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FROM TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES: A CASE STUDY OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (2002) AND EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (2015)

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**FROM TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES: A CASE STUDY OF *NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND*  
(2002) AND *EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT* (2015)**

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## Abstract

Education policy shapes the way teachers across the United States educate students and run their classrooms. The different legislation that politicians create highlights their goals for education and their understanding of its purpose. The media and many academic scholars have critiqued such policies as *No Child Left Behind* since its adoption in 2002 for ushering in an era of education more focused on student achievement rather than student learning. This swung pedagogical focus from teachers shaping the curriculum to meet students' needs toward criteria-based scoring. In 2015, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* replaced *No Child Left Behind* as a policy and was framed to respond to this criticism. Using content analysis and qualitative interviews with primary and secondary teachers in Los Angeles County, this research examines the difference between policy outlines and implementations. To date, much research has reported on the impact these policies have had on student academic performance. The present study will instead explore the impact on teachers' pedagogy in Los Angeles, the second-largest school system in the United States. The researcher utilized a series of contemporary news articles about the legislation to guide interviews, providing a reminder of these moments in time as a jumping-off point. Research outcomes found that the media's portrayal contrasted with teachers' everyday experiences. Further, teachers' opinions about the level of impact each policy generated differed; these variations in perception were explored, and common themes were identified.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

Policymakers dictate the structure of the education system in the United States of America, and most often, these politicians have never worked in education. One example of this is the *No Child Left Behind Act* (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) which was co-authored by Representatives George Miller, John Boehner, Ted Kennedy, and Judd Gregg. They all held multiple distinguished degrees related to the field of law. Still, none of these representatives held degrees in education (or fields related to education such as psychology or child development) nor appear to have held jobs as teachers or similar K-12 educational related institutions prior to co-authoring on how to change national educational policies that govern teachers and all K-12 children's learning processes. Yet, when they hand these policies down to educators, they redefine the purpose of education and endorse required outcomes without fully understanding their impact on teachers' pedagogical methods.

Educational policies always have unintended consequences, which can impact student learning outcomes. The media and many academic scholars have critiqued the policy, *No Child Left Behind*, since its adoption in 2002 for ushering in an education era more focused on student achievement rather than student learning (NCLB, 2002; Strauss, 2012; Bell & Meinelt, 2011). This swung teachers' focus from shaping their curriculum to building students' comprehension toward meeting a criteria-based cut-off score. In 2015, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* replaced *No Child Left Behind* as a policy and was framed as a response to this criticism (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). ESSA (2015) also had a significant impact on how teachers developed and implemented their curriculum, and research indicates it had its own set of unintended consequences (see Poiner, 2016). To date, much research has reported on the impact these policies have had on student academic performance

(e.g., systemic negative consequences for EL students as reported by Menken, 2010; stagnation for top performers associated with high-stakes testing according to Loveless et al., 2008; longitudinal assessment student performance under both NCLB and ESSA in Hemet & Jacob, 2017) or teacher performance (such as when Jennings & Bearak, 2014 discuss teaching to the test and artificial grade inflation) or teacher quality (e.g., Porter-Magee, 2004; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). However, few studies have explored the teacher perspective of living through the curriculum demands of both policies and exploring the changing effect it had across time on their classrooms compared to what media was portraying. Thus, the present research utilized a series of guided interviews. Interviewing stakeholders and exploring first-person narratives through semi-structured questioning has been found to be the time-honored method for successfully examining the impact of policy implementation (Hancock et al., 2021) over time. Thus, content analysis and qualitative interviews with primary and secondary teachers in Los Angeles, California, examine the difference between each policy's outlines and implementations and their impact on each teacher's pedagogical practices.

