when minority teachers are

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underrepresented in the teaching force. Therefore, it is apparent that AYP

requirements may significantly impact morale among African-American teachers in

low performing schools.

Teacher Autonomy

The second line of literature focuses on the relationship between teacher

autonomy and teacher morale. Pearson and Moomaw (2006) explain that teacher

autonomy, or lack thereof, appears to be a critical factor in teacher motivation and

retention. Teacher autonomy has proven to be a direct link to job satisfaction and

morale, with implications that it may also influence teacher attention and retention.

Therefore, this section of literature review examines prior research on teacher

autonomy and its relationship to teacher morale.

With the implementation of NCLB, teachers encountered a new realm of

instructional and occupational changes which required them to sacrifice a certain

level of autonomy in the classroom. Autonomy is defined as a self-governing state,

community, or group, and a teachers' sense of freedom to make certain decisions that

control certain aspects of their work life (Short, 1994). As it relates to education, it is

important for educators to maintain a certain level of teacher autonomy in the

classroom. Failure to do so may result in decreased morale and diminished

motivation from teachers. Pearson and Moomaw (2005) explain that autonomy is an

emerging factor in education reform, stating that teacher autonomy and empowerment

are the keys to solving many of the problems in today's school. They further explain

that teachers must have the freedom to "…prescribe the best treatment for their students as doctors/lawyers do for their patients/clients" (p.37).

According to Short (1994) autonomy is necessary in order for teachers to feel a sense of accomplishment. However, he also points out that the traditional structure of schools often prevents or limits autonomy, causing many teachers to leave the profession. Teacher autonomy is a critical factor related to teacher motivation and morale, yet the stringent guidelines of NCLB have significantly altered teacher autonomy, thus creating what appears to be an oppressive environment for the teacher workforce.

According to a study by Pearson and Moomaw (2006) examining teacher autonomy among 300 elementary, middle, and high school teachers in Florida, teacher autonomy is a common link that appears when examining teacher motivation, job satisfaction, stress, professionalism, and empowerment. They explain that in order for teachers to be regarded as professionals, they must have the freedom to choose what they feel is most beneficial for their students.

Similarly, the National Center for Education Statistics (1997) examined job satisfaction among the nation's K-12 teachers using the Schools and Staffing Survey, which examines teacher workplace conditions. They discovered that teacher autonomy is positively correlated with career satisfaction, making the teaching profession attractive as a career choice, and improving the quality of classroom teaching and practices, all of which may impact teacher morale. Likewise, Kruger, et

al. (2007) discovered that teachers who have more autonomy are less likely to experience the negative effects of stress.

Research by Rentner, et al. (2006) for the Center for Educational Policy describes the negative effects of NCLB on teacher autonomy, which include excessive time devoted to testing, diminished attention to advanced students, and a narrowing of curriculum content and skills. Jones (2007) explains that there is strong evidence that high stakes testing has coerced teachers into teaching directly to the test. Raising test scores often requires teachers to use instructional methods geared specifically towards test content. This can result in a loss of autonomy, narrowed instructional flexibility, and resentment among teachers who feel bound by curriculum guidelines.

Gitlin (2001) discovered in a case study examining teacher decision making among 6 teachers from two junior high schools in New York, that autonomy is the one area where teachers can find balance in an intense school structure. Yet Crocco and Costigan (2007) found in their study examining the narrowing of curriculum by NCLB among 219 new middle and high school teachers, that teachers felt their professional identity had been dwarfed and creativity and autonomy diminished due to the "shrinking space" of classroom decision-making as a result of mandated curriculum.

Szczesiul (2007) conducted a study of 10 middle school teachers with four to eight years of experience in urban classrooms to examine their perspectives on teacher autonomy. The study revealed that current accountability measures have

altered the work and discretionary power of teachers in many schools.   The study

further described the effects of accountability standards, explaining that state-

mandated testing and district guidelines restricted what teachers could decide about

curriculum and instruction.

Likewise, Hunt (2006) described the impact of accountability measures on

teacher autonomy in his findings, which revealed that teacher autonomy was

restricted due to a narrowed curriculum geared towards math and language arts, while

excluding other content areas. He later explained that teachers felt they had lost

control, which led to morale issues and increased anxiety.

The implicit focus on accountability testing has made it challenging for

teachers to implement creative instructional practices, fostering an atmosphere in

which content unrelated to testing mandates becomes a liability for student

achievement. Jones (2007) explains that high stakes testing not only influences what

is taught, but how it is taught.   He further notes that teaching to the test focuses on

low level thinking skills with drill and kill practice, which teachers say have stifled

both their creative ability and their capacity to meet the needs of students.

Ng (2006) conducted a study of preservice teachers and the impact of high

stakes accountability and discovered that while teachers understood the need for

accountability, they felt they should focus their efforts on developing meaningful and

engaging learning activities for students and that mandated curriculum worried them.

She also found that teachers felt accountability programs distracted teachers from the

deeper problems in schools and that it limited instruction geared towards higher order thinking skills.

Abrams, et al. (2003) found that 63% of teachers in high stakes states used specific test preparation materials developed by the state in their instruction, with 85% of teachers in high stakes states teaching test taking skills.

Kim and Sunderman (2004) explain that in a national survey of teachers in high stakes testing environments teachers felt pressured to align their instruction to the test and use intense test preparation activities, while limiting their focus on non-tested subjects. They also cautioned that such practices may improve test scores, but may not be a true reflection of student achievement.

The emphasis on accountability measures not only narrows curriculum content, but also places time constraints on instruction which could be geared towards other learning material. Educators are aware that effective planning is essential to effective instruction. However, when testing schedules and test preparation become the focus of instruction, teachers have less time to devote to content not covered by state tests.

A study by Jones and Egley (2004) surveyed 708 third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers in 30 school districts in Florida regarding their perceptions of high stakes testing, specifically the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test). Findings from this study revealed that test preparation and administration had reduced the amount of time available for instruction. The study later referred to other findings, which indicated that teachers spent from 8 to 10 hours a week on test preparation,

while students spent a significant amount of time practicing test taking strategies rather than engaging in learning.

Abrams, et al. (2003) discovered that of 470 elementary teachers surveyed in North Carolina, 80% of them spent more than 20% of instructional time practicing for tests. They further explained that 76% of high stakes teachers reported that state testing had led them to teach in a manner that contradicted what they believed was sound educational practice.

Lamb (2007) discovered in his study of testing culture in rural Mississippi that "Every lesson in a state tested classroom is considered test preparation" (p.41). He further explained that curriculum alignment was stressed heavily during the school year, resulting in an instructional environment closely related to teaching to the test.

Fewer instructional options may likely result in less effort on the part of teachers. A study of 12 teachers from two urban schools in Connecticut by Armaline and Levy (2004) examined the impact of the CAPT (Connecticut Academic Performance Test) on teacher autonomy. They found that state testing took away from teacher autonomy and room for creativity, lessening teacher quality from their perspective. The reduction of instructional time for meaningful and engaging activities makes it difficult for teachers in struggling schools to find much enjoyment in what they are teaching, which may directly impact teacher morale and possibly serve as a barrier to maintaining teacher satisfaction.

Loss of autonomy can stifle the very essence of what teachers are supposed to do – teach. Woods and Weasmer (2000) explain that it is vital that teachers be

recognized as valued contributors to curricular development and implementation of innovative practices in order to sense their own roles in the culture of the school. Crocco and Castigan (2007) explain that previous research has shown that the denial of teacher autonomy in factory-like schools undermines sound teaching practices. They further state that "If teachers perceive school conditions as undermining their job satisfaction, they will move to other schools or leave the profession entirely" (p. 514).

Loss of individuality and creativity can evoke negative attitudes for many teachers who are in schools that must improve test scores or face serious consequences, which is a common scenario for many African-American teachers. Claycomb (2000) explains that compared to all teachers, those in urban school districts report the lowest levels of teacher satisfaction with teaching resources and the lowest levels of teacher control over curricular and pedagogical issues.

Crocco and Castigan (2007) explain that teachers in schools with high proportions of low-income students were more constrained than teachers in more affluent schools. They further discovered that teachers who faced mandated curriculum experienced the most frustration by their lack of control, particularly when working in failing schools.

This focus on accountability testing may significantly restrict instructional options for African-American teachers who often teach in low-performing schools, possibly reducing their ability to incorporate meaningful learning experiences in the

classroom. Likewise, strict adherence to accountability standards may limit their instructional decision making abilities and negate the very idea of teacher autonomy.

With African-American teachers in low-performing middle schools facing the extensive challenges of AYP and a significant reduction in teacher autonomy as a result of NCLB, it is possible that these concepts may influence teacher morale and serve as an underlying cause for the present shortage of African-American teachers in the classroom. An examination of these aspects from the personal experiences and perspectives of African-American teachers can provide greater insight into the effects of education reform policies on these teachers, and provide a greater understanding of their diminishing presence in the field of education.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of NCLB on teacher

morale among African-American teachers in low performing middle schools.

Specifically, it was designed to provide insight into the experiences of African-

American teachers regarding NCLB and teacher morale, and to discover how teacher

morale may influence teacher attrition among African-American teachers. Emphasis

in this study was placed on understanding the shared experiences of African-

American teachers in low-performing middle schools. Using a qualitative,

phenomenological approach, the study examined African-American teacher

experiences in both a rural and urban middle school identified as Level 2 performing

or below and currently under improvement sanctions. The study compared the

responses from teachers at both the rural and urban school to determine similarities or

differences in teacher experiences. From these experiences an understanding of how

teacher morale has been affected by the stipulations of NCLB was gained.

According to Van Manen (2002) the purpose of phenomenological research is

to examine experiences in order to reflect on the meanings that may exist in them. He

explains that phenomenology is an empirical research method designed to explore

examples of lived experiences through lived experience accounts. Phenomenology asks, "What is this or that kind of experience like?...It attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it" (Van Manen, 1990).

A phenomenological approach utilizes both empirical and reflective methods, emphasizing both experiences and an interpretation of those experiences. However, it should be noted that according to Hein and Austin (2001) phenomenology does not dictate the use of any specific method, meaning there is no single way to conduct phenomenological research.

Van Manen (2002) describes 6 general research activities involved in a phenomenological approach:

1. selecting a phenomenon of interest
2. investigating the experience as it is lived
3. reflecting on the themes that characterize the experience
4. describing the phenomenon through writing
5. maintaining a strong relationship to the phenomenon
6. balancing the research by considering parts and the whole

For this study, the phenomenon of interest was teacher morale among African-American teachers in low-performing middle schools. As a former school public school teacher who served at a high performing school, I was eager to know what teachers in low-performing schools experienced as a result of NCLB. Were their experiences similar or different from my own, and in what ways? Both initial and

follow-up interviews were used to investigate the lived experiences of African-American teachers in low-performing middle schools. Upon completion of interviews and transcription of interviews, a thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes described through participant experiences. After reviewing transcripts repeatedly and identifying the thematic structures, the phenomenon was described in writing using participant quotes taken from interview transcripts, maintaining a strong relationship to the focus of the study. By examining experiences both collectively and individually, a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African-American teachers in low-performing middle schools was gained.

Participants

Teachers

The participants in this study were 9 African-American teachers from two low performing schools, five from Urban X Middle School in Central Mississippi and four from Rural Y Middle School in the Mississippi Delta. By examining teachers from an urban and rural low performing middle school, comparisons of teacher experiences in various school settings were made regarding teacher morale among African-American teachers in both urban and rural schools. As Reeves (2003) explains, the greatest teacher shortage occurs in hard-to-staff schools, which are those located in urban and rural areas, along with those which serve minority and low-income students. Therefore, studying teachers from both an urban and rural setting

provided a deeper understanding of African-American teacher experiences from various learning environments.

