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## ***#No Child Left Behind or Every Teacher under Surveillance?: Revealing Patriarchal Ideologies of Surveillance and Control***

This paper addresses how the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act uses patriarchal control to paper over issues of inequalities in education. While NCLB is set up to “save” public schools, I argue that it fails both students and teachers: it does not attend to the structural reasons why poor children and children of color are left behind or even center these children in its reforms; instead, it relies on and furthers the feminization of teaching, using teachers as convenient scapegoats, and it leaves class and race privilege intact. Its central focus on “high quality teachers,” in conjunction with centralized policies of curriculum and pedagogy, targets and blames predominantly female teachers as workers, ultimately reproducing patriarchal relations. I examine three main discourses in the Act that reveal ideological underpinnings of surveillance and control—a “science”-to-the-rescue discourse that endlessly (and vaguely) calls for “scientifically-based” research, a discourse on assessment and measurable outcomes that serves to neutralize and naturalize capitalism, and a discourse around teacher quality. Although these all rely on and further a feminization of teaching and are interrelated, for the scope of this paper I focus only on the blaming discourse around needing better quality teachers.

### **The Feminization of Teaching**

An understanding of how teaching is a feminized, naturalized and devalued profession helps explain how discourses around “We need better teachers” are allowed to circulate; certain assumptions about teachers and teaching—that teaching is just glorified babysitting, for example—are part of the basis on which NCLB is written. Teaching has long been considered women's work or “woman's true profession” (Hoffman 1981), and there has been much scholarship on the feminization of teaching, including examinations of how teaching is devalued because of its connections to children and the unpaid work of mothering, how women's experiences get left out of educational theory, and how definitions of educational leadership are masculinist and schools are structured and managed

hierarchically (see, for examples, Shakeshaft 1989; Dunlap and Schmuck 1995; Weiler 1998). In discussing teaching and motherhood, women's supposed other “true” profession, Patricia Carter (2002) argues that the construction of women as natural caregivers allows women to be teachers: “Society at large generally believed women to be superior teachers, especially for the lower grades, reasoning that a biological predestination gave them a natural affinity for children” (100). Nancy Hoffman (1981), too, notes that early educational theorists “claimed that teaching unlocked woman's instinct for mothering and prepared her for marriage” (xvii). These ideas that teaching and mothering are basically one in the same, and that the fact that some women have the ability to give birth translates into an essentialist notion that all women are naturally inclined to care for and teach children are all part of the feminization of teaching. Although teaching was considered woman’s work long before NCLB came into being, NCLB relies on and continues the feminization of teaching through paternalistic surveillance, control and blame.

### **The Blame Game and the Discourses of Teacher Quality**

*Yes, we accept as a given that we need better teachers.*

—Melinda Gates, Co-Chair, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

A major stated focus of NCLB is “Preparing, training and recruiting high quality teachers and principals” (NCLB 1620). Although having excellent teachers is important, I argue that not only does NCLB poorly attempt to define and measure “high quality” teaching, but I argue that NCLB's discourse around teacher quality relies on and furthers the feminization of teaching and unfairly hold teachers responsible for the “savage inequalities” (Kozol 1991; 2005) in schooling, ultimately resulting in teachers' further loss of control and agency.

Legislation meant to ensure equal education for all children that focuses on improving teachers as much as NCLB does makes the assumption that teachers are somehow to blame for unequal levels of education. Focusing so eagerly on teachers as being responsible for the problems in public schools is a misplacement of criticism in three main ways. First, it detaches teachers from their occupational hierarchy in which they are often already in positions of little power and are subject to teach according

to pre-established curricula and practices, for example. Second, it erases the real reasons behind the savage inequalities in schools, namely systemic racism and the poverty upon which capitalism depends, and instead creates the fiction that teachers' supposed lack of motivation or skills causes the problems that plague our schools. Third, the discourse of needing better-qualified teachers fails to take into account the reasons why many people are not attracted to the profession, including low pay, long hours, low levels of respect, and unprofessional environments in which there is little opportunity for collaboration with colleagues, to name a few.

Present throughout NCLB is the assumption that teachers up until this point have not been teaching well, and if they would just be more skilled and of better quality, children would become better students. The Act's inclusion of a “teacher and principal training and recruiting fund” is meant to:

(1) increase student academic achievement through strategies such as improving teacher and principal quality and increasing the number of highly qualified teachers in the classroom and highly qualified principals and assistant principals in schools; and (2) hold local educational agencies and schools accountable for improvements in student academic achievement. (NCLB 1620)

This discourse ties academic achievement, which is state-defined, completely to teachers and principals; it functions to make the relationship between teacher quality and student test scores appear directly correlated, and it erases the possibility of other factors at work.

Teachers and principals are made exclusively responsible for students' successes and failures to such an extent that they are punished by the state for inadequate achievement. For instance, when a school has been identified as needing improvement and fails to make the State-defined “adequate yearly progress” or AYP for two years, the school will be identified for “corrective action” and must take one of the following measures:

(I) Replace the school staff who are relevant to the failure to make adequate yearly progress. (II) Institute and fully implement a new curriculum, including providing appropriate professional development for all relevant staff, that is based on scientifically based research and offers substantial promise of improving educational achievement for low-achieving students and enabling the school to make adequately yearly progress. (III) Significantly decrease management authority at the school level. (IV) Appoint an outside expert to advise the school on its progress toward making adequate yearly progress, based on its school plan... (V) Extend the school year or school day for the school. (NCLB

1484)

Rather than take into account the inequalities that exist in society, these sorts of punishments and additional confiscations of power away from educators at the local level negate that schools' savage inequalities in fact stem from systems of oppression that exist outside of schools, that are beyond teachers' control. Underlying all of these suggestions, from firing teachers to imposing curricula and management from the outside, is the ideology that teachers are either unable or unwilling to educate properly and deserve to be punished and further controlled.