### **Background**

President George W. Bush signed H.R.1, *No Child Left Behind*, into law on January 8, 2002, to raise American students' reading and math proficiency skills and serve as a better competitor in the international arena (Watson, 2019, p. 52). NCLB was a reform of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which established the obligations for all states to teach specific topics and led to the formation of state standards (Paul, 2022). ESEA's stated purpose was to ensure that all K-12 pupils in the United States received an equitable and high-quality education. This also marked the beginning of significant government financing for K-12 public education, later employed as a reward/threat in NCLB (Paul, 2022). Rather than

local autonomy, it gave states a significant role in how schools accounted for the needed student achievement in these disciplines, subsequently used in NCLB to determine how students were graded. NCLB (2002) outlined how schools had to measure student achievement, and any school that did not meet the set standards cut-off criteria would be at risk of losing significant and much relied upon federal funding. For example, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) currently receives ten percent, or \$767 million, from federal sources (Budget Basics, 2020). (A proportionally comparable amount was at stake during the time of NCLB.) If LAUSD were to lose this funding both then and now, they would not have enough funds to provide salaries for teachers, staff, and other essential resources to students.

The bill's centerpiece was a requirement that states develop and implement "challenging" academic standards in reading and math, establish annual statewide progress objectives to ensure that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years, and test children in reading and math annually in grades 3 through 8 to track their progress. The measure prohibited any "national testing" or "federally controlled curriculum." States were responsible for selecting and designing their own examinations and ensuring that they related to state curricular standards. Federal grants were proposed to assist states in developing their examinations (*No Child Left Behind - The New Rules | Testing Our Schools | FRONTLINE | PBS*, n.d.). The results were required to be published in annual "report cards" on how schools are performing and how states are progressing toward their competency goals in general. Student academic outcomes were required to be broken down by categories, including socioeconomic level (e.g., free and reduced lunch status), race, ethnicity, disability status, and English proficiency level, to ensure that all groups of pupils were progressing sufficiently. Schools and districts were further obliged to prove "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) toward all statewide goals once the educational policy

was in effect (NCLB, 2002). Schools were mandated to report that they were on track to achieve 100% competency for all pupils within 12 years. States were allowed to choose what qualified as competent for each group. However, if schools did not meet these criteria of 100% progress, then the state was mandated to impose a tiered system of responses to foster school improvement. This tiered system was a series of increasing corrective actions. The system was built from mild warnings and retraining of teachers to threats of reduced funding and potential termination of teachers. This culminated in restructuring the school or possible permanent closure for any that consistently fell behind (NCLB, 2002).

NCLB's implementation in K-12 public schools required measuring student achievement through annual standardized testing. The test adopted to implement this in California was the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR Test California Department of Education, 2021). The California Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 (PSAA) initiated the original STAR program. Every spring, California public school pupils were given the multiple-choice STAR examination. The STAR Program featured four types of tests or components, the most common were California Standards Tests (CSTs; California Department of Education, 2021). These were criterion-referenced multiple-choice tests that assessed the California content standards in English-language arts, mathematics, science, and history-social science. It was believed that introducing a single set of standardized tests statewide during the same weeks would test students in public schools in a more equitable fashion while still holding schools accountable for student growth as required by NCLB.

The standardized testing instruments used to assess student content learning during NCLB were flawed. Extensive research has concluded that they do not provide valid and reliable measurement of student learning of content standards and result in scores that are not consistent,



accurate, or generalizable and are likely biased (Flaherty, 2015). A teacher from Virginia explained to the National Education Association, one of the most prominent teachers' unions in America, that many students who "do not perform well on standardized tests come from low-income homes or live in poverty" (Flaherty, 2015). Even though every student takes the same exam, the tests' nature did not account for factors such as hunger, physical disability, cognitive difficulties, lack of adequate testing facilities, or inconsistent test format. NCLB (2002) also did not mandate item validity be achieved on tests and focused on content and not pedagogical elements for improving curriculum delivery and student understanding. Such as Universal Design for Learning, a methodology that helps teachers recognize that different students learn in different ways (Basham et al., 2010). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) addresses students' needs by proactively planning instructional, environmental, and technological supports so that all students can access and engage in education effectively (Basham et al., 2010). While the issues of NCLB were many (entire books have been written on the subject), ultimately, creating a generalized approach to education without adequate federal funding led to *No Child Left Behind's* demise. This educational policy created a test-based education system at the cost of supporting critical thinking skills in students. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* attempted to address these policy shortcomings (Dennis, 2016, p. 396).