The research requirements for teachers selected for this study were African-American teachers who had taught at least 1 year prior to the implementation of *No Child Left Behind* and those who presently teach in one of the core content areas assessed by the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT).

Teachers at both Urban X Middle School and Rural Y Middle School were primarily African-American. According to data from the Mississippi Report Card (MAARS) for 2003-2004 (2004), 93.7% of the core academic teachers at Urban X Middle School were highly qualified. During the same year, 92.3% of the core academic teachers at Rural Y Middle School were highly qualified. In addition, district data revealed that 34.5% of teachers in Urban X School District have advanced degrees, with 12.3% of teachers having one-year licenses. In Rural Y School District, 15.1% of teachers have advanced degrees, with 29.0% of teachers having one-year licenses.

Table 1: Urban X Middle School Teacher Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Content/Subject Area	Years of Experience	Area of Certification
Teacher A	Female	50s	Math	19	Math 4-12
Teacher B	Female	30s	Reading	8	English
Teacher C	Female	50s	Reading	18	Reading/English
Teacher D	Female	60s	Language Arts	33	K-8
Teacher E	Female	30s	Math	10	Math 4-12

Table 2: Rural Y Middle School Teacher Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Content/Subject Area	Years of Experience	Area of Certification
Teacher F	Female	40s	Language Arts	15	English
Teacher G	Female	30s	Language Arts	11	English
Teacher H	Male	60s	Social Studies	32	Social Studies
Teacher I	Male	50s	Math	25	Math

Low-Performing Schools

The schools participating in this study were located in different regions of Mississippi. Yet while they differed geographically, the demographics of each school were almost identical. Based on the Mississippi Report Card for 2006 (2006) both schools had high percentages of students receiving free/reduced lunch. In Urban X School District, 95.2% of its students received free/reduced lunch. In Rural Y School District, 89.06% of its students received free/reduced lunch. Both schools served student populations that were made up primarily of minorities, with 99% of the students at Urban X Middle School being African-American, and 96% of the students at Rural Y Middle School being African-American.

Both schools included in the study were Level 2 accredited and identified as under performing based on 2007 results of the Mississippi Statewide Accountability System. Urban X Middle School was under corrective action in 2006, while Rural Y Middle School was in year 2 of improvement during the same year. The only significant difference between the two schools was school size, with Urban X Middle School having a total enrollment of 806 students, and Rural Y Middle School having a total enrollment of 329 students.

Procedures

The study began in March 2008 following written approval from superintendents of both school districts and IRB acceptance. Once permission was granted, I contacted the principals of each participating school to gain their written consent for the study and to select participants for the study. Once participants were selected from a convenience sample, I met with teachers selected for the study in order to allow for personal introductions and to receive their signed consent. Upon their consent, I scheduled interviews with each teacher to be conducted during their planning period.

Before conducting the initial interviews, I began my research with a bracketing interview in order to identify my personal biases and assumptions. Hein and Austin (2001) describe bracketing as setting aside presuppositions, biases, and other knowledge about a phenomenon from personal experience or scholarly sources. Upon completing the bracketing process, I realized that while I had strong feelings regarding NCLB and accountability, my experiences with NCLB as a teacher did not affect me as negatively as I previously thought. Through careful observation of my experiences from the bracketing interview, I realized that I had not experienced any significant pressure as a result of NCLB. Instead, while I questioned the accountability measures of the law, NCLB was merely an educational nuisance, one which did not hinder my teaching in any significant manner.

After identifying my personal biases, etc., semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants in order to examine teacher experiences with NCLB and its effect on teacher morale. According to Van Manen (2002) the interview serves as a means of "exploring and gathering experiential narrative material, stories or anecdotes, that may serve as a resource for developing richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon." To gain a clearer understanding of teacher experiences, I conducted two interview sessions; both an initial and follow-up interview scheduled approximately 2 -3 weeks apart to allow for transcription and evaluation of interview transcripts.

Data Collection

Data collection for this research included both initial and follow-up interviews. Initial interviews were structured based on a detailed interview schedule; however, flexibility was allowed in order to probe more deeply into various questions or aspects of the research topic. I presented interview questions to each participant in a one on one setting and audio-taped each interview to ensure accuracy. The duration of interviews varied, with some lasting from one hour to one and a half hours. The interviews for teachers at Urban X Middle School took place in teacher classrooms either during teacher planning periods or after school. Interviews for teachers at Urban Y Middle School were conducted in the principal's office during teacher planning periods. Once initial interviews were conducted, I transcribed the interviews on my own, which required 2 to 6 hours per interview. Each interview yielded between 12-22 pages of transcription After the initial interviews were

transcribed, copies of the interview transcripts were given to participants to review. I

encouraged teachers to add comments or ask questions if they felt impelled to do so.

It is important to note that upon examining the interview transcripts, it was apparent

that my interview questions needed to be altered in order to gain a more thorough

description of teacher experiences; therefore, changes to the questions were made.

Follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify any questions, comments, or

concerns. These interviews were less structured and lasted approximately 30 minutes

long. Changes, additions, etc., to interview transcripts were made, with a final copy

of the transcripts being submitted to participants for their approval. Again, I listened

to audio-taped interviews repeatedly to gain a clearer understanding of participant

experiences, identifying recurring themes and selecting participant quotes as thematic

support.

Table 3: Research and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. What are African-American teachers in low performing schools general perspectives regarding NCLB?	1. Explain your decision to become a teacher. 2. Describe the most significant change you have observed since NCLB was enacted. 3. In your opinion, is AYP a fair and effective way to lessen the achievement gap? 4. Describe some advantages/disadvantages of the law. 5. Describe the greatest challenge you face as a result of NCLB. 6. As an African-American teacher, do you feel more or less affected by the law? Explain. 7. Overall, what are your thoughts about NCLB?

Table 3 cont.

2. How has NCLB affected teacher morale among African-American teachers in low performing schools?	1. How important is teacher morale to you? 2. How do you feel about coming to school each day? 3. How motivated are you to teach? 4. Describe what it is like being a teacher here. 5. Has the morale at your school changed since the implementation of NCLB? Explain. 6. Describe how it feels to be identified as a Level 2 school. 8. How much pressure do you feel to improve student test scores? 9. How do you feel about published test scores? 10. Have published test scores affected your morale or motivation? 11. Do you think NCLB discourages potential teachers from entering the profession? Explain. 12. Has NCLB affected teacher turnover at your school?
3. How has NCLB affected teacher autonomy for African-American teachers in low performing schools?	1. How much control do you have over what you teach? 2. Has NCLB affected the amount of creativity You have in planning instruction? 3. Describe the amount of input you have in Making curricular decisions. 4. How much instructional time do you spend on average preparing for the state test? 5. As test time approaches, how do you feel?
4. How likely are African-American teachers in low performing schools to remain at their current school and/or the teaching profession as a result of NCLB?	1. Explain your decision to remain at your school. 2. Would you or have you considered transferring to another school? Why or Why not? 3. Have you ever contemplated leaving the teaching profession altogether? 4. Where do you see yourself in the three years? 5. When you look out into the faces in your classroom, what do you see?

Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis for this study was done simultaneously.

Initial data analysis began with a description of the data collected. Thick, rich

description was used to provide the details of interview data. This was necessary in

order to make sure that the information collected was accurate and mimicked the

original recording of the data. Transcription of interviews was an integral part of this

process, and information from these interview transcripts was charted in matrix

displays using Microsoft Word and outlined according to the four research questions

and interview questions designed for this study. Approximately 2-6 hours were

necessary to transcribe each taped interview.

Following the description of interview transcripts, a thematic analysis of the

data collected was used to identify recurring themes related to NCLB and teacher

morale that emerged from the interview transcripts. Van Manen (2002) explains that

phenomenological themes help identify the structures of experience. For this study,

two thematic approaches were used, both a wholistic and selective reading approach.

This was done by carefully reading and re-reading collected data from interview

transcripts, in order to determine which themes emerged or appeared to be recurring

among participants, while selecting statements from participants that helped to

exemplify these themes. I listened to the interviews three times, first to ensure

accuracy, and then subsequent times to get a greater sense of the overall experiences

described by each participant. According to Hein and Austin (2001) themes emerge

from three sources: the participant's meanings, the investigator's meanings, and the intersubjective meanings of the participants and investigator.

Once detailed analysis of the data was complete, recurring themes related to NCLB and African-American teacher morale were identified. These themes were then reinforced by quoted experiences of the participants in the study. I provided quotes from interview transcripts that illustrated the various themes that emerged from the data. Van Manen (1990) explains that the purpose in using quotations from research participants is so that readers can be "in more direct contact with the world" as it was lived and then retrospectively described by participants (p.9).

Methodological Concerns and Trustworthiness

As researcher, my primary role was facilitating interview sessions with teachers selected for the study in a school setting. Establishing and maintaining rapport was an essential part of my role as researcher to ensure that teachers felt a sense of trustworthiness throughout the study. I was hesitant to ask some of the interview questions simply because my experience as an educator was vastly different from that of my participants. The demographics of the school in which I previously taught were completely different from the schools in which I conducted my research. Therefore, I was cautious not to make assumptions about my participants' experiences. I constantly and consciously had to assess my personal biases and researcher subjectivity. Having had firsthand experience with NCLB and student achievement, I tried to avoid projecting my personal feelings, attitudes, and assumptions onto the participants in the study and into the data analysis. The

bracketing interview conducted prior to data collection helped provide a greater awareness of my perspectives and allowed me to examine my research and data from an objective point of view by seeing participant experiences as they were, not as I perceived them.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter focuses on the accounts of the experiences of African-American teachers in low-performing middle schools and a discussion of these experiences as it pertains to teacher morale and NCLB. Using a thematic analysis, several themes emerged from interview transcripts which provided a glimpse into the lived experiences of the participants.

Upon careful examination of the recurring themes, it appears that each theme revolves around participants' perception of No Child Left Behind as a policy based on mainstream educational ideology, which ignores the social, cultural, and educational differences of educators and students that exist outside the mainstream. For instance, much of what NCLB asserts is based on the notion that students are already equipped with the basic skills needed to achieve on each grade level. However, as participants explained, for many students in low performing schools this is most often not the case. Likewise, NCLB assumes that students and teachers are equipped with the same access to educational resources. Unfortunately, participants in this study acknowledged that supplemental materials and resources often lagged behind other schools and districts, and judging by the age and physical condition of the schools I visited, teachers not only had inadequate resources, but inadequate

facilities as well. NCLB also assumes that students learn in the same manner, with instruction steeped in traditional methodology. Yet, participants in the study explained that although they tried to make their lessons engaging, they felt they were not creating life-long learners; they were essentially preparing their students for the test, often leaving out critical thinking skills and social skills through repetitive instruction. Kim and Sunderman (2004) point out the possible consequences of such practices, stating that if schools focus solely on test content, disadvantaged minority students could be further restricted from a rigorous academic curriculum and rapid test score gains may not reflect broad learning gains.

NCLB further assumes that students' social and cultural constructs are equivalent to that of the mainstream. However, socio-economic status and parental involvement are largely influential in regard to educational achievement, and as many participants pointed out, these factors have had a significant impact on the students they serve. Orfield and Lee (2005) explain that poverty is strongly related to numerous aspects of child development and that it is unrealistic to expect change in schools in any meaningful way without dealing with the issues that arise with poverty. And while participants did not perceive factors such as poverty and lack of parental support as excuses for under achievement, they acknowledged that the broader implications of these factors on student learning and ultimately student achievement must be taken into consideration.