While teachers are not always totally opposed to a system of accountability that includes incentives and sanctions, teachers in one study (Tracey 2005) “did believe that the NCLB sanctions were unfair,” and many teachers expressed their frustration at the idea that simply the threat of punishment would be enough to turn schools around (88). One teacher responded, “We are *dedicated* people that have been treated unfairly as a result of circumstances beyond our control. If I’m told I will lose my job, will that automatically make the scores go up?” (Tracey 2005, 88). NCLB's system of punishment assumes that teachers are the problem, and while sanctions and rewards might motivate teachers on some level to make improvements, the harsh realities in our public schools are not caused by a motivational problem.

Indeed, teachers are not seen by the legislators of NCLB as motivated, competent or as experts in and of themselves. While on the one hand teachers are seemingly expected to take on the responsibility of systemic inequalities, NCLB simultaneously sees teachers as needing constant supervision and intervention from the state and from outside “experts.” For example, NCLB includes suggestions to “bring mathematics and science teachers in elementary schools and secondary schools together with scientists, mathematicians, and engineers to increase the subject matter knowledge of mathematics and science teachers” and to “focus on the education of mathematics and science teachers

as a career-long process that continuously stimulates teachers' intellectual growth and upgrades teachers' knowledge and skills" (NCLB 1643). Such strategies rob teachers of any sense of professionalism or respect, and places even more obligations on teachers already stretched thin, tired, and underpaid (Moulthrop et al 2005).

NCLB's controlling and surveilling functions are not neutral but are steeped in and made possible by the constructions of gender. For instance, the Act states that it will achieve its goal of ensuring that all children have an equal education by, among other things, "(7) providing greater decisionmaking authority and flexibility to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance" (NCLB 1440). This discourse of granting more power in return for more responsibility reveals the paternalistic ideology of the state, never mind the fact that the so-called "flexibility" granted to teachers is not so flexible when we look at the scripted materials that teachers are required to use for curricula (See, for example, Wright Source materials at [thewrightsource.com](http://thewrightsource.com)). Rather than a professional who is capable of teaching without the watchful government, the teacher is infantilized and assumed either inept or purposefully unwilling to teach.

The ceaseless call throughout NCLB for high quality teachers, who should continually upgrade their teaching credentials and forever be held accountable for students' achievement scores, functions to divert attention away from the systemic, societal inequalities of racism, classism, sexism, heteronormativity, and so on. Interestingly however, NCLB simultaneously calls for those who have not been trained as educators to become teachers in programs like "Troops to Teachers" (NCLB 1648). Far from requiring teaching experience or a depth of knowledge about pedagogy, in order to be eligible for the "Troops to Teachers" program, "a member of the Armed Forces...[must] have received a baccalaureate or advanced degree from an accredited institution of higher education" (NCLB 1650). In addition to such programs advancing the mentality that anyone can teach, encouraging military members to become teachers is a rather direct method of making

sure schools follow the wishes of the militaristic, paternalistic state, and these former soldiers could conceivably act as military recruiters. Cynthia Enloe (2000) argues that the state has to consciously work to shape its citizens' beliefs about who belongs in the military and how masculinities and femininities function to shape those beliefs. However, whether the state does this consciously or not, it is worth understanding how ex-soldiers in the classroom can act as recruiters in various ways. In a sense, the Troops to Teachers program encourages the masculinist soldier to act as a disciplinary figure, watching over and controlling the feminized teachers.

### **Conclusion**

Although critiquing NCLB and then immediately offering quick solutions and alternatives to teachers is tempting, I want to caution against an emphasis on teachers as the object of “fixing,” as this reinscribes the notion that teachers are the only factor in the equation of educational problems. To recommend an alternative educational system other than NCLB in a sense replaces the “should” of NCLB with another “should.” Such a prescription unfairly places the responsibility back onto teachers' shoulders, diverts attention away from racism and poverty as root causes for the unequal educations children receive, and further feminizes teaching as a profession in need of rescue by an external source. I also want to remain suspicious of any suggestions that come from those in positions of more power than teachers, or from those in a non-educational context like business, and not from teachers or those working in coalition with teachers. Instead of prescribing solutions to teachers, my paper is an effort to direct our attentions to the underlying causes of educational inequalities like poverty and systemic racism that NCLB fails to address. We must be mindful of the ways that schools and educational legislation like NCLB rely on and help to maintain systems of domination. Any solutions must take into account the complicated set of pressures on schools, and solutions must be flexible and allow for the differences we find across classrooms, students and teachers.

Feminist (hooks 1994; Lather 1991; Weiler

1998; Mohanty 1994, 2003) and postmodern (Slattery 1995) educators argue against universalizing prescriptions like NCLB. bell hooks (1994), for instance, discusses pedagogical strategies in *Teaching to Transgress*, but she does not intend for them to be simple solutions to be instituted by all teachers everywhere: “Even though I share strategies, these works do not offer blueprints for ways to make the classroom an exciting place for learning. To do so would undermine the insistence that engaged pedagogy recognize each classroom as different, that strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience” (hooks 10-11). Indeed, fluidity, complexity and multiplicity are valued by these kinds of educators, so NCLB, as well as a controlling, rigid imposition of any kind, are considered inimical to any learning project. While it is problematic to somehow prescribe subversive practices to teachers to resist NCLB, it can be helpful to point to feminist and other educational theorists who promote other possibilities of what teaching and learning can look like.



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