In 2015, President Barack Obama had the opportunity to renew *No Child Left Behind*, but he did so with changes, renaming the legislation the *Every Student Succeeds Act*. The most significant difference between the two policies is that ESSA (2015) gave schools a comprehensive list of ways to measure student achievement, such as high school graduation rates or Kindergarten literacy rates, in addition to collecting standardized testing data. Additionally, schools were required to pick four or five from the federal list of options based on their current

ranking (Text - S.1177 - 114th Congress (2015-2016): Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d.) in order to receive continued funding. The policy also provided additional funding for schools to audit their testing procedures and remove any “unnecessary” testing. It also required parental and community input when creating new plans (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016).

The prominent teachers’ union, the American Federation of Teachers, issued a resolution supporting the *Every Student Succeeds Act* in 2016. It gave schools and teachers more flexibility in running their classrooms (American Federation of Teachers, 2016). The American Federation of Teachers is the second-largest teachers union in the country representing approximately 1.7 million teachers (American Federation of Teachers, 2020).

Even though the *Every Student Succeeds Act* was a significant improvement from *No Child Left Behind*, the policy still was reported as having weaknesses (Review, 2017). For example, the continuous focus on standardized testing across NCLB and into ESSA has been described as a “cultural iceberg” to ascertain student learning. Specifically, Edward T. Hall proposed the culture iceberg analogy in 1976. If a society’s culture were an iceberg, Hall reasoned, some features would be visible above water, but the majority would be submerged beneath the surface. The visible, or conscious, aspect of culture is the tip of the iceberg, and it comprises behaviors and beliefs that are overt and codified. The internal, or subconscious, cultural influences are found beneath a society’s surface and contain systemic or traditional beliefs, values, and cognitive processes that further underpin motivation and behavioral responses. (Constant Foreigner, 2010). Thus, some have criticized ESSA’s continued focus on standardized tests to measure grade-level proficiency in a single content subject rather than individual student improvement over the school year (Watson, 2019, p. 53). Critics also pointed out the depth of comprehension as addressing only the tip of the iceberg, with additional factors

influencing teacher performance and student learning, such as grade-level readiness or degree of federal or local resources and support as part of socioeconomic status. These factors go unchanged because they are themes under the implementation surface.

One such pedagogical area beneath the surface is both NCLB and ESSA's impact on teachers. Teachers are the primary means by which students learn most of their content. Thus, teachers' impressions of how the policies were implemented and influenced their lesson delivery instead of how they were intended (policy wording) or described (contemporaneous media reporting) are of strong interest. These policies and how they were delivered impacted teacher classroom behavior and delivery method, which are two established critical factors that influence student outcomes (e.g., Donohoo & Katz, 2017; Good, 2014; & Mellati et al., 2015). But what is known about their perception of what happened? Both policies' requirements were documented and announced to all public K-12 teachers simultaneously, and the listed consequences for those that did not succeed at policy implementation. Responses were typified in media communications of the time period. But what was actually happening in the minds of teachers as they were asked to implement these two policies? How these policies impact their pedagogy and classroom decisions and media match or support these classroom behaviors requires exploration and is the present study's focus.

### **Research Questions:**

1. From different teachers' perspectives, how did the education policies *No Child Left Behind* (2002) and *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) differ in their intended goals and implementation and media portrayals?
2. How did these two policies differ in their intended student learning outcomes from the different teachers' perspectives?

## **Hypotheses:**

1. The researcher expects to find differences in the intended policy outcomes and the media's overall reporting on the policies and teachers' lived experiences.
2. Teachers will report varied opinions and experiences about the two policies' effects on their educational careers, despite policies being applied to all educators at the same time with the same legal wording.
3. Despite varied opinions and experiences, teachers will express critiques aligned on similar themes in response to *No Child Left Behind* (2002) and the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) as policies.

## **Design and Methods**

The present study aimed to investigate what impact NCLB (2002) and ESSA (2015) had on K-12 teachers and their pedagogical practices/perspectives. Interviews gathered first-person narratives to assess common themes, pedagogical responses, and perceptions of its impact on student performance among teachers in California.