Therefore, based on the themes identified, participant experiences seem to question NCLB's attempt to level the playing field for all students without examining

the extensive issues that exist among the students it is designed to help. Participants explain how little attention is given to the diverse social, cultural, and educational context of student learning. Instead, a one size fits all approach is used, and teachers and students who do not "fit" find themselves struggling to shape and mold themselves into an educational structure that is neither effective nor meets their needs. This blanket approach appears to be the primary caveat of NCLB for participants at both Urban X Middle School and Rural Y Middle School and the underlying concept that unifies the five themes within the study.

The following is a list of the recurring themes and subcategories identified through a careful analysis of interview transcripts:

Theme I: What about the children? – The Whole Child; Struggling Students

Theme II: Pressure Points – Adequate Yearly Progress; Published Test Scores; Test Anxiety

Theme III: Autonomy – Curriculum Autonomy; Creative Autonomy; Instructional Autonomy

Theme IV: Teacher Morale – Morale Matters; Teacher Frustration; School Climate

Theme V: African-American Teachers – Why We Teach; NCLB & African-American Teachers; Why We Stay; Why We leave; Where We'll Be in Three Years; What We See

Theme I: What About the Children? – The Whole Child

When asked to describe their greatest concerns regarding No Child Left

Behind, participants did not focus exclusively on NCLB and its impact on their own

personal or professional lives. Instead, most participants expressed resounding alarm

for the children they served. They described NCLB as a hindrance to the success of

their students, raising extensive questions as to what is being sacrificed in the name of

accountability and academic achievement. Some participants also described the

inability of NCLB to meet the needs of different types of students, particularly those

who do not share the same background, experiences, and social structures of

mainstream society.

> … You have to look at the whole child…With all this testing and testing, you
>
> don't get a chance to meet that whole child to help develop that child. NCLB
>
> does not give you that span of time to actually deal with the child and let them
>
> be successful…I don't care how much instruction you do, if you're not
>
> meeting that whole child to see what's going on, of course they're left behind!
>
> You have to see…what these kids are going through…Just like the one that
>
> just left out. She came from another district and I get her in my classroom and
>
> I have to deal with her because she's in foster care. She came in two mornings
>
> straight crying. So you have to stop and deal with her and help her handle it.
>
> But the thing is, what if I said, "Be quiet girl. We've got to test today. Let's go
>
> on. I don't have time for this. I've got to meet this. I've got to get this standard
>
> done."… I've lost a child…If they would stop and look at what we're dealing

with with kids, they would change it. Our kids come from different situations.

They are facing different things. I think NCLB is forcing this issue of

academics, academics, test scores, test scores. But are you looking at that

child we're losing? Are we checking ourselves?…Are we boosting other

districts and losing other districts and a whole community of kids?

(Teacher A)

...It's just a format that is being used by higher educators to take away that

sense of belonging that our children so much need. They need another

awareness of life, character, and all the other things that go along with it…It's

like every time we come in, pushing the test…'We've got to pass the MCT!

We've got MCT II coming on!' Yes, we do. But what about those other

things? Life skills our children need. They're lacking in those skills and that

hurts me because there's nothing there. The child is not going to use whatever

I said for that test. He's not going to use that in his everyday living. It's just

for a short span of time. I'm disappointed with NCLB. It's not reaching our

children…I want to reach. I want to teach. But what I have to work with, I

can't do it. Teaching from a test. It's knowledge, but it's not the kind of

knowledge that's going to help our children master skills that's going to help

them in this global economy…You can't compete with other children across

the world with a test! And that upsets me!...We need a change. And we need a

great awakening. But right now? This test isn't going to change it…

(Teacher C)

…Even though we're trying to educate all children…education comes in different forms…Everyone is educated to a degree, but everyone is not…academically educated. And I think that's one of the major problems that our youth…are facing now…I feel like if they taught more of a trade…We've taken a lot of the vocation out of education. I think that's a reason why we're losing a lot of our black kids…When I was in school. We were taught academics, but we were also taught a trade…a lot of kids found something that they were capable of mastering…Our kids are not exposed daily to the things that…city kids or some of the white kids are exposed to. And they're not taught the value of education. They are not taught social values and discipline…They are exposed to more, the majority. They are exposed to wealth. They are exposed to success. They see it. They live it…(Teacher H)

Theme I: What About the Children? – Struggling Students

In discussing the impact of NCLB on the needs of students, many participants expressed concern for struggling students in their classrooms. Specifically, they expressed concern for the exceptional education students who are mainstreamed into many of their classrooms and the regular education students who often lag behind in basic skills. Many participants felt that requiring exceptional education students to meet the same achievement levels as their counterparts was not only unfair, but unrealistic, placing significant stress on both teachers and students. Others described the challenges they faced in trying to teach regular education students who struggled to keep up because they lack the necessary skills to achieve.

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…You have SPED kids that have IEPs that say they are performing on 4th grade level…They have to take the test for 8th grade, but they're performing here. So how do you expect a child to do well if they're performing on 4th grade and you have to pass an 8th grade test? And the State says that these children have to do that. I think that's the greatest disadvantage that anyone can face…You're trying to do everything that you can to move them from 4th grade up to 8th grade in 9 months. And it's just almost impossible to do…I just don't feel that that's the best thing to do for the child because he's going to feel like a failure…He's going to fail the test…(Teacher E)

…If those [exceptional education students] students are in exceptional ed classes, if they're functioning on a second grade level, why would you bring them into a 7th grade classroom to take the 7th or 8th grade exam? They just look at it and they just bubble in answers…When I get a group of students, the vast majority of my students are functioning like maybe on a 4th grade or 5th grade level, very few are functioning on grade level…A lot of them came to me, they had weak vocabulary, very, very weak reading skills. And it's kind of hard for me to introduce things, objectives on my grade level when I have to reach back down to build them up. (Teacher G)

…I had a young man…In the classroom he has a calculator, he can do what I ask him. But I had him to manually show me how he multiplied 16 x 16, and he couldn't do it…With a calculator he did it quick; he told me 256. He

doesn't even know how to line place values. That's not my fault, but NCLB says you've got to teach it…(Teacher I)

Theme II: Pressure Points – Adequate Yearly Progress

One of the most significant aspects of No Child Left Behind is the Adequate Yearly Progress accountability measure. Participants expressed their concerns regarding this aspect of the law, describing the immense pressure they felt to improve student achievement. Likewise, participants voiced their concern that too much emphasis was being placed solely on standardized test scores.

…I don't want to lose my kids…I don't want to lose ANY of my kids...because I tell them, 'You are my future.'…But with No Child Left Behind now, I feel like it's more of a strain to pull 'em because all of them are not going to be on the same level. All of them are not going to learn the same way…I don't want to lose them and I feel like No Child Left Behind will leave a teacher behind trying to help them move up…Anything takes 5 years. You've got a foundation to build…For 5 years I wish they wouldn't do anything with the test for us. Give us a chance…to move. To get things established. To get positive things going. To get kids thinking and moving in the right direction. THEN come in and say, 'What have you done?' (Teacher A)

…It's more of the accountability being more on the teachers…If the children don't do well, it's the teacher's fault. If they don't grasp it, it's the teachers fault…I feel a tremendous amount of pressure. Because not only does it play a

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part with the way we feel, the teachers, but it plays a big part in the way that they [students] feel about themselves, too. Because they don't want to be associated with a low-performing school. They love being part…of a winning team…(Teacher B)

…I feel a lot of pressure…I'm doing everything I can to prepare you. You do all types of activities. You do this. You do that. But still, my name is on that test. So when the scores come in, they're looking at me. They're not going to look at the students. When our scores are released, all teachers are sitting together throughout the district. So when 7th grade language arts shows up, everybody knows who that is because there's only ONE teacher in the district that teaches language arts, 7th grade. So it's kind of scary how it's going to be this year…(Teacher G)

Theme II: Pressure Points – Published Test Scores

NCLB is based on the premise that published test scores will increase teacher motivation and thus improve student achievement. However, most participants in this study revealed that in many cases, published test scores have had the opposite affect. In particular, the negative impact of published test scores appears to be significant as teachers described the effects of being identified as a low performing school. Participants described emotions which ranged from rebellion and frustration to embarrassment and disappointment when test scores were released. They explained that published test scores affected not only them, but their students as well.

…It causes rebellion, because the most rebellious teachers that I have to work with, especially the young ones, it's because of that. You don't give them a chance. It almost becomes a handicap. So publishing it? What have you gained? …You've gained a label that is not positive. Well, they have enough of that. Look around the area they live in…When I first came here, they [the students] told me, they said, 'We're the ones who put Chimneyville* down because our test scores were so bad.' So it's in their minds, 'I do not test well. I'm not anything because they wrote about us in the paper…' If we carry labels, then the child will never come out from under anything…If anything, what I'd like to see in the paper is kids being successful and moving forward so they can kind of get out of all this negative. I don't like that. …You've got a foundation to build. If you don't look at the leaps and bounds, the little growth…The test scores might not show it, but it's a growth. It's a foundation being laid to go further. But it takes a while to do it…(Teacher A)

…It's awful. It's a very bad feeling because no one wants to be a part of anything that's not looked upon in a positive way. Not the children. Not the faculty…When I'm talking to my colleagues, I put on this façade like, 'Ok, well, it's just the children. They're not doing what they need to do. They need to try harder.' But deep inside, I know for a fact that there is something I need to do, too…When I see that my students aren't where I feel they should be, it makes me wonder, '…Do I need to move out of the way and allow someone who has the potential, someone who has the ability?...Maybe I'm not

supposed to be here…Maybe I just shouldn't do this.' And it makes you question yourself. But I know that I love children. I know that I'm concerned about their future. And I know that I want them to succeed. But do I need to be here? Am I the one to help them get to that point?…It makes me question myself when the test scores aren't where they should be…(Teacher B)

…I wish that we were not, because there are a lot of things that go along with that, different people coming in…scrutinizing and evaluating and all these different things. And of course I don't want that for my kids. I don't want that for myself as well…It makes it very hard on our district…And who wants to be associated with a Level 1 or Level 2?...I don't like seeing anything published, especially when it's negative, and I know the hard work that we do…I know what I'm capable of doing and I know what I have done. So I try not to let that define who I am as a teacher…I've still got to come and do what I've got to do, regardless of what the test scores are or what's being published…I've still got to go in my classroom and do what I've got to do, which is teach. (Teacher F)

Theme II: Pressure Points – Test Anxiety

In discussing the accountability measures established by NCLB, participants expressed concern for the effects of state mandated testing, not only on teachers, but on students as well. Increased pressure to improve achievement has generated test anxiety among both teachers and students, with many participants describing the frenzied process of preparing for the test. Some participants explained that while the

pressure was intense, they tried to manage the pressure without succumbing to anxiety and stress, while other participants explained that the pressure to improve was not a significant issue for them.

