Teaching to the Test: Public School Reality or Myth? A Review of Curriculum Changes and Teacher Attitudes Since the 2001 Enactment of No Child Left Behind

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Teaching to the Test: Public School Reality or Myth? A Review of Curriculum Changes and Teacher Attitudes Since the 2001 Enactment of No Child Left Behind

David Grant Helbig, Jr.

In 1965 the federal government of the United States passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This statute called for federal funding of primary and secondary schools. This funding was meant to cover the costs of educational needs ranging from instructional material to professional development. This legislation could have expired in 1970; however, it has been reauthorized and reworked approximately every five years. For example, in 1994 the act was reauthorized as the Improving America’s Schools Act. This renewed version of the legislation called for greater support for disadvantaged students and funding for bilingual education.

The 2001 renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was titled No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This legislation was enacted in part to ensure that all students receive a high quality education. This legislation attempts to ensure this by holding individual schools, school districts, and teachers accountable for their pupils’ performance. As currently constituted, NCLB sets the expectation that all students can and will perform at their appropriate grade level in mathematics and reading. The legislation mandated each school to create and administer assessments to measure student levels of progress. This is often done through standardized testing. If a school is unable to bring their students up to the expected grade level standards, that school can be labeled as failing or in need of improvement. When a school is labeled as failing, or in need of improvement, it can lose federal funding. Furthermore, the parents of the students in that school have the option to have their children sent to a school that has not been marked as failing or in need of improvement. If a failing school is unable to improve its status, it could be closed.

The federal government’s focus on providing high quality education to all students was in part due to an achievement gap between various subgroups of students. An achievement gap can be described as the disparity in academic achievement between students found within subgroups, such as those based on gender, race or economic status. In the United States, there are significant achievement gaps between some of the students in some of the subgroups. Achievement gaps can also be found when comparing the performance of particular subgroups to other subgroups.

Along with its focus on achievement gaps, NCLB also supports curriculum reform. The legislation calls for research and implementation of educational methods that have been determined to be effective through scientific research. This focus on scientifically proven teaching methods would be likely to cause a purposeful shift in curriculum and instruction. Critics of high stakes standardized testing feel that this legislation has caused an unintended shift in curriculum and instruction. These critics, some of them being teachers, claim that the focus of curriculum and instruction have shifted from presenting the students with a topic or subject, to training the students how to pass a test in a particular subject area. Critics have labeled its practice “teaching to the test.”

At this time, NCLB does not require that schools test their students for progress in the subjects of science or social studies. This has created situations where these subjects have been deemed less important than mathematics and language arts. Some elementary school teachers now teach alternating units of science and social studies. In other schools these subjects are not addressed in elementary school classrooms until after the mandated standardized tests have been administered. This is done so teachers are able to dedicate all of their classroom time to subjects that students will be tested on.

This study did not attempt to judge the effectiveness or appropriateness of the NCLB legislation. The research objective of this study was to examine changes to curriculum and instruction since NCLB was enacted. This examination was limited to the curriculum and instruction of language arts and mathematics and when applicable, the reduction, delay or removal of academic areas such as science and social studies. Through the course of each interview, the participants began to share their feelings and opinions on the topics. Since teachers attitudes and opinions could have an effect on instruction, that information was noted and reported on in the findings of this study.

This study was carried out by conducting nine structured interviews with elementary school teachers in towns surrounding Danbury, Connecticut. A separate meeting took place with each teacher. Hand written field notes were utilized for record keeping purposes. The participating teachers were asked questions regarding lesson plan objectives, time spent on individual academic subjects, consistency of subject presentation, one on one time (one teacher and one student), test prep, group work time,
teacher autonomy, and teaching to the test. Most of the questions asked the participants to compare these topics as there were at the time of the interview as compared to previous school years.