**Participants.** The study sampled K-12 public school teachers from Los Angeles County. The inclusion/exclusion criteria for the instructors were that they must be over the age of 18, fluent in English, started teaching prior to 2002, and must still be teaching through the time of the interview in 2022. Changing schools or subject content areas did not impact the inclusion criteria due to the expanse of time under investigation. The rationale for this criterion was to ensure that the participants could accurately attest to the shift in pedagogical practices across both policies and the shift in perceived student achievement in order to have experiences from before, during, and after the implementation of both policies. Initial participants were obtained by recommendation and social media posting (e.g., Facebook). Subsequent participants were

“snowball sampled” (*FAQs and Vignettes* | *NSF – National Science Foundation*, n. d.). Each initial respondent was asked to suggest colleagues they knew of who met the timeline criteria. The researcher then contacted the recommended teachers by email to see if they could serve as research participants. All five K-16 teachers interviewed were from five different school districts and types of schools (e.g., charter, non-charter, elementary, high school) in the same county. Narrowing the regional differences to only one county was done to help reduce the impact of other legislative policies that could have potentially impacted students and teachers enacted during this study’s long timeframe.

Both NCLB (2002) and ESSA (2015) also influenced content standards and K-12 achievement testing, standardizing both throughout the county selected. Los Angeles County was further chosen as the region for the present investigation because it encompasses the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). LAUSD has been the second-largest school district in the United States for the period covered in this study and has included a wide variety of teachers, students, and school formats during that time. Specifically, LAUSD currently comprises over 600,000 K-12 students and over 25,000 teachers. The ethnic composition of the LAUSD student population is primarily Latino (73.4%); the remainder is African American (10.0%), White (8.8%), Asian (3.9%), Filipino (2.2%), Pacific Islander (.04%), American Indian (.04%) and two or more races, not Latino, (1%). The district has 161,484 English language learner students. Their primary languages are Spanish (93.4% of English language learners), with Korean (1.1%) and Armenian (1.1%) being second and third, and Tagalog, Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Russian each accounting for less than 1% of the total. Thus, this sampling location allows for interviewing teachers from various backgrounds who have had the opportunity for a wide sampling of experiences with a large and diverse student population (Los Angeles Unified

School District Human Resources, 2018) and yet are working under the same legislative requirements.

The participating teachers spanned across K-12 grade levels and subject areas of teaching. Their teaching content assignments remained the same across different schools during NCLB and ESSA's adoptions, even if they changed schools. Two teachers were special education teachers, with one teaching elementary students and the other teaching life skills to adult students. One teacher taught high school Honors and AP English Language Arts, and another teacher taught sixth-grade English Language Arts and Social Studies/History. The final teacher taught third-grade multiple subject in the school's Schools for Advanced Studies (SAS) program. Four of the five teachers were white and non-Hispanic, and all teachers were female. Three teachers were newer to teaching during NCLB's start (with none less than one year of experience), with two out of five teachers well into their teaching careers (greater than three years experience).

***Teacher 1. (Teacher S)***

Teacher S is a charter school's ninth and tenth grade Honors and Advanced Placement English teacher. She is Black and has been teaching for 23 years. At the start of NCLB, Teacher S was a middle school English Language Arts teacher at a school in Los Angeles County, but she moved to high school soon after.

***Teacher 2. (Teacher R)***

Teacher R is a sixth-grade Honors English Language Arts and History/Social Studies teacher in an affiliated charter school. She is Caucasian and non-Hispanic and has been teaching for over 38 years. Teacher R has also taught yearbook, leadership, math, science, and physical

education, and she spent time as an Assistant Principal, but she has taught at two different schools over her teaching career.

***Teacher 3. (Teacher J)***

Teacher J is a third-grade teacher in her charter school's SAS gifted and talented student program. She is Caucasian and non-Hispanic and has been teaching for 25 years. She has taught each grade and ability level in the kindergarten through fifth-grade level in addition to music and dance classes.

***Teacher 4. (Teacher D)***

Teacher D is a third, fourth, and fifth-grade special education teacher in a public school in a major school district in Los Angeles County. She is Caucasian and non-Hispanic and has been teaching for 31 years.

***Teacher 5. (Teacher E)***

Teacher E was a special education teacher during the time of NCLB and ESSA implementation but now serves as a Department Chair for a Community Transition Services program, which teaches life skills and enrichment to adults with disabilities. She is Caucasian and non-Hispanic and has worked in education for 30 years.