> …I'm always nervous around this time of year. I would be lying if I said, 'Oh, I'm sure they're going to do well.' But I am always nervous. I have faith in them and I always tell them that I have faith in them because I do. But we still continue to work, work, work, work. We don't become relaxed…The closer it gets, the more nervous we get. The harder we have to work. Even though we've attempted to cover everything, we still don't become relaxed…They [students] suffer from burnout. I know they get tired of hearing about the test, but it's a creature that the government created! So we have to constantly focus on it. That's sad to say, but we do…You prepare them for the test itself rather than making them lifelong learners, and that's a disservice to them…You almost make them have test anxiety constantly focusing on tests…becoming fixated on tests. (Teacher B)

> …During testing time it's really frantic…It's just very stressful because teachers are held accountable…And you want to teach…If you're a good teacher, you just want to teach. You just want to teach and you want your students to learn. You don't want it to be like something that's always hanging over your head in order to get this done and get that done. So you're always pushing, pushing. I better make sure I cover this benchmark, that benchmark, this, this, this, this…It becomes very stressful. And I have 5

bleeding ulcers to prove it…I try not to let myself get anxious about it because it is what it is. And then once it comes out, there's nothing you can do anyway. So I can just only do the best that I can and try to prepare my students for it…If we're giving it our best, that's all we can do… (Teacher F)

…my thing is so focused on the kids. Is that child going to be successful when they get over to the ninth grade? Have I done my job to get them prepared for the ninth grade? That's the pressure I feel. Not the test scores…because I have to look at that individual child. I have to answer to the kids…if I have to always answer to a test, then I need to leave my profession…because I have human beings that need to be successful citizens. That's what I'm creating. And if I get to the place where I'm just creating for the test, then I'll tell them I won't sign a contract. I'll do something else. I'll just leave. (Teacher A)

Theme III: Autonomy – Curriculum Autonomy

Teacher autonomy is an important aspect related to teacher satisfaction and morale. Yet when it comes to curriculum autonomy, participants were left with limited control over what they could teach. This is primarily the result of state and district mandated objectives and standards. When asked to describe their level of curricular control, participants expressed a very limited amount of autonomy. Likewise, they expressed the need for additional programs and activities to boost student achievement and broaden their academic experience, rather than gearing curriculum strictly towards subject area content.

…It's pretty much lesson plans. They are rigorous. You teach what you expect our children to learn from this MCT II and you gear your objectives towards the MCT II and the depth of knowledge 1, 2, and 3. I could be more creative to me, but mainly we're pulling materials to cover those objectives that we will see on the MCT test.(Teacher C)

…Real teaching has been removed from the classroom because everyone is basically test-minded now…There are certain things that teachers do in the classroom that are not on tests and probably will never be on tests. We don't get a chance to do those things because we're strictly focused on the test because that's what we're graded on… We actually use the district framework, which is mirrored from the State, so we're basically doing, teaching exactly what they want us to teach…That's basically what we use…You are not free to have strategies, teaching strategies that you know would probably work with your students because you know who your students are…You're so focused, so intent on dealing with the curriculum that is at hand because you want to cover all these different things because this is what the kids are going to be tested on… When you're teaching the test…it's very stressful. People say they don't, but essentially that's exactly what it is to me because…we have our curriculum from the state department, which is geared towards the test. And then the district's curriculum is geared towards the state…so everything to me still leads back to the test… (Teacher F)

… there are a lot of different things that not only myself but other teachers
would like to see implemented in the school which we think would help the
students, would help their achievement level that we've been asking for for
years…I would love to see some extracurricular things. I would love to see
some art and dance classes, some foreign languages. Our children deserve
that, too. They deserve it…(Teacher B)

Theme III: Autonomy – Creative Autonomy

Although participants described a very narrow and limited degree of
autonomy in regard to curricular decisions, most teachers explained that creative
autonomy was much greater. They emphasized their ability to instruct their classes
according to their own teaching style, utilizing various resources to do so, provided
they covered content material specified by state and district standards.

…I'm a kinesthetic person…I love groups. I love centers. I love kids
moving…I want to be the facilitator. I want them to be the teacher…I had a
young lady last year, for some reason the kids couldn't get a theorem and she
got it. I had her teach every child I taught…I set it up with the teachers where
the first 30 minutes of class she would come to me and teach them. And she
did it, to a hundred and fifty kids…and she was a quiet child…but the thing is,
I respected her creativity and that moved her into another level…she left out
of here like, "I can do anything now going to the high school"…I love to sit
back and let them do that and teach each other. (Teacher A)

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…I know my area. I know what I'm doing. I'm always searching for new

ideas, new ways to implement those things into my classroom. I'm game on

learning different things, going different places, going to workshops, going on

the internet and finding different things. What worked in this classroom?

How did he/she get his children to do this and make them learn? (Teacher B)

…how I teach, I have complete autonomy in that…I like to question and let

the kids come up with different responses. Then we question the responses to

see which ones are accurate…I also have them teach some things…I like to

have them help one another…I try to have them help themselves a lot of

times…they have to work within their group in order to get the job done.

(Teacher E)

Theme III: Autonomy – Instructional Autonomy

With increased pressure to improve test scores, participants described the

extensive instructional time devoted to test preparation. Most participants described

it as a non-stop process, where they constantly worked on reinforcing content

knowledge, skills and test-taking strategies, usually from the very beginning

of the school year. They described the frantic pace in which they worked to make

sure that all state objectives and benchmarks were covered prior to state testing.

…From the time they get in here until the time they walk out. Constantly.

We're constantly preparing. I told them, 'I know you guys are tired of hearing

me talk about test, test, test' And my children will constantly say, 'Don't you

want to stop talking? Don't you want to bring it down? Don't you want to stop

working for a while? Let us breathe?' And I tell them, 'We don't have time to breathe right now.' (Teacher B)

…I consider all teaching preparing for the test. So I would say 100% of class time is devoted to preparing for the test because we're working on standards. And the test is supposed to test standards…The kids are like, 'Can we have a free day?' No. No free days…No free days. I don't do that. We don't have recess. I try to make it fun, so we try to do different little games, but we're still working on whatever standards we're working on. (Teacher E)

…5 days a week. 180 days per year, including Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday tutoring and summer remediation…[how do the students respond?]…It takes from them…because sooner or later, ok, enough with the test already…Our district will probably give practice tests, maybe once or twice a nine weeks…It's just a lot for them…We can really see the effects of it. Teachers and students can really see the effects of it…They get burned out…We just took the MCT II, and nine weeks tests are next week, and then don't forget you had practice tests before to try to see where they were and find the strengths and weaknesses…(Teacher F)

Theme IV: Teacher Morale – Morale Matters

When asked to describe how important teacher morale was to the educational process, participants explained that morale was one of the most important aspects of teaching that affects numerous factors in the classroom and teaching environment.

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Many of the participants felt that teacher morale was an essential component to both teacher motivation and student achievement.

> …Oh, it's extremely important! Because it's the center of everything that you do at work. Your attitude when you make it to work, your attitude in the classroom, your attitude towards your students, the attitude that you convey upon your lessons. It's extremely important. (Teacher B)
>
> …I put teacher morale at the top of my list because if you have a low self-esteem, naturally it's going to go towards my children. And you can't effectively do the job that you were hired to do with the morale low…(Teacher C)
>
> …It's very important to have that. If you feel bad about your job, you just don't want to be here. You have teacher absenteeism to look at. Teacher morale is very, very important. And I think you should always do something to boost teacher morale, an incentive or something. (Teacher E)

Theme IV: Teacher Morale –Morale vs Motivation

In discussing teacher morale and motivation, participants explained that although their morale had been affected by NCLB, their motivation for teaching was high, positive and strong, with NCLB having little influence on their desire to educate children. In general, teachers were passionate about teaching because of their deep level of love and commitment to their students. They appeared to have a cultural connection with their students, one in which they wanted to help the children who reminded them of themselves succeed despite the circumstances surrounding them.

And for this reason, participants were motivated to teach, even though they struggled at times to maintain their morale.

> …I want to do my best and I've always put the focus on the child. I love my students. I love coming to work. I love to see them excel. When I can plant a seed that I can see, then I'm happy. And I want to see it. If I plant that seed, I want to see it grow. And if I can see growth, I'm happy. And sometimes my children give me little notes saying how they enjoyed the class and what they didn't know before and now they know how to apply that knowledge that we learned in class. They'll come back and tell me about it. And I'm excited about that. But I can't do it by myself. It's going to take everybody in the school, everyone in the district, all administrators, teachers, parents, and students to make it happen. (Teacher C)

> …I love teaching. I feel like when I teach, I'm actually giving something back to my community. I look at society now and I want to ensure that my children have a positive impact on society. Not only do I teach them, but I talk to them, so they'll understand the value of life…I love my children. This is my passion. My children are my passion. I want to provide for those children that are dropping out of school…I want them to have a chance... (Teacher E)

> …I love it…It's challenging sometimes, but I look at it and say, when I accepted the position, I accepted the position to educate all children regardless of race, gender, how they smell, how they look, how they act. Sometimes they upset me…They get frustrated. But in the end, they come back. They thank

you. They buy me little gifts, send me little cards…It's challenging…but in the end, they understand why. (Teacher G)

…I enjoy coming to school. When I get up in the morning, I know that my job is to teach and to educate. And sometimes, in a sense, play a fatherly role to some child…I enjoy trying to reach children in any way I can professionally. I try to instill in our kids the importance of education. How successful it is to have an education, and I also stress that those who do not have an education…the chances are greater of being successful with an education than not. (Teacher H)

Theme IV: Teacher Morale – School Climate

Although participants in the study expressed a sincere dedication to teaching, many of them acknowledged that the stress and pressure generated by NCLB had not left them unscathed. For some participants, teacher morale was low, despite their desire to make a difference. Frustration and burn out were factors that affected the morale of many of the participants who tried to stay focused on the children, but who could not ignore the impact of accountability on the teaching profession. It is worth noting that there appeared to be differences in teacher morale pertaining to aspects unrelated to NCLB between teachers from Urban X Middle School and Rural Y Middle School. For instance, participants at Urban X Middle School appeared to suggest that there was a significant lack of cohesiveness within their school, making it challenging for teachers to work together as a team in order to improve student achievement. This could be a direct result of the extensive administrator turnover the

school had experienced in recent years. At Rural Y Middle School, there appeared to be a greater sense of collegiality and cohesiveness among participants, a family kind of atmosphere, where participants worked collectively to ensure the success of their students. While Rural Y Middle School had also experienced a recent change in administrative leadership, their experiences in general appeared to be more positive.

…It's horrible, especially for the young ones. Because you're testing, you're testing. You're held accountable for testing, testing, testing. They [teachers] are not given a chance to be creative and to take the things that they know they can build upon to be successful. It's based on what this child does one day on this piece of paper. It's not based on this child in my classroom, how this child has gone from this point to this point to this point…NCLB is leaving us behind. The more we test, the more we go with those test scores, it's leaving us behind…We're losing teachers and morale is not high.

(Teacher A)

…I would say that we have a low morale here because we're not able to consistently do what we need to do for our children. Yes, we have low morale. Not just here, but over the places where I have been…the districts…I want to focus on those high expectations, but it's hard… Excellence! That's what I'm looking for, excellence. And if the morale is low, certainly I can't expect you to make my child…become an excellent student because YOU'RE low, THEY'RE low, and WE ALL are low. Therefore, we can't achieve what we

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need to achieve…You might have a little growth, but it's not going to be that higher level that we expect you to be on. (Teacher C)

…It (NCLB) has impacted our school greatly because it is very stressful…very, very, very stressful…We as teachers feel like it's on us. We always feel like it's on us…It's the teacher…in a lot of instances, we're held accountable…Most of the time, every summer we're all sitting waiting anxiously, calling to see, 'Is there any news? Is there any news? Is there any news?' And of course it affects teacher morale because you can tell coming in…It's like, we moved up a great deal. It was a great deal to us…Everyone came back all excited and hype because you know, we've got it now. We got it. We're going to keep moving up. That is until we found out that the test had changed. So that kid of kicked some of that out of us…(Teacher F)

Some participants explained that NCLB was not the primary catalyst for teacher morale. They mentioned issues such as disciplinary problems, inconsistent school practices, and fragmented peer relationships as factors that also affected their morale.