**Literature Review**

"With the progress of globalization and the growth of competition between communities, the education of future generations is attracting critical attention (Cankoy, Osman and Mehmet Ali Tut 2005)." With that sentence, the authors of "High-Stakes Testing and Mathematics Performance of Fourth Graders in North Cyprus," a study that will be detailed later, explained why education and curriculum reform have become global hot button issues. The studies detailed here include aspects of high stakes testing and curriculum shifts. While none of them mirror my methodology or objectives, they are able to provide insight into the magnitude of high stakes testing and curricular shifts. These studies include information on curriculum effectiveness, teaching to the test, student and teacher opinions regarding NCLB and curriculum shifts. These studies also indicate that standardized testing and curriculum reforms are issues that affect all students and teachers; whether they are located in the United States or in other nations, or attending school in affluent, poor, rural, suburban or inner city communities.

In "Test Preparation in New Jersey" (Firestone et al. 2004) the researchers attempted to "describe the effects on instruction of the first three years of implementation of new state tests in mathematics and science for nine-year-olds in New Jersey (67)." This study was designed to determine if high stakes testing caused fundamental changes to classroom instruction, or created a pressure filled environment where classroom teachers resort to what critics refer to as "teaching to the test." Supporters of high stakes testing feel that sanctions need to be attached to the tests so that educators will take them seriously, but opponents say that such pressure leads to the most deleterious effects of testing (67)."

Firestone employed a two-tiered approach.

To obtain information that would allow us to make general statements about teaching in the state, we relied heavily on teacher surveys. However, because the validity of self-reports on teaching practice is often suspect, we supplemented the surveys with a smaller sample of teachers who were both observed and interviewed. The survey was conducted in the springs of 1999, 2000 and 2001. To ensure that the study was representative of New Jersey's total population, the researchers drew their sample of fourth grade classrooms from all eight of the states District Factor Groups (DFG). (70)

DFG is the state's measure of district wealth. "To reflect the pressure associated with high stakes, we developed a measure that asked teachers to respond to five Likert items on a 4-point scale running from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' with items like 'when I design lessons and activities in math and science, it is understood that an important goal is to raise ESPA scores (72)." The smaller sample of teachers that were observed and interviewed were selected from the teachers that replied to the initial survey and who taught in school districts that were currently committed to professional development. Observations were performed by researchers who "kept a running record of the events in the classroom, focusing on the activities of the teacher as well as capturing the activities of students" (74). After the lesson was completed, the researcher would interview the teacher about the lesson and how it was related to future standardized tests.

While the researchers observed both mathematics and science lessons being presented, they chose to only report on their findings that related to mathematics instruction. The report indicates that two methods of instruction were featured in the classrooms. In periods leading up to a state test, "[a] pattern emerged that suggests a strong association of short-term, de-contextualized test preparation activities. . ." (74). This practice could be considered teaching to the test. The study also found that instruction occurring in non test-prep periods featured inquiry-oriented approaches.

"Teachers' Views on Recent Curriculum Changes" (Flores 2005) is a report that details the opinions of elementary school teachers towards shifts in the curriculum. In Portugal, elementary school curriculum has shifted from a narrow, highly centralized program to a situation where teachers are encouraged and expected to develop and deliver their own curriculum and instruction. This study also focused on those same teachers sense of professionalism related to the new curriculum.

This study was conducted during the 2002-2003 school year. Semi-Structured interviews were conducted and used to collect data from forty-five teachers and administrators. The researchers used a Likert Scale to gauge the participants' opinions regarding curriculum changes, professionalism and school culture. Three open-ended questions regarding the nature of teaching were also included.
The results were mixed. While teachers appreciated the increased flexibility in their lessons, they felt the changes were forced upon them. Common teacher concerns included but were not limited to: not enough teacher training, lack of resources, increased time working, and expanded bureaucracy. Further teacher concerns focused on the new curriculum's ambiguity and complexity.