**Interview Method.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted in one-on-one settings and consisted of a media literature review portion and a question-and-answer portion comparing NCLB (2002) and ESSA (2015) impact on teaching and perceived outcomes. The study used an adapted version of an Elicitation Interview (Hogan et al., 2015), which is a method that is useful for gathering detailed and precise accounts of teachers' experiences. The Elicitation Interview method is a technique for acquiring accurate and detailed narratives of human experience. It can be used to understand better how people react to and interpret visualizations in data exploration

and analysis. (Hogan et al., 2015; Johnson & Weller, 2002). In the adapted version used for this study, the interviews began by presenting the teacher with two newspaper headlines with articles about each policy (one piece per policy). See Appendix B for the four articles. Policy articles were from local papers, generated during the time period, and were randomly assigned. Teachers were given five minutes to read these items. They were asked to focus on the summary section of each article. Providing the interviewees with access to these documents as part of the researcher's effort to reactivate memories about common public discourse during these time points helped foster discussion. This elicitation drew the participants into exploring common reactions and responses they recalled from each policy period, which were later used to determine themes as part of this study's data analysis. Participants read each article and reflected on whether they agreed with the authors' statements based on their recollections and what memory evidence they could provide about their teaching experience at the time.

Moving into the question-and-answer second part of the adapted Elicitation Interview process, participants reflected in greater depth on their time teaching under both policies, explaining how the rules and regulations shaped their teaching practices and student learning outcomes. They were also prompted to identify their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of each policy. (See Appendix A for sample interview questions.)

**Procedure.** Each interview was conducted online for one hour per participant. Interview audio and video were recorded using Zoom for later transcription to augment the researcher's detailed personal notes. The researcher used a unique password-protected Zoom meeting to record each session and stored the videos on an external hard drive. Participants were not asked to change their screen names before the interview because only the researcher had access to the recordings. Participants were made aware of the recording mechanism prior to their interview



and the option to “opt-out.” Participants were instructed at the beginning of the interview and during the informed consent process (when they electronically signed the document agreeing to participate in the study) that they had the right to not reply to a question by asking the researcher to move on to another question (skip a question) or end the interview altogether. Participants were not required to turn on their Zoom cameras; they could leave them on or off according to their comfort levels. Participants received an email containing the unique password-protected Zoom meeting information before the scheduled interview. All recordings were destroyed after transcripts were generated.

Qualitative data analysis was used to compile the results from the interviews. Qualitative research methodology is well suited for gathering non-numerical data, particularly when it focuses not only on what people did but why they did it, such as in response to educational policy changes in this study. It is a methodology that includes gathering narratives from participants’ open-ended responses during interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These findings can generate case study profiles and detect common or unexpected themes in perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Every teacher has their own lived experience, and the benefit of qualitative data analysis is to explore those experiences firsthand to find patterns. With this goal in mind, this project was not suitable for a controlled experimental design because it measured participants’ understanding, observations, and personal responses to changes in pedagogical practices, both intended and unintended, across multiple years as part of historical, educational policy change.

**Analyses.** After the interviews were conducted, transcripts were made, themes and general findings were summarized, and representational responses surrounding both policies and any thematic deviations from the literature were identified and reviewed.

To answer the three proposed hypotheses, the impact of NCLB and ESSA was examined using visual data analysis, which is a traditional method for assessing outcomes in a single case design study (Horner et al., 2005). Visual data analysis allows for interpretation utilizing: (a) categorization, (b) trend & variability, and (c) consistency of data patterns across similar participants. Within each education policy, changes in trends were studied to assess the category of teacher attitude and the directionality of teacher attitude change. The term “variability” relates to how variable the data is at any one-time point of sampling as well as the consistency across time (Kratochwill et al., 2010).