…My biggest thing is discipline. That's my biggest thing. That's the biggest problem I have. And it's not that I don't have classroom management because I'm good at that…I'm constantly trying to find different things that I can use in the classroom to grab my students attention and keep them motivated and want to learn…That's a constant challenge. (Teacher B)

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…There is no discipline worth anything…a little spanking on the hand, a tap

on the wrist, and a parent called. What is that? We've got to be consistent.

…We're not consistent. Everybody needs to say the same thing. If you're

going to make a rule, we all abide by the same rule. Let's not break the rule

and bend it because of my friend…the rule was made…and I want the law to

work and I want to be fair. And therefore, if you're not fair, there's a

breakdown. (Teacher C)

…It's getting increasingly difficult this year. The kids are changing. They are

just getting out of control. They are so disrespectful…I'm just getting a little

tired of it now…Next year is going to be my last year because it's just a

different breed of children. They are very, very disrespectful…I feel like it's a

war where I have to fight them in order to teach them. And I get tired of

fighting you in order to get your attention. And a lot of teachers are

complaining about the same thing…So, that's the thing…We've been having

a lot of fights lately. I don't know if the kids are frustrated or what's going on,

but they're cold-like, cold-hearted…They don't seem interested in learning.

Not all of them, but the majority of them are not interested in learning

anything new. They come to school to play…(Teacher D)

There were also participants who felt NCLB had not negatively affected

teacher morale within their schools. Some explained that they believed teachers were

committed to doing their jobs despite the challenges they faced, while others

experienced little or no effects of NCLB on teacher morale.

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…The overall school climate is one that is conducive to learning…I believe every teacher here is doing their best to educate the children that they service. So I think it's a climate of learning… (Teacher E)

…When we come to work, and I can speak for basically every teacher here, when they come to work, they come to teach and educate our children. and everyone here enjoys teaching the kids. They enjoy talking with the kids. They enjoy trying to motivate them both educationally and socially. (Teacher H)

…I think some of the teachers get more or less frustrated. The morale has changed a little bit, but not a lot. (Teacher G)

Theme V: African-American Teachers – Why We Teach

When asked to explain their decision to become a teacher, participants shared various reasons why they chose the teaching profession, with some stumbling into the profession by accident and others having an innate desire to teach. But many of them expressed similar desires to reach out to children. Their responses helped to shape and define the backdrop for why they do what they do. And while their callings were varied, gaining an understanding of how they were drawn to the teaching profession provided a lens for examining participant experiences in a deeper context.

…I love children. And I was motivated as a child to put everything that I had within me in helping someone else. When I grew up, I wanted to teach…I wanted to be somebody special to help other unfortunate children. (Teacher C)

…I went into the business sector and I found myself hating to go to work in the mornings. So I decided to become a substitute for a while and I liked it so much. It felt rewarding to go to work in the mornings. You never have a dull day. And so I decided to become certified and sought out to do that and that's what I did, and now I'm here. (Teacher E)

…During the time that I became a teacher, we had what we called split schools, where the white kids were going to school and the black kids had to be out to take care of the crops. We had to pick cotton, chop cotton. So when I saw the white kids going to school, that motivated me to want to get an education to get out of the cotton field. And I knew the only way I would get out of the cotton field was to get an education…plus I enjoyed working with children. (Teacher H)

Theme V: African-American Teachers – NCLB & African-American Teachers

Nearly all of the participants explained that they felt more affected by NCLB than their counterparts, although there was some variation as to the degree in which they felt they were affected. They described the underlying social structures that deeply affected the students they served, which often hindered student achievement. Participants felt more affected by NCLB not simply because they were African-American, but because of the student demographics within their schools and the social challenges many of their students faced. Participants made reference to the

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concept of exposure and the general lack of social and academic exposure for their
students, many of whom have experienced little outside their communities.

…When I first came here, they gave us a tour of the city, and they said, "This
is why our kids are like this." And I was saying, "No. This is not why our kids
are like this."…Socioeconomic condition does not affect our kids. It's not
affecting their minds. I think as a school we need to expose them to more
things. Take them out of here….This community is too close knit into the
same little ground. If our kids were exposed to more…blow them up. Move
them…it's exposure…the more we expose them, the better they're going to
be. Even if they have to walk back into the same thing, they can say, "When I
get to school, this is what I am. This is what I can do." Bring out that
creativity in them…the more they do, the more they'll connect together and
change the outside…(Teacher A)

…some just don't care about school…my friend and I were talking this
evening…she said she was trying to get the children to do a budget…she said
they weren't interested in that. They were like, 'I'm gone do like my
momma…' They don't have any aspirations…'I can get me a voucher. I can
get me some food stamps and I can do this. I don't have to reach for the stars.
This is a good life.' She said, 'you know what's frustrating? I was trying to
get them to think about what they wanted to be in the future and work towards
that and tell them what they need to do in high school.' She said they would
just half do something they weren't even interested in, and that's career

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education…you can't get the majority of them to actually think about the future, to get that mindset to want something, to want to achieve. It's frustrating. (Teacher D)

...Our kids, our students' social values are totally different than the students in most places because most of the students have not seen or know of another African American that's totally successful…in business, or as a doctor or lawyer. They're not exposed to that on a daily level. So to them, we preach that if you get an education, you can be successful. You can earn all this, but they have never actually seen it in everyday life…We can tell them, but a lot of times it actually helps if they could actually see and we show them. And I think that if they were exposed to it, even though you're going to lose some of them…I believe that especially the kids in our area, they have many talents, that they could really be successful. (Teacher H)

…we need books. We need supplies. We need parental guidance…just so many other things that we really need. We could get supplies from the internet. More televisions. More computers…we need a computer lab for reading. We don't have that. I have ONE computer! I have in each class 21-25 students, 7 classes…and I gave one class an AR test. It took me, even on my break time, the class time and my break time to complete that AR test…if we don't have these things, these tools, virtually we CANNOT expect our children to achieve! (Teacher C)

Theme V: African-American Teachers – Why We Stay

When asked why they chose to remain in what NCLB considers a 'failing' school, participants described how they were dedicated to working with the children they served, despite the challenges they faced. For many participants, choosing to stay at their schools was a higher calling beyond test scores and federal mandates. For other participants, they felt connected to their schools and communities, and remaining there served as an opportunity for them to give something back.

> …I am a product of Chimneyville*. So it's personal for me. I want the school district to become the type of school that people are constantly fighting to get their kids into because we are just that successful, because I want us to be successful. That's the bottom line…and I'm passionate about it. I mean, my children are in school here, in the district. I have a little girl who's in kindergarten. I have a little boy that's over here. He's in the 8th grade, and I have two more coming up…I want people to say, '…I want to move to Chimneyville* because I heard the school district is wonderful.' And I want it to be that kind of place…(Teacher B)

> …I stay here because I feel a connection with the children that I service. I keep going back to the children. I feel that there is a need here. And I honestly believe that I do a really good job at meeting that need. They might not like me all the time. But I feel like the service that I'm providing in this community is what God wants me to do at this point in my life…(Teacher E)

…I'm from here and I know that my kids are capable of becoming successful

adults, just as well as any other student, in any other school, in any other

district…If we all leave because of how our school performs, then who will be

here for our kids? No one will be here for them. And our kids deserve a

chance to become successful adults. So I will probably never leave…I like to

teach. I realize the kids that we have here and where they're coming from.

…I'm going to do all that I can to help them because someone did the same

for me…I'm from where they're from. So I know how it is. I want to prove to

them that, ok, same thing, but I made it…You can't let it hold you back…The

key to freedom is education…That's my purpose…I'm from right over there

where you're from. I know all of that. But you've got to look past that. You

are capable of looking past that and moving on. (Teacher F)

Theme V: African-American Teachers – Why We Leave

In discussing the current shortage of African-American teachers, participants

shared their reasons why they believe African-American teachers are dwindling.

Many participants blamed the rigorous requirements of NCLB as a significant

deterrent to young, African-American teachers, most of whom they said either left

the profession altogether or sought careers in other fields.

…We're going to lose a lot of good, talented, young teachers. And the only

reason I haven't gone out the door maybe is because I have too many

years…And then you're going to lose veterans who have had successful

things and they know successful things, and once you lose them going out,

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that's gone out the door and you have nothing to replace it. We're losing

excellence…Excellence will bring academics, will bring test scores. We're

losing that because people are constantly going out the door…Young people

are not taking this. They're not taking it. They are leaving the profession, and

they're leaving too fast…I don't like this revolving door. There's no

solidity…(Teacher A)

…Young teachers that enter the profession, once they see all the work and all

the stuff required…I guess they have this idea of what it was like when their

teacher was a teacher. And it's not like that anymore. So you have them after

one year, leaving the profession, or after 3 years, so they get that loan paid off

and they're outta here. Then they're gone. They're out of the teaching

profession for good. It's not that they leave because they think it's going to be

better over here. They know that everywhere you go, you have the same

standards. I feel NCLB has really, really stopped a lot of people from going

into the profession. Since I've been here at this school, I think we have…8-10

new teachers per year. I came in a group of probably about 10 or 12, maybe

even 15. Some of the teachers retired, but some of them just left. One left in

the middle of the year. She said she could not take it. She said, 'I'll go wait

tables first.' But of the 15 or so that came in with me, 2 of us are still

here…Right now with NCLB a lot of teachers want to quit the profession

because there's so much excess stuff they have to do. They feel that teachers

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are having to do more teaching to the test than actually teaching the children what they need to know...It's just overwhelming for new teachers. (Teacher E)

…There's a lot of negative feedback with NCLB, especially in the more disadvantaged school districts. And then the accountability level is so high for teachers now. Who wants to be held accountable for so much when you can only do so much?...A lot of good teachers have retired from our district and it's just the stress level…It becomes very stressful, especially if you feel like you are doing just about everything that you can honestly and truly do, and the results may not be what everyone else expects them to be…I'd say about 5/6 [number of teachers who leave each year] and I think that's a big number considering we're a small school…the revolving door…There's no stability…It's not stable for the kids… (Teacher F)

Theme V: African-American Teachers – Where We'll Be in Three Years

While many of the participants in the study were overwhelmingly dedicated to teaching, several of them did not see themselves remaining in the classroom within the next three years. For most participants, while they loved the children they served, it appeared that some of them questioned how much longer they would teach. Other participants expressed an unfailing dedication to the teaching profession, their students, and their communities. For them, teaching was a way of life which they could not abandon.

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…I see myself still in the educational field. I still want to be in education, but I want to go into different areas of education. I want to go into counseling. I want to stay within the school district. But like I said, I eventually see myself going into counseling, but I still want to be with the children…I love teaching. I want to stay in the educational field. I don't see myself lasting as long as my teachers did in the classroom. I would love to, but I just don't see it… (Teacher B)

…I would like to be here in the classroom. I would like to be teaching all Algebra I classes…I would like to be working on my PhD. I'm just not ready to leave the classroom. I don't know if I'll be ready in three years to leave the classroom. But right now I feel like this is where I can make the most impact on the lives of the children that I serve. I want to help the children. That's what I'm here for…(Teacher E)

…I would like to be in administration. But if not, I like working in middle school, with the most difficult kids to work with (laughs)…So I think I will stay right here. What in the world would I do? I don't know what I would do…I'll be teaching until I leave this world I'm sure…I know I will be doing this a very long time…(Teacher F)

…I possibly see myself here in the district being a principal, administrator, or counselor or curriculum coordinator, something of that nature. (Teacher G)

Theme V: African-American Teachers – What We See

The participants in this study were often confronted with the grim realities of society and its effect on children. The impact of both poverty and systemic injustice have darkened the path of success for many of the students they serve. Some participants described the disappointment and pain they experienced when they witnessed student potential thwarted, misguided, or stifled. Yet, despite this, participants in this study maintained a sense of hope for their children. Most of them were able to see in their children what the children themselves and even NCLB could not see – promise.