**Methodology**

The intent of this study was to examine curriculum changes in elementary schools since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind legislation. After the conclusion of the interview stage, an analysis of the research allowed for the recognition of recurring themes. Special attention was given changes in literacy curriculum, mathematics curriculum, science curriculum, social studies curriculum, and teacher attitudes. I attempted to recognize trends such as fundamental curricular changes, time spent on individual subjects, changes to the frequency at which subjects are presented and as previously noted, and teacher's attitudes. Results from the study could contribute to the overall understanding of a typical elementary school classroom and the curriculum trends that can be found in those classrooms. Furthermore, the themes recognized in this research could provide the foundation for future similar or more comprehensive research.

The subjects interviewed for this study were elementary school teachers from towns surrounding Danbury, Connecticut. Since the objective of this research was to explore curriculum changes that have occurred in the years following the enactment of the No Child Left Behind in 2001, only teachers with at least seven years of teaching experience were included in this study. Due to the fluid nature of curriculum, it is difficult to determine the factors that caused curricular changes. For that reason, it is inappropriate to directly attribute any curriculum shifts to the NCLB legislation. Therefore, all curricular shifts found during this research, that have occurred since NCLB’s enactment in 2001 have been considered; however this study did not attempt to conclude that any of the changes were caused specifically by the NCLB legislation.

Given the time and resource constraints, a small locally found sample was determined to be best for this study. Several of the interviewees were contacted and included because along with fitting the necessary criteria to participate, they already had a pre-existing relationship with me. After interviewing those candidates, a snowball method was employed to gain further interviews. One of the interviewees was contacted randomly through e-mail. That teacher later provided contact info for another qualified teacher who was later interviewed.

The following table represents the significant variable characteristics of each participant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Name*</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Years Taught</th>
<th>Grade Taught</th>
<th>Town</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30 - 35</td>
<td>7 - 10</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Town One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55 - 60</td>
<td>30 - 35</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Town Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35 - 40</td>
<td>7 - 10</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Town Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30 - 35</td>
<td>7 - 10</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Town One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50 - 55</td>
<td>7 - 10</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Town Two</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>7 - 10</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Town Three</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
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<td>30 - 35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
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<td>Town Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50 - 55</td>
<td>30 - 35</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Town Two</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*For purposes of confidentiality, the names of participants have been changed.
This study included nine participants. Seven of the nine participants were female. This unbalanced representation of females and males in the study was not intentionally included. However, given the unbalanced representation of male teachers in elementary schools, this ratio is acceptable. In the schools that I visited during the interview process, the unbalanced ratio of female to male teachers was even greater than this survey represents.

The method employed by this study was structured interviewing. Interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to seventy-five minutes. One interview had to be split into two sessions. The participants work schedules prohibited the interviews from running any longer than they did. Each participant was asked fifteen open-ended questions. The participants were all interviewed in person. Field notes were kept to record the participant’s answers.

Findings

The process of reviewing the collected data revealed four central themes: shifts in literacy curriculum, shifts in mathematics curriculum, shifts in science and social studies curriculums, and the rationalizations, attitudes and contradictions found during teacher interview. These themes are discussed, individually and in detail in the following subsections.

Shifts in Literacy Curriculum

While all of the interviewees were asked about changes in the amount of time spent on language arts, very few were able to quantify those time changes. Rather than indicate a percentage change for time spent on language arts increasing or decreasing, some of the participants chose to provide a breakdown of the time spent on language arts. For example, Faith, a second grade teacher explained that she chose to spend forty-five minutes to one hour on writers’ workshop, three to four times a day. She also attempted to spend anywhere from forty-five minutes to two hours daily on readers’ workshop. It should be noted that science and or social studies curriculum would often become integrated into those writers’ and readers’ workshops.

If those teachers did not specifically mention either of these instruction methods, they referenced components of them during their interviews. Faith, as mentioned earlier detailed how much time she spends on these two instruction methods. Erin, a second grade teacher, and Irene, a first grade teacher, both mentioned modeling multiple times during their interviews. Erin, felt that modeling was such an integral part of instruction that she touched it when asked about her lesson plan objectives. Modeling involves a teacher demonstrating a specific skill or concept to their students. Teacher modeling would often be found in the mini-lessons that start each readers’ or writers’ workshop. Modeling will often include visual and audio cues for the students to follow. Irene spoke about encouraging student participation and fostering an environment where students are excited to contribute because they see the teacher is enthusiastic.