## **Results**

### ***Teacher 1. (Teacher S)***

Teacher S during the interview indicated that she felt that NCLB was modeled after President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, but it came with a significant increase in tests and changes in testing every two to three years. A significant part of her curriculum started to include test-taking strategies instead of project-based learning. The common standards created from ESSA were beneficial in theory to her, but Teacher S noted the extensive amount of standards. She said that education was “a mile wide and an inch deep,” so students learned a little information about a wide range of topics - enough to pass their exams. Teacher S also noted that the vast number of tests do not yield useful data; the results are not calculated in appropriate time frame to place students in the level of class that meets their academic needs.

### ***Teacher 2. (Teacher R)***

After reviewing the media articles, Teacher R emphasized how neither NCLB nor ESSA accounted for the need for student differentiation. Students in the same grade level start at various levels, she noted, so it was “absurd” that the federal government would require 100%

proficiency for all students. She described a culture of teachers “getting in trouble” for not meeting these standards, even though there was little support from policymakers. Teacher R could not definitively note changes in grade-level readiness over time because, as a sixth-grade teacher, students enter her classroom from many different elementary schools, so she does not know how much that impacts their middle school readiness. She did highlight that students are more mature than in the past, but less concerned with exam proficiency, She does not know if this can be attributed to NCLB or ESSA. Like Teacher S explained, Common Core under ESSA gave Teacher R “more freedom” in what she taught and how she taught it.

***Teacher 3. (Teacher J)***

When describing her pedagogical practices, Teacher J focused on her expectations of her students over time, noting that as her colleagues lowered their expectations and simplified their workload, she continued to challenge her students. Teacher J noted in her reflection on the media's representation of NCLB and ESSA through newspaper articles that she agreed with the goals of the policies and testing, but the amount of testing and changes every couple of years made proficiency unattainable.

***Teacher 4. (Teacher D)***

In reflecting on the media's portrayal of NCLB and ESSA through the newspaper articles, Teacher D explained that she believed in the purpose of the policies and testing, but their implementation was flawed because they did not take students' varying needs into account. She said that most of her students fail the standardized exams because their special education curriculum does not reflect what is tested. She felt pressured to “teach to the test” and underscored the lack of resources to test students, such as functional computers. Over the course of her teaching career, Teacher D held a “students first” philosophy, which dissuaded her from

emphasizing the importance of the policies in her practice. She did not identify any significant changes in student learning outcomes over time, but she noted that parental involvement has declined over her career as parents have been given more rights over their childrens' education.

#### ***Teacher 5. (Teacher E)***

In her interview, Teacher E highlighted the differences between the media's portrayal of NCLB and ESSA. While the policies were meant to create a uniform system for evaluating students, she explained that the tests did not take into account factors such as a students' parental involvement, socioeconomic status, or access to outside academic resources, all of which affect their test performance. She emphasized that teachers should be held accountable for their performance, but test scores cannot be the only factor in determining success. Teacher E did not identify any significant changes in student performance as a result of NCLB and ESSA.

### **Discussion**

This research project sought to answer two questions: 1) From different teachers' perspectives, how do the education policies *No Child Left Behind* (2002) and *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) differ in their intended goals and implementation and media portrayals? 2) From the different teachers' perspectives, how did these two policies differ in their intended student learning outcomes? Two themes emerged in compiling and analyzing teachers' perspectives as a result of their interviews: a dramatic change in teaching pedagogy and inefficient use of data toward measuring teaching excellence and student achievement.

#### **Theme 1. Changing What Teaching Pedagogy Focused On**

The consensus among the five research participants was that tying what was defined as "successful student performance" to maintaining school funding and teachers' job security as part of the NCLB policy implementation shifted teaching pedagogy from focusing on student

learning outcomes to focusing on performance-based outcomes. [1] The majority of participants (3 out of 5) [2] reported that NCLB also led to a significant increase in testing at the district, state, and federal levels as part of this performance-based assessment. This finding is supported by the review as mentioned above of the production of the STAR testing and expansion of the CST testing system during NCLB's implementation in California and by media-based literature from the period describing the implementation of these policies. Within this theme, Teacher S noted that this more extensive testing resulted in less instructional time available for content. She indicated that "testing takes away time to explore." Further, she explained how teachers were required to adhere strictly to the standards during lesson planning and implementation to cover each content area by the state testing date (which was usually early spring and not the end of an entire school year in California)

