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Rebell, Michael A., & Wolff, Jessica R. (2008). *Moving Every Child Ahead: From NCLB Hype To Meaningful Educational Opportunity*. New York: Teachers College Press

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Rebell and Wolff have poignantly articulated a multidimensional framework, for local, state, and federal officials, from which to deconstruct, and then, reconstruct the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. They expose and analyze the underlying ideologies of the historical, sociopolitical, and economic policies that have continued to perpetuate race and class polarization, and the failure of the NCLB law to educate the majority of low income minority students. This critical stance provides the theoretical construct from which the authors pose their key question: "Can NCLB be revised so that its core goals-eliminating achievement gaps and raising

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the achievement levels of all students-can actually be realized?” (p. 4)

The law clearly identifies two primary purposes: 1) to ensure that all children have a “fair” equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education, 2) to ensure that all children reach, at a minimum, “proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards” by 2013-2014 school year (NCLB, 2000). The authors posit that attainment of these demanding national goals advocated by the NCLB are largely achievable; however, in order to bring about the required systemic change an honest dialogue must be formulated.



Michael A. Rebell

Therefore, if the goal is to provide every student with a “complete” and “competitive” education, then systemic change, must be formulated around a “political awareness, incorporating what Agger (1991) proposed as, “Once we identify the politics, we can work to reformulate it” (p.13). It is from this theoretical framework that the law can be deconstructed; and then, reconstructed, to reflect the position advocated by Rebell & Wolff which is to “face realistically the challenges encountered by low achieving students and by those educators who seek to help these students” (p.5).

It is imperative, that the first step, in analyzing the NCLB law is to deconstruct its lack of effectiveness in achieving its ambitious goals within the construct of “political awareness” to answer the question, posed by Rebell and Wolff, “Why has NCLB not been more effective in closing the opportunity gaps that are at the root of our nation’s achievement gap?”

They argue that the current version of the NCLB law is riddled with political rhetoric and hyperbole. They expose three critical constructs that have contributed to the law’s ineffectiveness. First, calling minimally qualified teachers, “highly qualified.” Incorporated in this mandate is the encouragement of states to expand preparation for alternate-route teacher certification programs as a means of increasing their numbers of “highly qualified” teachers. Large

proportions of teachers with alternative certifications are found in schools that are low-performing and enroll higher concentrations of poor minority students; which, is problematic because many of these teachers are inexperienced and undereducated.

Second, the NCLB mandates 100% proficiency by 2014. Rebell and Wolff argue this is untenable, and adherence to this mandate is impossible, especially for schools with diverse student populations. Many students, in high poverty schools, are likely to perform at lower initial levels than their more advantaged peers; thereby, requiring them to make greater progress toward universal proficiency in the same amount of time.

Finally, the ongoing congressional dispute pertaining to the gap between authorization and appropriation of funding levels in the law; which, is evidenced by the fact, that the current level of funding does not even cover the costs of its own requirements. The Education Trust Act of 2006 estimated that nationwide, on average, spending on children in high-poverty school districts is \$825 less per student than spending on students in low-poverty districts, or over \$20,000 per year for each class of 25 students.

Framing the analysis, of the NCLB, in the construct of “political awareness,” the authors raise another question, “Why, after half a century, since the passage of *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, are poor minority students still being denied their constitutional right to “equal educational opportunity?” Kumashiro (2000) provides some insight to help formulate an answer to this question; but first, he argues it is critical to recognize the unconscious influence of the repetitions and citations of harmful histories and harmful discourses which have maintained the status quo in denying these students access to an “equal” education.

Anderson, in his seminal work, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, provides a profound in-depth account of the relationship between power and education through a historical perspective of the sociopolitical and economic

policies, and the philosophical belief of white supremacy; which has served to deny generations of African American students the right to an “equal education.” He raises the reader’s level of consciousness by developing an awareness of these repetitions and citations of harmful histories and harmful discourses, by providing the reader with the knowledge of these historical ideologies. Knowledge of these historical ideologies enables the reader to make the connection of how these historical ideologies are repeated in the present NCLB law; thereby, providing insight as to why it has failed to educate the majority of low income African Americans in our urban schools.