Irene added that she was modeling behaviors and skills that “are specific skills that are taught now that will not have been taught before. These are skills that will be used when taking the CMT’s, techniques for test taking.” CMT’s is short for Connecticut Mastery Tests. The CMT’s are the standardized tests used by the state of Connecticut.

Adam, a fourth grade teacher, mentioned the reciprocal teaching model when asked about the amount of time he spent instructing on language arts. The reciprocal teaching model consists of a teacher leading his or her students through four learning stages; summarizing, questioning, clarifying and predicting. These stages are built into the mini-lessons, reading or writing and eventual sharing found in readers’ and writers’ workshops.

According to Irene, readers’ and writers’ workshops are “the cutting edge of literacy development” and are the methods being taught to pre-service teachers. Furthermore, she felt these methods are becoming universally accepted. She explained that in the past much of the instruction that she and other teachers used was based in whole language philosophy.

Whole language instruction teaches students to read and write by focusing on entire texts. Students are exposed to full text rather than working up to that stage using multiple steps. In this part of the country, whole language is no longer a widely accepted philosophy or instruction method.

During their interviews, Adam, Irene and Erin mentioned guided reading. Guided reading involves dividing students in to groups that are usually determined by achievement level or learning style. This instruction method allows the teacher to provide differentiated instruction to multiple groups of students. Differentiated instruction involves using multiple teaching strategies to instruct students with different levels of ability and different learning styles. Guided reading can be used as its own literacy curriculum or partnered with other instructional styles.
Guided reading uses a structured schedule similar to that of readers’ workshop. The lesson begins with a ten to fifteen minute lesson. This period allows the teacher to instruct on reading strategies. These strategies include but are not limited to echoed reading, dissecting context for clues, and applying letter and word knowledge. The students then meet with their predetermined groups for fifteen to twenty minutes of reading with the teacher or another supervisory figure. It is expected that the students will begin to use the previously presented reading strategies during these group sessions. The final stage of the lesson involves five to ten minutes of teacher lead activity. This can involve discussion led by the teacher, acting or even a writing activity related to the reading.

Shifts in Mathematics Curriculum

When the participants were asked if the amount of time they dedicated to mathematics had changed, they provided varied answers, but their answers were not inconsistent. None of the teachers that provided a measurement of how long they instructed on mathematics; claimed they spent less than sixty minutes per day on the subject. Gina, a third grade teacher, told me that she used to spend ninety minutes on math by choice, but was now dedicating ninety minutes by necessity. Heather, a third grade teacher, and Irene have both increased the amount of math instruction to at least sixty minutes per day.

Six of the nine participants taught in the same school. That school and all the elementary schools in that school district adopted a new math curriculum at the beginning of the 2006-07 academic years. That school district changed from the Everyday Math curriculum to a curriculum designed by Saxon Math.

According to Irene, Everyday Math employed a spiraling curriculum. In a spiraling curriculum a skill will be introduced and addressed for one or two days. After those lessons, the skill would not be addressed again for two weeks. After that time had passed, the skill would be re-visited and expanded upon.

She also explained that Everyday Math was very “hands-on.” This curriculum, used games, activities and group work to introduce the skills needed for each lesson. The spiraling curriculum and the emphasis on games caused an issue for some parents. Many of them could not understand the spiraling format, while others could not pick up the nuances of the activities and viewed them as play-like activities. Gina also stated that many parents did not understand the Everyday Math curriculum.

Irene also provided the most in depth review of the new mathematics program, Saxon Math. She said that Saxon employs a more traditional approach, tending to be based on memorization and repeated drills. Two of Saxon's major instructional methods are the use of bulletin boards and worksheets. Each class has a bulletin board dedicated to math. At some point during the day, the teacher will lead the class in a lesson in front of the board. The boards feature grade appropriate number patterns, calendars, and money themed activities. Student also spend part of their in class time working on worksheets that emphasize a skill through patterns and repetition.