>…I had to walk out of class because I cried. We've been having a big problem with our children being territorial, claiming territories over senseless things. I got all teary-eyed because I told them that I have such high expectations for each one of them…When I look at my students I get excited because I think about… their potential, the things that they are capable of doing because… I love 'em. I love my children. I love my students. And it hurts me to know that they're not excited about their education and…the mountains that they can move with a good education. When I look at their little faces all I think about is, 'I need to do something. I need to do something that's going to make you want to learn as much as I want to teach you…(Teacher B)

>…Somewhere down the line, somebody did not focus on the child. What happened? I don't know. But we can't focus on what didn't happen. I'm encouraged to know that something can happen. Pick up... Pick up the pieces

and move on.   There's hurt there. Oppression. There is a lack of care and love. It's a lot of things I see in the faces of our children. That particular thing, lack of love and care. Somebody just passed them up. They didn't care about them and that within itself is a child left behind. Seeing that a child, not being in an inclusion class, reading on a first to second grade level in the seventh grade? Somebody didn't do homework. That hurts me. Not that I can do anything about it at this point, but I can do the best I can with the tools and resources that I have. However, somebody didn't do the right thing with our children and therefore, our children are left behind…(Teacher C)

…When I look at my children, I see my nurses, my doctors, my mechanics, and my everything else… my bankers, my people that will be serving me when I get older. I see a future that is bright. I see so much for them, and I want them to see those same things. I want them to see their dreams and realize that it's up to them to make those things come true…(Teacher E)

…Some students are screaming for rescue – help…Sometimes I have students who come in in the morning and they automatically just cover their heads. And I'll ask them what's wrong…'I just don't want to talk.' And a lot of them are kind of angry as to how the cards have been dealt to them in life because of their parents…A lot of them are eager for structure…A lot of them pretend that they don't want anybody to tell them what to do or ask them what to do…I tell the parents, your children want structure. They want you to be there to tell them, 'You need to eat a snack, get your work out.'…Help them. Just

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watch them do it, whether you can help them or not…A lot of them [students] really do want to learn. They don't have that background at home, nobody there to say this is what it has to be like. This is what you're going to do. So when they get to school, they're kind of harsh sometimes…And because I'm from here, it makes me want to work even harder to push them. And I know I can't help everyone exceed or excel, but I can definitely encourage them…(Teacher G)

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research was to examine the impact of No Child Left
Behind on teacher morale among African-American teachers in both urban and rural
low performing middle schools. Their experiences with NCLB have been evaluated
and thematically organized to provide a deeper understanding of this research
phenomenon. This chapter discusses the relevance of these experiences in regard to
the research questions generated for this investigation and the effects of No Child
Left Behind on African-American teachers in struggling schools. Conclusions were
drawn from this study, as well as limitations and implications for future research.

Summary

In this study, a phenomenological approach was used to examine the
experiences of African-American teachers in low-performing middle schools.
Several themes emerged from 139 pages of transcribed interviews from 9
participants. These participants shared their experiences on various aspects related to
NCLB and teacher morale. For many participants, NCLB represented an idealistic
perspective of education, while ignoring the deeper underlying social qualms that
plague many low performing schools. Participants spoke candidly about their
experiences as educators

in struggling schools and the additional strain of seeking to maintain high academic expectations for their students.

Experiences among participants at both Urban X Middle School and Rural Y Middle School were similar when they discussed NCLB and its accountability measures. This aspect of NCLB placed significant pressure on teachers as they were held accountable for both student achievement and many factors beyond their control. They stressed the failure of NCLB to recognize that student achievement is affected by numerous social and cultural disparities which often hinder performance within low performing schools significantly. Nearly all participants experienced increased pressure to improve test performance. Yet, how they chose to deal with that pressure varied among participants. For some participants, NCLB and its accountability requirements had negatively affected their morale, while others experienced little or no negative affects.

NCLB and teacher autonomy yielded different experiences for participants. Most participants acknowledged that they had limited autonomy in regard to curriculum decisions. Yet, they felt free to use various instructional methods, resources, or activities for their students. Only a few participants felt teacher autonomy was significantly hindered by NCLB. The greatest concern among participants was not teacher autonomy, but what they perceived as limited instructional autonomy as a result of mandated curriculum frameworks that were test centered and unbalanced. So much emphasis was placed on tested material that teachers felt they had little room for activities and exercises unrelated to tested

content. Therefore, NCLB seemed to reduce the amount of educational enrichment activities for African-American teachers in low performing schools since significant amounts of their instructional time were devoted to test preparation.

Teacher morale for most participants in this study was influenced by NCLB, primarily because of published test scores and NCLB's mainstream ideology. The negative labeling of their schools and the social issues unaddressed by NCLB appeared to affect teacher morale for African-American teachers. Yet, participants also described additional factors they experienced within their schools that they believed significantly contributed to teacher morale; issues such as, disciplinary problems and inconsistent school practices, which combined with NCLB, served as influences on morale.

Teacher attrition among African-American teachers and NCLB appeared interrelated to some degree based on participant experiences. Many participants explained how NCLB and the pressure it generated had caused some African-American teachers at their schools to leave the classroom or quit the teaching profession altogether. Of particular interest was the recurring description of how many young teachers who quit teaching refused to deal with the increased pressure of teacher accountability as a result of NCLB. Some participants acknowledged that teacher turnover within their schools was significant, with more and more teachers opting to quit or retire. Only 2 participants from this study were definitely planning to remain in the classroom. Therefore, the pressures associated with NCLB appeared

to influence teacher attrition among African-American teachers in low performing

schools.

Discussion

Experiences from participants in this study served as the foundation for the 5

themes that emerged from interview transcripts. The 5 themes identified –What

about the children?; Pressure Points; Autonomy; Teacher Morale; African-American

Teachers – established a foundation for understanding the experiences of participants

in the study, painting a clearer picture of the various dimensions of NCLB and its

effects on African-American teachers in under-performing schools. Through these

themes, participants described their experiences regarding NCLB and its effect on

teachers, students, and instructional practices. These themes were subsequently used

to address the 4 research questions generated for this investigation.

1. What are African-American Teachers in Low-performing Schools
   General Perspectives Regarding No Child Left Behind?

NCLB and its accountability measures garnered varied responses from

participants; however, African-American teachers from both Urban X Middle School

and Rural Y Middle School expressed similar frustrations with the law in general,

specifically with regard to adequate yearly progress for all students. They described

the difficulty in ensuring success for all students, when all students were not starting

from the same place, which English (2002) asserted, stating that "The assessment

tools used by many state accountability systems are based on false notions of fairness

and equity" (p. 298).

Participants expressed concern with NCLB's subgroup rules and its effect on exceptional education students and struggling students, both of whom generally lack the basic skills necessary for achievement and whom often represent a significant number of their students. And because a significant number of their students fall into these categories, NCLB appears to place a greater burden on African-American teachers. Song (2006) discovered that 57% of teachers agreed that without basic skills, students could not learn material that required higher order thinking skills. Participants appeared to emphasize this as they strongly questioned the fairness of requiring exceptional education students to take state tests on grade level, although their ability levels were not equivalent, and covering state objectives and benchmarks that were difficult for struggling students to master. African-American teachers in this study felt that NCLB predisposed their schools for failure since more of their students fall into the subgroup categories, making it even more difficult for their schools to make adequate yearly progress.

According to research by Abrams, et al. (2003) a larger proportion of teachers in high stakes environments reported feeling pressure from various entities (i.e. principals, superintendents, etc.) in regard to state testing. They further explained that teachers who experienced this pressure from various administrators were more likely to work in schools with lower teacher morale. Based on the experiences of participants, NCLB and its accountability measurements have generated significant pressure and anxiety for African-American teachers and students. Participants described the constant pressure they experienced as a result of accountability. For

many of them, the constant focus on state testing resulted in test anxiety. They described the pressure as an impending force from numerous sources, which made it difficult for them to maintain a balance between the various roles they played as educators and academic achievement. Moore and Waltman (2007) identified publicity, consequences, testing, students, and government factors as multiple sources of pressure generated by NCLB.

Participants also described the test anxiety brought on by NCLB as a condition that affected both teachers and students. Beidel and Turner (1993) examined test anxiety among 229 African American children in grades 3-6 in a low socio-economic school. Findings from this study revealed that 41% of children experienced test anxiety. They later explained that children who were anxious had lower achievement levels and lower self confidence. Many participants in this study explained that their students experienced test anxiety to some degree as a result of the pressure to improve test scores, and were negatively affected by test results.

Although most participants took issue with NCLB and its accountability measures, there were a few participants who experienced little pressure or no pressure at all in regard to accountability. For some of them, testing was secondary to their main purpose, educating students. They acknowledged that while the pressure was there, they opted not to allow that pressure to negatively impact them as teachers. Therefore, for African-American teachers in low performing schools, the pressure to improve is more intense since they have more struggling learners with greater gains to make, thus generating anxiety for teachers and students alike.

With the increased emphasis on accountability based on NCLB requirements, many participants explained the effects of NCLB on instructional practices. They described the burn out they experienced from drill and kill instruction and the frantic pace in which they attempted to cover state and district standards prior to the testing cycle. Abrams, et al. (2003) found that 41% of teachers in high stakes environments strongly agreed that the pressure to improve test scores was so great, that they had little time to teach any material not covered on the test. Frequently, participants described their frustration with this aspect of NCLB, emphasizing that the accountability standards failed to adequately assess achievement, reducing instruction to meaningless bits of information which many participants believed would not help their students gain the necessary life and social skills necessary for the real world. Some participants were clearly upset by this aspect of NCLB, while others appeared exasperated with how policy-makers designed this construct of the law.

The participants stressed that they believed more children were being left behind as a result of NCLB by reducing the educational process to a single test. They felt that their students were not receiving a balanced and engaging educational experience, one that included not only academic achievement, but also social development and life skills; qualities they felt were essential to becoming well-rounded adults. Participants expressed concern for their students not engaging in other facets of education, such as extracurricular and vocational activities. Instead, their students spent a majority of their class time preparing for tests rather than expanding their knowledge base or exploring their skills. Pinder (2008) explained

that constant testing was not beneficial for students and that NCLB failed to address the real needs of students. Therefore, African-American teachers in low performing middle schools appear to differ from teachers in previous studies regarding NCLB and accountability in that they and their students often sacrifice educational enrichment for the sake of improved test scores.

*2. How Has NCLB Affected Teacher Morale Among African-American
   Teachers in Low-performing Schools?*

Since no previous research exists that has examined teacher morale among African-American teachers in low performing middle schools or that has examined the effects of NCLB on African-American teacher morale, this research provides important glimpses into the experiences of African-American teachers. Results from this study revealed that teacher morale for African-American teachers in low performing middle schools is influenced by NCLB, but to varying degrees. And while participants shared similar experiences with participants in previous studies regarding accountability and NCLB, this study revealed that teacher morale among African-American teachers differed in that it was more strongly influenced by two factors pertaining to NCLB: published test scores and the cultural relevance of the law.

Participants in this study from both Urban X Middle School and Rural Y Middle School expressed how negative labeling of their schools as a result of poor test performance had influenced teacher morale. Many of the participants described the humiliation and disappointment they experienced as a result of such labeling,

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indicating that for many teachers, labeling had essentially undermined their efforts to improve their students' achievement levels. Participants emphasized how strenuously they worked to help their students improve. Yet, the published test scores made it appear as if they simply were not doing enough or were not doing anything at all. This caused frustration and hurt for many participants and increased teacher stress levels. Participants described the struggles they faced trying to maintain high expectations for their students, while accepting the painful realization that even with their best efforts, achievement may not measure up to the standards set forth by NCLB. They mentioned how they served not only as teachers, but also as mentors, counselors, and in some instances as mothers and fathers. Yet, most of these aspects were often overlooked and overshadowed by NCLB and negative labeling as an underperforming school.