Anderson exposes three critical conceptual constructs, which were instrumental in denying African Americans access to “equal” educational opportunity; poorly regulated teaching training certification programs, repressive and inappropriate educational objectives, and inadequate and insufficient funding. These three critical constructs parallel the three critical constructs identified by Rebell and Wolff; which they feel have contributed to the ineffectiveness of the NCLB law.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a great shortage of black teachers. The proper training of black teachers was necessary for the expansion of common schooling for black children. Anderson posits that, “although southern states, counties and cities varied in their standards for certifying and hiring teachers, many elementary school teachers had not gone beyond high school” (p. 111). In addition, the effort made by the northern philanthropists to increase the supply of black teachers was an illusionary attempt; instead, training black teachers in the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education. Under the current NCLB law and its alternative certification program many teachers in high-poverty, low performing schools still are dramatically less qualified, on average, than teachers in other schools.

In response to this shortage of black teachers existing black educational institutions developed teacher training programs; however, many of these institutions promoted a classical

education. These educational programs caused black educators to question the content and goals of these black teacher training institutions. Many of these classical educational programs were viewed as “impractical and not geared to prepare black youth for useful citizenship and productive efficiency” (p.133). Therefore, both educational options available to blacks during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were ineffective in providing an “equal” and productive education. The Hampton-Tuskegee model tracked blacks into low paying menial jobs, or “Negro jobs,” and a classical education was non-productive. Similarities can be traced to the NCLB law. Poor minority children receive an education that contributes to increasing inequalities through using a very narrowly defined highly scripted curriculum which focuses on developing “basic skills” and test taking preparation; while, completely eliminating any creative instruction in the development of higher order thinking skills. AYP is detrimental to schools with diverse populations which are more likely to serve large numbers of disadvantaged students, who are more likely to face sanctions for failing to make AYP.

Anderson describes how public elementary schools finally became available to the majority of southern black children during the first third of the twentieth century; however, public school funds for black children were diverted to white children. Rebell and Wolff posit, “Congress has largely ignored the reality of the inequities of poverty and race and the enormous impact that these have on children, families and schools,” (p. 8). In addition, the original intent to target Title I funds toward students with the greatest educational needs has been, in many cases, subverted to more advantaged students.

Anderson provides the historical evidence to develop a political awareness of the repetitions and citations of harmful histories and harmful discourses and the damaging effect they have had on the education of many African Americans. It is Anderson’s historic insight, which enables the reader to make the “correct” connections between these repressive historical events and the inequities in the current NCLB law.

Rebell and Wolff assimilate these “correct” connections as a catalyst from which they deconstructed the NCLB law and then reconstruct it through proposing prescriptive solutions. They believe that America is still strongly committed to an “equal” education for all students. However, they argue we must change the language of the current goals stated in the NCLB. They advocate that reconstruction of the NCLB law must be done within the conceptual construct of providing a “meaningful educational opportunity” for all children; as opposed, to the current construct of providing “significant opportunity.” They posit, that “Congress should revise the NCLB to eliminate the mandate for 100% proficiency by 2014, and instead require that states provide meaningful educational opportunities for all their public school children by that date” (p.157). The authors outline the following prescriptive solutions to provide *meaningful* educational opportunities: addressing state teacher certification programs, the federal government must take a more proactive role to ensure the quality of state academic content standards, identify the actual costs of providing all students with a *meaningful* educational opportunity, the current cascade of consequences and sanctions should be replaced with an effective system for providing technical assistance and accountability for capacity building in low-performing schools, and finally, establishment of a new federal-state partnership.

This book is an excellent example of activist research. It must not only be read by educators, but also by local, state, and federal administrators and legislators. NCLB will most likely come up for reauthorization in 2014. We must begin the process of a critical dialogue regarding the current ineffectiveness of this law. This book provides the data to develop this dialogue as well as offering prescriptive solutions to provide *meaningful* educational opportunities to all children. Rebell and Wolff posit, “Half a century after the Supreme Court proclaimed *Brown v. Board of Education*, the reality that “it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he/she is denied the opportunity for an education,” it clearly is time to ensure that *meaningful* educational opportunities are not longer a

dream or a vision, but a reality for every child in the United States of America” (p. 155).

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