Saxon Math is designed so that the students were assessed after every five lessons. Erin made it clear that these were not tests, but assessments. Irene said they were tests that were graded and used to benchmark student progress. Regardless of how the teachers perceived these activities, they were happening much more frequently this academic year than in previous years. Irene claimed that in the past, she only tested her students three times per academic year.

When asked about their level of autonomy in the current school year as compared to previous school years, Adam and Donna, who teach in the same school, both admitted that they had less autonomy. Adam felt that there was more uniformity between all of the classrooms now. Donna noted that in the past, she was allowed to choose her own mathematics curriculum, but as of the current school year that choice was made for her. Beth, who teaches at a different school than Adam and Donna, also felt as though she had been forced to give up some of her autonomy in regards to her mathematics instruction.

Shifts in Science Curriculum and Social Studies Curriculum

Unfortunately, due to the increased emphasis on literacy and mathematics, some teachers are spending less time on science and social studies. While not every elementary school or every teacher has cut back on science or social studies, enough of them have made adjustments to the instruction of these two subjects that the changes warrant consideration. Overall, the participants felt that adjusted science and social studies curriculums were not kid friendly, integrated into the language arts programs, covered in alternating blocks, and in part, geared towards standardized testing.

Most of the participants claimed that science and social studies were presented to their classes by integrating the relevant
subject matter into the language arts program. This allowed their students to be exposed to the subject matter without taking away from the time dedicated to mathematics or literacy. Adam said that he uses non-fiction books to incorporate the two subjects into his schedule. Beth, Erin, Gina and Heather all told me that science and social studies are woven into the language arts curriculum.

None of the participants present both science and social studies at the same time throughout the entire school year. Faith described a model for covering these two subjects that seemed to appear in several of the participants’ classrooms. In her class, Faith has broken the year into four rotating blocks. Science and social studies are each presented in two of those blocks. At the start of the year, Faith might present science. During that block, there is no social studies instruction. When that first science block is completed, the class will move into a social studies block. After completing the social studies block, a second science block begins. The fourth and final block would then be dedicated exclusively to social studies.

None of the participants felt that they spent any more time on science or social studies than they had in the past. However, two of the teachers, Adam and Faith commented that more time would be spent on science in the future because achievement in science will soon be tested for on the Connecticut Mastery Tests. Gina and Heather said that the time spent on science had decreased despite the fact they were instructing their students with the “wet paper test.” The wet paper test was according to Gina, was “an embedded science task... designed to expose the students to the scientific method... took several lessons...” and was quite time consuming. This activity was geared towards future science testing on the CMT’s.

When asked about changes in the amount of time dedicated to science in her classroom, Donna explained that she tries not to short change the subject, but more often than not, she had not been able to dedicate as much time as she had in the past. She also noted that she had stopped all science instruction as her class approached CMT’s. Heather said that she was told by her administration to stop science instruction in the time leading up to the state tests.

When asked specifically about the amount of time spent on social studies, Chris explained that he incorporates the topic all year. No other teacher claimed to do the same. To contrast Chris’s answer, Erin explained in her school and classroom, social studies instruction was “low on the totem pole.” On a similar note, Donna said that social studies instruction was “definitely her lowest priority” and was not covered all year maybe even just “once a week.”

Overall, these topics had become “not as kid friendly” according to Chris. Heather noted that she has less time for her students to engage in creative work, and that she has lost her flexibility and creativity in lesson planning. Irene explained that she was asked to present new science topics this year that were “not always kid friendly.” And that she had less time for projects.

Irene also explained that the new science curriculums had shifted away from the traditional focus on the five W’s: Who, What, Where, When and Why. The new curriculum now focused on comparing and contrasting. The process of relating one situation to another became the focus because future CMT science questions will be asking students to compare and contrast activities.