Additionally, focus on teacher excellence during NCLB was reported as shifting to adequate test performance of the class as a whole (e.g., the class average reaching a set score) and not on how effectively teachers attempted to engage students with their pedagogical practices, nor the level of individual understanding of content attained under such scaffolding. Thus, participant teachers reported overall that the focus became "teaching to the test" and created a "high-stakes environment" in which students and teachers were afraid to have students fail. Teachers S, R, and D specifically noted how the high-stakes nature of attaining these cut-off scores also led to increased competition between teachers to teach the advanced classes rather than collaborating as a team. Because these students were already high-performing, teachers felt more secure in their jobs when preparing students for the exams and more capable of shifting focus back to content. All five teachers also saw their colleagues cheat on the exams to help their students "succeed" and obtain the needed scores.

Further, each participant indicated during interviews that testing under both NCLB (2002) and ESSA (2015) equally disadvantaged teachers because the exams measured with a cut-off score for the entire class on the correct answer to ascertain achievement, not on individual improvement and growth. Reflecting on the students that had entered and exited their classrooms during these two policies, all five teachers generated statements that emphasized how students start each school year with varying background levels in the content. Some students made greater growth, even though it might not be reflected in the criteria level cut-off score. Additionally, the cut-off scores appeared to require all students to begin at the same beginning and aim for the same endpoint, regardless of reading proficiency, English language development level, or grade-level readiness. Teachers D and E, the two special education teachers, expressed this sentiment by indicating how their students were responsible for performing at grade level on these exams if they took them, even though their cognitive abilities did not match those of their same-age peers. They might have been making strong progress otherwise. Also, teacher participants reported that they felt their job had shifted from excellence in teaching the content concepts during both NCLB and ESSA to bringing all students up to the same score because the standardized test did not account for the natural variation in students during its reporting.

## **Theme 2. Inefficient Use of Data**

Teachers S, R, and J further reported that testing being added during NCLB and maintained during ESSA was not, in their view, contradictory to the policy's stated goals and media descriptions. They felt that the purpose was not to ascertain improvement in teacher quality, student academic growth, or another learning measure. Instead, it was to require educational stakeholders to collect data for policymakers to see if their policies were progressing.

Although ESSA (2015) indicated reducing the stakes associated with testing, which was echoed in media coverage, the teachers interviewed in this study did not feel a significant difference in testing requirements after the new policy's adoption. All five of the teachers made statements indicating their beliefs that both policies had positive intentions with poor implementation and oversight, which resulted in poorly applied data on outcomes. Testing students in special education classes takes twice as long as testing the general education classes, further reducing the class time spent on exploring and learning new topics.

The data collected through the mandated standardized tests was intended to help teachers improve their classrooms to aid the overall goal of NCLB (2002) and ESSA (2015). Teacher S highlighted that the data is not collected or evaluated promptly, so teachers cannot effectively implement the results in their classrooms in a formative fashion. Educational stakeholders are overwhelmed with the data reported, but they do not have an effective mechanism to process it or implement its findings. The teachers also noted a disconnect between identifying who needs which services and administering follow-through. While these education policies were intended to raise academic standards, teachers explained how their implementation created a testing-based model of education that led to students' increased teacher reliance and decreased resilience.

### **Considerations and Limitations**

While the findings from the present investigation are important, consideration needs to be given to factors that limit its scope. This capstone project's primary consideration is that NCLB (2002) was in effect for 11 years, but ESSA (2015) has only been active for six years. This time difference is complicated because one year of ESSA (2015) migrated nationally to unplanned distance learning and virtual instruction for most K-12 students and teachers nationwide, including the region of Los Angeles, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, more

reported research data is available about NCLB's (2002) successes and failures because it was in effect for longer. Lee and Reeves studied the impact of NCLB (2002) using state testing data from 1990 to 2020 (Lee & Reeves, 2012). Data on NCLB (2002) has been gathered on its impact over time, but ESSA (2015) has not been implemented long enough to collect this long-term data. What reported data may have been further interrupted by journals slowing or ceasing production during the first year of COVID-19. However, teachers' narratives on the impact of pedagogical practices and everyday experiences were not intended as a definitive data set but rather an exploratory one in order to identify themes that can still inform scholars and educators about these policy periods. Due to teachers keeping in touch with graduate students and having experienced both teaching policy events during NCLB and ESSA personally, they can provide a wealth of ex post facto knowledge and insight through reflected observation of their responses, as well as referencing the extensive understanding they have of current and former student learning outcomes in response to having experienced both systemic changes.