The public scrutiny generated by NCLB appears to have influenced teacher morale among African-American teachers in this study. However, it is important to note that while African-American teacher morale was affected by published test scores, teachers did not lose their love for teaching. Instead, they expressed a deep level of love and concern for their students and a commitment to instilling the value of education into the children they served, regardless of the test scores. Likewise, NCLB did not affect teacher morale for all participants. Instead, additional factors such as disciplinary problems and inconsistent school practices also influenced teacher morale for some participants, while others felt no effects on teacher morale at all.

In addition to published test scores negatively affecting teacher morale, the cultural relevance of NCLB, or lack thereof, appeared to impact teacher morale as well. While many participants understood the need for high academic standards and accountability, most of them felt that the law ignored the deeper issues facing teachers and students in low performing schools. Participants questioned this aspect of NCLB's accountability measures, which appears to hold teachers accountable for factors beyond their control, such as the various social and cultural constructs that differ significantly from the mainstream.

According to Talbert-Johnson (2004) previous studies revealed that students who could identify with the academic culture of school had more motivation to achieve, which resulted in higher educational gains than students who could not identify with their academic culture. Likewise, Baker (2005) explained that the education of African-American students was more separated from their personal experiences than any other ethnic group. Participants in this study described the disconnect they observed between the social values of mainstream society and that of their students. For many participants, they recognized a significant disparity between the expectations of NCLB and the social and cultural backgrounds of their students.

Song (2006) explained that knowledge and skills within curriculum should be related to various issues, including language, dialect, family structures, neighborhoods, community resources, and cultural differences. Yet, participants explained that the knowledge and content their students were required to master by NCLB failed to consider the social and cultural diversity of their students. They

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pointed out the fact that NCLB makes the naïve assumption that all students are equipped with equal academic, social, and environmental factors. However, participants mentioned that their students had not been exposed to various learning environments or social structures different from their own, resulting in their students possessing a very narrowed and limited view of the world. Participants used the term 'exposure' repeatedly when discussing the issue of social structure, cultural backgrounds and the limitations their students experienced based on socioeconomic and environmental factors. They described the different social values their students have in contrast to those of mainstream society, in which education is often devalued and underappreciated primarily because there is often little that exists within students' family structures or communities to inspire or encourage academic achievement.

More specifically, participants in this study emphasized the lack of parental involvement at their schools as a social value which deeply impacts the students they serve. They expressed their belief that the lack of parental involvement had a resounding effect on student achievement and described the difficulty in maintaining high expectations without students having those same expectations from home. Participants further mentioned that they felt NCLB held them accountable for what they believed were factors beyond their immediate control and for which parents needed to share an active role. Participants pointed out the fact that most high performing schools generally had greater parental involvement, which they felt significantly influenced student achievement.

Jeynes (2007) discovered in his meta-analysis of parental involvement and student achievement, that parental involvement positively influenced educational outcomes and could reduce the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students. Brown, Anfara, and Roney (2004) discovered similar findings in their qualitative study of high performing schools and low performing schools. They found that parents and family members were reported to be much more involved in the HPS than the LPS and explained that teachers in LPS expressed a sense of frustration regarding the lack of parental involvement within their schools. Participants in this study expressed a deep level of commitment to working with students, but felt they were left to fight the battle of improving student achievement alone. The lack of parental support also made it difficult for them to keep their students motivated to learn, making their jobs even more challenging. Therefore, for African-American teachers NCLB's failure to consider the underlying social and cultural issues African-American teachers face and cannot control, has significantly influenced teacher morale.

3. *How has NCLB Affected Teacher Autonomy for African-American
   Teachers in Low-performing Schools?*

For African-American teachers in low performing schools, teacher autonomy changed significantly as a result of NCLB. However, few participants felt that their freedom in the classroom had been entirely compromised. Most participants acknowledged that while they were limited in their ability to make curricular decisions, they felt they were able to conduct their classes in a manner which allowed

them to use creative activities and resources freely. There were a few participants

who felt somewhat stifled by state and district objectives. They described their efforts

to cover all of the objectives and benchmarks that would appear on the state test,

which left them little room for instructional content that was not test related.

The most significant aspect of teacher autonomy affected by NCLB according

to participants was instructional autonomy. Participants described the extensive time

devoted to preparing students for the test. They explained that significant portions of

their class time were being devoted solely to test content.   Most participants stated

that preparation started from day one of the school year, and included practice tests,

skill drills, and sample exercises that took up a significant amount of instructional

time.

Abrams, et al. (2003) discovered that four times as many teachers (44%) in

high stakes environments reported spending more than 30 class hours per year

preparing for the state test, with 70% of high stakes teachers indicating they were

preparing for the test throughout the year, rather than the weeks prior to state testing.

Participants in this investigation explained that their instructional devotion to test

preparation was an effort to ensure that every objective and benchmark was covered.

This in turn caused anxiety for some participants who felt pressured to constantly

reassess their teaching to avoid omitting tested material. The result of such narrowed

instructional autonomy generated burn out among some participants, and many of

them described similar effects on their students. Therefore, it appears that for

African-American teachers in low performing schools, the effects of NCLB on

teacher autonomy seem greater as these teachers must devote substantial amounts of instructional time to test preparation due to increased pressure to raise student achievement.

4. How Likely are African-American Teachers in Low-performing Schools to Remain at Their Current School and/or the Teaching Profession as a Result of NCLB?

Many participants at both Urban X Middle School and Rural Y Middle School observed a significant impact on teacher attrition among African-American teachers within their schools as a result of NCLB. Particularly, participants described the frustration experienced by many teachers, both young and old, in submitting to the requirements of NCLB, which they perceived as an oppressive set of educational guidelines. Participants explained that real teachers just wanted to teach for the love of teaching. Yet, NCLB had made it increasingly difficult for teachers to do exactly that. Therefore, African-American teachers were leaving participants' schools in increasing numbers as the pressure to improve student performance mounted for teachers in low-performing middle schools.

According to Talbert-Johnson (2004) attrition is most acute in high poverty schools, with teachers leaving these schools because of dissatisfaction with teaching. This appeared to be the case for both schools utilized for this study. Teacher turnover at both Urban X Middle School and Rural Y Middle School appeared to be significant, with participants describing the number of new teachers they saw each year within their schools. For many participants, they felt too many teachers were coming and going, a revolving door of sorts, which left their schools unbalanced and

unstable. Participants explained that it was difficult to maintain high academic standards when there was a significant rate of attrition among teachers. Of the 9 participants included in this study, 2 were definitely planning to remain in the classroom, 3 were not certain about their future plans, 3 were planning to pursue other areas in education, and 1 planned to retire.

Participants in this investigation were all African-American middle school teachers, yet they varied in age, geographical location, and years of teaching experience. Participants also varied in the description of their experiences. Some participants, particularly those who were language arts teachers, were relatively animated and engaging, occasionally adding humor to the descriptions of their experiences. They felt free to express themselves and enjoyed having an opportunity to share their stories, using anecdotes and examples in their exposition. Other participants were more reserved and calm, offering fewer detailed or lengthy examples or descriptions of their experiences. For them, sticking to the question at hand and answering succinctly seemed more important than offering extensive explanations.

Regardless of their differences, each participant was cooperative and friendly, and some even thanked me for conducting this type of study. To them, I had provided an opportunity for teachers to share their experiences in an open, non-threatening manner, while giving voice to their concerns.

Conclusion

Findings from this phenomenological study reveal that teacher morale among African-American teachers in low performing schools has been influenced by NCLB as a result of published test scores and the law's failure to acknowledge existing social and cultural discrepancies. However, results also suggest that teacher morale may be impacted by other factors as well. Participant experiences indicate that teacher morale is an immensely complex phenomenon, one in which no single factor can be held entirely responsible. Hence, NCLB alone does not appear to be the primary caveat for teacher morale. Instead, teacher morale appears to be a culmination of social and educational intricacies, making it difficult to place substantial emphasis on NCLB as a major proponent without acknowledging other factors related to teacher morale.

Lumsden (1998) explains that a healthy school environment and teacher morale tend to be related. Likewise, findings from this study suggest that there are other pertinent factors within the school environment which may significantly influence teacher morale. Participants suggest that teacher morale is deeply affected, not only by NCLB, but by subsequent factors such as disciplinary problems, inconsistent school practices, and strained peer relationships (Briggs & Richardson, 1992). These factors, combined with the extensive social issues participants face within their schools, appear to make No Child Left Behind an additional stress factor in what is already a stressful learning environment. Therefore, the general feeling

African-American teachers hold towards NCLB, is that it is an educational policy which simply makes matters worse.

Results from this study indicate that African-American teachers in urban and rural schools share mirrored experiences, primarily because they serve similar populations of students. They both describe the lack of exposure, the lack of parental involvement, the issue of poverty and the lack of educational resources within their schools. These are the hard truths they face on a daily basis, and for some participants they too have shared in the experience of these disparities with their students. Participants do not believe that No Child Left Behind, or any other educational reform policy can eliminate the social injustices that are manifest within their schools (Armaline & Levy, 2005). However, they are willing to implement sound educational practices that are beneficial for their students and those that address the needs of the children they serve. For this reason, participants do not perceive social inequality as an excuse for achievement. Instead, they emphasize the fact that while their students face insurmountable odds, they are capable of being successful, regardless. And for many participants, they believe their primary purpose as educators is not merely to pass the 'test,' but to help their children see that their circumstances do not dictate their futures.

Findings from this research study further indicate that while the accountability measures established by NCLB do influence teacher morale, it does not alter the dedication of teachers truly committed to education. Participants and their schools are forced to wear the label of underachievement; however, they are not willing to

allow labels to dictate their purpose or hinder their desire to educate children. Every

participant expresses a sincere dedication to educating the students they serve. They

are enthusiastic about teaching, and though they acknowledge the difficulties they

face, there appears to be a resilience within them which drives their efforts towards

helping students achieve despite the odds. Teaching is more than just a career for

most participants. It is a calling which many of them answer with an unfaltering will

and determination to do whatever is necessary to ensure the success of their students.

Therefore, while NCLB has influenced teacher morale among African-

American teachers to a certain extent, it appears it has not diminished or lessened

their dedication to students and to the teaching profession. What appears to motivate

participants, according to the findings in this study, is far removed from NCLB, test

scores, or any other educational practice. The participants genuinely care about the

well-being of their students, and they are willing to bear the frustration and angst, the

disappointment and the negativity in order to establish and maintain a connection to

their children. Their focus is not entirely on NCLB and all its ramifications, but

instead on the kids they see each day, many of whom must trudge daily from

classrooms of possibility to communities of hopelessness, despair, and mediocrity.

Conducting a phenomenological, qualitative study has allowed me to acquire

a deeper understanding of African-American teacher experiences in low-performing

middle schools in a manner which would not have been possible had I used

quantitative techniques for this research. This study epitomizes the

phenomenological philosophy Byrne (2001) describes as the belief that knowledge

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and understanding are embedded in our everyday world and cannot be quantified or reduced to numbers or statistics. Gathering intricate details from the experiences of participants in this study through qualitative methodology provides thick, rich data which quantitative methods could rarely capture.

I am truly inspired by the tenacity of participants in this study, and I am equally humbled by their experiences and their dedication to educating our future leaders. Likewise, I emphatically agree with the NEA's assertion that, "Teachers in these schools do not need blame – they need help. They are struggling with the fewest resources to teach those students who must leap the highest barriers on the way to excellence." And until this help is sufficiently and tangibly granted to teachers in struggling schools, they will be left to mend the gaping wounds of education with the band-aid of inadequate education reform policies.