**Attitudes, Contradictions and Rationalizations**

Only two of the questions included in the interviews were designed to gauge the participants’ opinions or attitudes. Question fourteen asked the participants if they felt as though they had less autonomy. Question fifteen asked the participants if they felt as though they were “teaching to the test.” While these two questions provided meaningful insight into how the teachers felt about their level of autonomy and their perceived level of “teaching to the test,” the first thirteen questions tended to evoke responses that displayed among other things how the teachers felt about curriculum changes, and how the teachers rationalized the changes to instruction and curriculum. Surprisingly, analysis of the teachers’ responses also revealed an unexpected response and numerous contradictions within individual interviews.

Through the course of each interview, some of the teacher’s personality traits began to show. Most of the time, they would elaborate with their answers and provide information for extra questions that might be raised. Some of teachers were prone to short answers. More often than not, the participants were very eager to answer all the questions. It was when the participants began to expand their answers that the attitudes, contradictions and rationalizations appeared.

As previously stated in the methodology section, question fifteen provided the participants with a definition for the term “teaching to test.” The following sentence was read to each participant: “Critics of aligning classroom curriculum with the standardized tests have defined that practice as teaching to the test.” Despite having that definition provided, several of the participants felt that the changes that have occurred in their classroom, should not be considered “teaching to the test.”
When asked if she had less autonomy than she had in previous years, Beth provided a solemn one-word answer, “Yes.” She also felt that the amount of time she was able to dedicate to science and social studies had decreased, and those subjects were not covered all year. Despite those changes and an increase in the amount of homework she had to assign, Beth did not think that she was “teaching to the test.” Rather than viewing her actions as “teaching to the test,” Beth felt that she was “covering the bases so kids are ready,” and trying to “introduce areas the kids will meet.”

An example of a teacher who contradicted herself but did not deny “teaching to the test” was Faith. When asked if she felt the way lessons were presented had changed, Faith replied “Not here,” referring to her entire school district. With her next sentence, she told me that the district had moved their CMT prep sessions from “September or October to January through March.” Later in the interview, when asked if she had less autonomy than in previous years, she said she had less and that she does not “get to be as creative.” She provided her example about the museums that she used to allow her class to create and added that there is less “fun time.” Despite not feeling as though her lessons have changed, she did not deny “teaching to the test” saying that “happens everywhere.” She added that tests are a bigger issue this year than in the past and that the tests are not really testing learning.

Two teachers that readily admitted that curriculum had changed and that they were “teaching to the test” were Gina and Heather. When asked if the way they presented lessons had changed, Gina said no, but noted a shift towards requiring open-ended responses. Heather felt that her lesson plans had changed. She said that they were “not as original” and added that teachers are losing their flexibility and creativity in lesson planning and that lessons are now more regimented. Gina and Heather both felt as though they had less autonomy than in previous years. When asked, Gina said, “Yes. It is dictated what to do, and when to do it,” and added that curriculum is state driven. Heather said that she had “less ability to make her own decisions.” When asked if she was “teaching to the test,” Gina said, “We are expected to do this. Workshops teach this.” During the interview with Heather, she said, “Yes, I am teaching to the test. Nobody wants to be singled out in front of their peers for not succeeding. Teachers are being tracked for their student tests. Teachers might be doing what the administration wants, but poor test scores could lead to reprimanding.”

I think that the answers provided by Gina, Heather and Irene are interesting because of the similarities found in the answers and the similarities between these teachers. All three were veteran female teachers with comparable amounts of experience. I think that Gina, Heather and Irene were comfortable enough with their status as teachers to admit that they are “teaching to the test.” Whereas younger teachers like Adam, Donna and Faith were more reluctant to admit that it was happening in their classrooms. I am not sure why Irene was the only veteran teacher who saw improvement in her classroom instruction. Of all the teachers interviewed, Irene tended to provide the most in depth and insightful responses to the interview questions, therefore I would speculate that Irene was either more confident as a teacher or more in touch with the curriculum that she presented.