Another consideration when generalizing the findings to broader audiences includes the participants' demographic data. All the interviewees were women. Four out of five participants were White, and one was Black. Because of the small sample size and reduced diversity in the sample population in this pilot study, findings are limited in how far they may be generalized toward explaining all teachers' perceived impact of the adoption of NCLB (2002) and ESSA (2015) student learning outcomes. Additionally, all participants were selected from the western urban region of Los Angeles County. However, this study does allow insight into the responses, trends, and patterns of K-12 teachers during these two educational events and finds who were in contact with a wide variety of class formats (e.g., general and special education), grade levels, and types of student populations. At the same time, these policies were intended to boost



academic standards, their execution resulted in a testing-based style of education, which led to increasing teacher reliance and lower resilience among pupils. This is significant because it informs us about the impact of systemic educational policy changes on classroom practice and teaching pedagogy. If this study were to be repeated in a second phase, the researcher would recruit more participants representing a broader variety of demographics to gauge a wider perspective of teachers across Los Angeles County to confirm and extend this project's findings. As is well documented, larger sample sizes could produce more accurate mean values, uncover outliers that could bias data in smaller samples, and have a lower margin of error (Biau et al., 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Comparing media portrayal and teachers' everyday experiences teaching under *No Child Left Behind* and the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, this research adds to the existing literature surrounding education policy goals versus implementation. This contribution is particularly meaningful because educators face the most direct impact in implementing these policies. Their voices are often left out of the existing literature, except for statements from teachers' unions. Although these policies were intended to improve student learning and school outcomes but significantly impacted grade-level readiness and data collection, the present case study investigation concluded there were, in fact, significant differences in the intended policy outcomes and the media's overall reporting on the policies and the teachers' actual lived experiences. In summary, teachers reported varied opinions and experiences about the two policies' effects on their educational careers despite policies being applied to all educators at the same time with the same legal wording common themes. These shifts in themes held across NCLB and the revised ESSA included a perceived change in teaching pedagogical emphasis

from learning outcomes to performance-based outcomes. The other noteworthy theme was that data gathered from expanded testing was not being seen as being utilized to address the stated goal of each educational policy and that both media and policy implementors focused on the large-scale test results instead of the impacts on individual students or the ability to generate feedback for teacher curriculum revising.

In conclusion, this research can help start a conversation between future policymakers and teachers. Working as partners to reform American education, teachers can better understand what influences their pedagogical practices, both intended and accidental, with regard to new educational policy. Policymakers can recognize the need to involve individuals who work in settings where policy interpretation becomes classroom practice. If politicians want comprehensive educational revision programs to have a greater chance of beneficial impact on students' capability for learning with fewer unintended consequences than the most recent two systemic changes, then planning to listen actively and respond to classroom teachers' experiences better to grasp potential impacting variables at the classroom level should become a priority.

### **Appendix A Sample Interview Questions:**

- When did you become a teacher? Why did you become a teacher? Can you share a little about your teaching philosophy?
- What do you know about the policy No Child Left Behind (2002)? What do you think were the initial goals of the policy? Do you feel that it impacted your teaching, either directly or indirectly?
- What do you know about the policy Every Student Succeeds Act (2015)? What do you think were the initial goals of the policy? Do you feel that it impacted your teaching, either directly or indirectly?
- Thinking about yourself as a new teacher and the teacher you are now, have you reflected on whether or not these policies shaped your teaching style?
- Let's shift towards the students who have come into your classroom over the years. Have you noticed any significant changes across time? Do you think those are related to the adoption of these policies and their implementation?
- Now I'd like to focus on other educational stakeholders. Have you noticed any significant changes across time? Do you think those are related to the adoption of these policies and their implementation?
- What do you think the public misunderstands about these policies and their impact on schools? What information or misconceptions do you wish you could correct or reinforce?

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