Limitations

As with most qualitative studies, limitations in this study were extensive. The element of time and scheduling presented the greatest challenge, particularly when trying to schedule interviews. What initially was scheduled to take two weeks, turned into a month-long venture for the teachers at Urban X Middle School. Some teachers either cancelled interview appointments at the last minute in some instances, or cancelled while I was en route to their school. At Rural Y Middle School, contact with the principal was difficult to establish initially, particularly with the school being 90 miles from where I live. Therefore, scheduling interviews took much longer than expected. Initially, the study required 5 teachers from each school. However, at

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Rural Y Middle School, there were not enough African-American teachers within the school who had enough years of teaching experience who fit the research requirements necessary for the study. Therefore, only 4 teachers from Rural Y Middle School were used, reducing the number of research participants from 10 to 9. In addition, teachers at Rural Y Middle School were preparing for an awards day ceremony the afternoon of scheduled interviews, so the initial interviews for these participants were not as in-depth as I would have liked them to be due to time constraints.

Limitations also extended to the interviews themselves. Tape recorders stopped. Cassette tapes ran out, and batteries lost their juice. This meant that for some interviews, data was omitted or lost due to technical difficulties. Questions had to be posed repeatedly or asked again during follow-up interviews. In some instances, the quality of the interviews became an issue. Some participants either provided answers that were too vague and too broad, or they answered questions in a manner that resulted in little more than excessive rambling. This required that I edit some of the interview questions, asking for more specific answers and descriptions of experiences. Overall, though the limitations were extensive, they mainly served as mild nuisances that were easily rectified or modified in order to complete the study.

Additional limitations related to data analysis were also a part of this investigation. Having to transcribe and analyze the data entirely alone made it more difficult for me to completely avoid researcher subjectivity. If an additional person or group had been used to collectively analyze the results of the study, a deeper level of

understanding and possibly a broader interpretation could have been established and presented.

Implications for Future Research

Research Implications

      While this phenomenological study examined African-American teacher experiences in low performing middle schools, further research examining other teacher perspectives within these schools could be beneficial. This would be of particular interest considering what previous research has discovered regarding the number of Caucasian teachers who make up the majority of the teacher workforce across the State (Enwefa et al., 2001).

      Likewise, there are numerous schools across Mississippi similar to the two schools selected for this study. Examining teacher morale among teachers across the state within these schools using a quantitative approach could provide significant insight into the effects of NCLB on teacher morale on a much broader, generalized scale. Results from such research could indicate whether teacher experiences are pervasive or isolated, which could have significant implications for future education reform policies.

      Since teacher morale has not been examined extensively as an educational policy issue, it could be beneficial to conduct additional qualitative and quantitative studies regarding this topic. As previous research suggests (Briggs & Richardson, 1992), few studies exist which have adequately examined teacher morale and even

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fewer that have examined the impact of teacher morale on other factors, such as teacher attrition. Therefore, subsequent studies utilizing various research methodologies would greatly contribute to a deeper understanding of teacher morale and its relevance to the educational process.

Results from this study indicate that teacher morale is a multifaceted concept, meaning it cannot be judged by a single variable. Numerous factors are related to teacher morale and influence teacher morale to varying degrees (Lumsden, 1998). Future research examining other factors related to teacher morale, such as administrative leadership, peer relationships, disciplinary procedures, etc., would be beneficial in establishing a broader context for understanding both intrinsic and extrinsic factors pertaining to teacher morale.

Practical Implications

The present study suggests that No Child Left Behind has affected the morale of African-American teachers in low performing schools and strongly suggests that attrition among African-American teachers has been impacted as well. This appears to be the result of the stringent requirements and accountability measures set forth by the law.

Education policy-makers must take into account the societal and cultural issues which many African-American teachers face and which undergird student achievement for many of their students. To apply a one-size-fit-all approach to education reform is to ignore the systemic problems that plague many underperforming schools. Education policies must realistically acknowledge and

evaluate the underlying issues that exist within the current educational system and develop approaches that cultivate real student achievement for students from various backgrounds. Gestl-Pepin (2006) explains that it is imperative that the challenges teachers face within high poverty schools be recognized, and that the struggles their children face be acknowledged. Otherwise, education reform will persist in missing the mark of higher academic achievement and ultimately leave entire communities of children behind.

Resorting to scientifically derived results as the sole indicator of achievement is a significantly flawed approach to education reform. Education consists of more than dubious facts and content knowledge. NCLB has generated a test-driven school environment that has not dramatically improved student achievement. And based on results from this study, many African-American teachers believe that their students are missing out on facets of education essential to preparing students for the real world. Curriculum mandates should be rich in critical thinking skills and higher order thinking processes rather than arbitrary sets of content knowledge requirements that provide limited insight into student abilities.

The present shortage of African-American teachers within Mississippi, as well as across the country (Bolich, 2003), signals that attention needs to be given to African-American teachers and their vanishing presence in the classroom. Likewise, policy-makers should seek to provide greater incentives not only for teachers in general, but particularly for African-American teachers who choose to work in the most difficult school environments. Their efforts to improve student achievement

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should be acknowledged and adequate resources and support should be supplied in order to retain teachers of color. While some may question the importance of retaining African-American teachers, Wilder (2000) explains that the shortage of teachers of color creates a lack of opportunity for African-American students to experience positive interactions with teachers like them; prevents students from all backgrounds from having teachers with diverse backgrounds; and impacts the extent to which culturally relevant education is integrated into mainstream curriculum. Therefore, it is necessary for educators, school administrators, and policy-makers alike to examine this issue and seek ways to ensure that the teacher workforce adequately reflects the students it serves.

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENTS

July 23, 2007

Dear Mr. Superintendent,

I am writing to request your permission to conduct a qualitative study in your school district. I am presently a doctoral student at Mississippi State University majoring in Curriculum and Instruction. The focus of my study is *No Child Left Behind and Teacher Morale among African-American Teachers in Low Performing Schools.*

There is a crisis within our educational system involving the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. While there may be numerous causes for this phenomenon, a critical examination of this issue has been overlooked by most researchers. Previous studies have shown that teacher morale is an important concept to understand in order to effectively implement education initiatives and school reform. NCLB has had an immense impact on teacher instruction and classroom practices. However, little knowledge exists that examines teacher perspectives regarding the law's effect on teacher instruction and morale, particularly among teachers who serve in struggling schools. By conducting this study, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of what teachers in the trenches are experiencing and how those experiences have shaped both their philosophies of education and their teaching motivation. As most businesses and organizations are aware, it is difficult to be successful without dedicated employees. The same holds true in education. Without dedicated teachers, it is impossible for any facet of education to be effective. And failure to examine teacher morale may serve as an underlying hindrance to the educational process.

The IRB [Institution Review Board] at MSU requires that graduate students receive written permission from school superintendents before any research study can be conducted. Therefore, I would like your permission to conduct this study in your school district. Upon receiving permission, five teachers from the school site will be selected to participate in the study. Attached is a permission form that you will need to type on your official school letterhead and mail to me by August 6, 2007. I hope that permission will be granted, and I look forward to working with you and hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Kim L. Wiley
Phone: (601) 856-4697
Address: P.O. Box 601, Canton, MS 39046
Email: laloj24@hotmail.com

APPENDIX B

CONSENT LETTER TO PRINCIPALS

October 21, 2007

Dear Mr. Principal,

   I am writing to request your permission to conduct a qualitative study at Nichols Middle School. I am presently a doctoral student at Mississippi State University majoring in Curriculum and Instruction. The focus of my study is *No Child Left Behind and Teacher Morale among African-American teachers in Low Performing Schools.*
   There is a crisis within our educational system involving the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. While there may be numerous causes for this phenomenon, a critical examination of this issue has been overlooked by most researchers. Previous studies have shown that teacher morale is an important concept to understand in order to effectively implement education initiatives and school reform. NCLB has had an immense impact on teacher instruction and classroom practices. However, little knowledge exists that examines teacher perspectives regarding the law's effect on teacher instruction and morale, particularly among teachers who serve in struggling schools. By conducting this study, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of what teachers in the trenches are experiencing and how those experiences have shaped both their philosophies of education and their teaching motivation. As most businesses and organizations are aware, it is difficult to be successful without dedicated employees. The same holds true in education. Without dedicated teachers, it is impossible for any facet of education to be effective. And failure to examine teacher morale may serve as an underlying hindrance to the educational process.
   I would like your permission to conduct this study at your school, upon receiving permission from the IRB [Institution Review Board] at MSU. Once permission is granted, five teachers from your school will be selected to participate in the study. Teachers participating in the study must have taught at least one year prior to the implementation of NCLB and presently teach in one of the core content areas assessed by the MCT. I have received permission from the Superintendent of your school district, and I hope that you will grant your permission as well. I look forward to working with you and hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Kim L. Wiley
Phone: (601) 856-4697
Address: P.O. Box 601, Canton, MS 39046
Email: laloj24@hotmail.com

APPENDIX C

CONSENT LETTER TO TEACHERS

Consent Form

Title of Study: *NCLB and Teacher Morale Among African-American Teachers in Low Performing Schools*

Name of Researcher & University Affiliation: Ms. Kim L. Wiley, Mississippi State University

Purpose of this research project:
To examine the experiences and perspectives of African-American teachers in low performing schools regarding the current No Child Left Behind Act and the influence of NCLB on teacher morale.

Potential Benefits of the study:
By examining the experiences and perspectives of African-American teachers in low performing schools who face significant challenges in meeting the requirements of NCLB, education leaders and policy-makers can gain a deeper understanding of how their decisions influence and impact teachers and how those decisions may ultimately affect teacher retention.

Confidentiality:
Two interviews will be conducted for this research project, which include both an initial interview and a follow-up interview. Initial interviews will last approximately one hour, with follow-up interviews lasting 30 minutes to one hour. Participants may **skip** any questions that they **do not wish to answer** at any time during the interview.

ALL information obtained from research participants will be kept confidential [Note: *These records will be held by a state entity and therefore are subject to disclosure if required by law*]

If you should have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Kim L. Wiley at 601-856-4697. For additional information regarding your rights as a research subject, please feel free to contact the MSU Regulatory Compliance Office at 662-325-5220. Please understand that your **participation is voluntary**. **Your refusal to participate** will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You **may discontinue your participation** at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Date

_____   _____
Investigator Signature   Date

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APPENDIX D

INSTITUTION REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

Mississippi State UNIVERSITY

November 29, 2007

Kim L. Wiley
P. O. Box 601
Canton, MS 39046

RE: IRB Study #07-346: NCLB & Teacher Morale Among African-American Teachers in Low
Performing Schools

Dear Ms. Wiley:

The above referenced project was reviewed and approved via administrative review on 11/29/2007 in
accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2). Continuing review is not necessary for this project. However,
any modification to the project must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Any
failure to adhere to the approved protocol could result in suspension or termination of your project. The
IRB reserves the right, at anytime during the project period, to observe you and the additional
researchers on this project.

Please refer to your IRB number (#07-346) when contacting our office regarding this application.

Thank you for your cooperation and good luck to you in conducting this research project. If you have
questions or concerns, please contact me at kcrowley@research.msstate.edu or 325-8543.

Sincerely,

Katherine Crowley
Assistant IRB Compliance Administrator

cc: Dr. Linda Coats

Office for Regulatory Compliance
P. O. Box 6223 • 8A Morgan Street • Mailstop 9563 • Mississippi State, MS 39762 • (662) 325-3294 • FAX (662) 325-8776

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