**Conclusion**

The curriculum changes detailed by the participants were along the lines of what I expected to hear. I expected the teachers to explain that an emphasis was being placed on literacy curriculum (reading and writing). The teachers detailed the readers’ and writers’ workshops that they now use in their classes and confirmed that they spent as much, if not more, time on those subjects as compared to previous years. I expected that the teachers would all say that they spent more time on math than in the past. Most of the teachers did state that there was a renewed focus on math. Several mentioned that they spent more class time on math and assigned more math homework than they used to.

I was pleasantly surprised at some of the feedback I received in regards to science and social studies. I expected that teachers would tell me there was no time for these subjects and they received almost no coverage. I also expected that some teachers would tell me they did not instruct on these topics until after the Connecticut Mastery Tests were completed. While the teachers did not have a lot of time for these two topics, most of them attempted to cover them both during the year, even if they could only address one or the other during certain periods. As a pre-service teacher, I was not aware that most teachers had integrated their science and social studies curricula into their literacy curricula. This integration has allowed the teachers to keep science and social studies as part of their classroom.

I also expected that the teachers would tell me that they were teaching test taking strategies and techniques. While this was
not as stressed as I thought it would be, it was brought up in a few of the interviews. The teachers that spoke about test strategies did not say that they prepared any differently for traditional tests. The changes they alluded to were regarding test taking skills and strategies for the Connecticut Mastery Tests.

I expected more teachers to criticize the No Child Left Behind legislation and the changes that occurred in their classrooms. For the most part, the teachers did not offer comments or opinions regarding NCLB. I did not design any questions that specifically asked the participants to provide their opinions on the legislation itself; rather the questions focused on the way the legislation affected their lesson plans. I designed the questionnaire knowing that the teachers were likely to provide expansive answers. I expected that almost any of the fifteen questions would have brought out a statement about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the legislation.

I did not expect that the participants would have difficulty admitting that they were “teaching to the test.” Three of nine teachers denied that it was happening in their classrooms. These three participants rationalized that the changes were a result of changing curriculum, changing standards, or felt that since their grade level did not partake in standardized testing, they could not be “teaching to the test.” Two of the teachers wavered between answering yes and no when asked if they were “teaching to the test.” These participants seemed to realize that the way they conducted their classroom had changed, but did not want to admit that the decision to change was made for them.

Four of the nine participants were willing to admit that they were “teaching to the test.” Three of these four were veteran teachers, each of them having approximately thirty years of teaching experience. I think that their experience in the classroom provided them with the confidence to admit that they were “teaching to the test.” I also think that their vast experiences and knowledge made it impossible for them to ignore the changes that had occurred. The fourth teacher who admitted that she was “teaching to the test” had nearly ten years of teaching experience. I believe that she was willing to admit that she was “teaching to the test” because she had become somewhat disgruntled with her current teaching situation.

A post research review of the studies detailed in the literature review included in this paper revealed very little connection between those studies and this study. “Test Preparation in New Jersey” (Firestone 2004) found that two types of instruction were being used in the classroom. That study found that in non-test preparation periods, the instruction focused on inquiry-oriented approaches to the materials. During the periods in which the focus of instruction has shifted from traditional instruction to test preparation, the instruction emphasized “short-term, de-contextualized test preparation activities.”

“Teachers’ Views on Recent Curriculum Changes” (Flores 2005) had some findings that related to my study. Some of the teachers in that study were concerned with a lack of teacher training. One of the participants in my study expressed a concern that teachers were not prepared for the new methods of instruction that they were expected to use.

Since the participants in this study were not randomly selected and were concentrated in one area, this study cannot be considered as representative of all elementary school classrooms, or even representative of all the classes in the schools I visited. Most of the participants were involved because they had a pre-existing relationship with me. The sample was predominantly female and all the participants were Caucasian. This study was limited by its’ original intentions. I set up the questions and interviews to examine changes in curriculum and instruction, and to a lesser degree, teacher attitudes. There was no attempt to judge the effectiveness or appropriateness of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Furthermore this study did not attempt to determine the effects of curriculum changes on student performance. Despite its’ narrow focus, this study has provided valuable insight into curriculum shifts and teacher attitudes regarding those shifts.
References


