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COMMENTARY

NCLB data-driven reform movement: Contextualizing data

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The article of Rosita L. Rivera Rodriguez, [Leaving most Latino children behind: No Child Left Behind legislation, testing, and the misuse of data under George Bush administration](#), published in this number of DataCritica, raises a series of important concerns for educators as it applies to the deleterious effects of educational policy in marginalized communities, such as the Latino population. To better understand the arguments of Rivera-Rodriguez, I would like to place the No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) within its broader context.

The standards-based reform movement began as far back as the early 20th century when early curriculum theorists like Ellwood Cubberley and others attempted to align school curriculum to the needs and demands of the U. S. economy by developing a “scientific approach” to designing and planning school curriculum. From the 1950s to the 1970s, with the Cold War in full swing, the “back to basics” movement gained momentum in teacher education programs and graduate schools of education. Once again, supporters of the movement were determined to make certain that school curriculum reflected not only the ideologies and political views of the dominant groups in the United States, but that it also prepared students for employment in the growing military industrial complex to defend the country against the so-called “communist threat” ([Sleeter, 2005](#)).

The origins of the current standards-based movement can be traced back to the *Nation at Risk* report published in 1983. The report blamed schools for the weak economic performance of the United States against its Asian and European rivals. The driving forces behind the recent educational policies of the *No Child Left Behind* act passed in 2001 can be tied to the neoliberal social and economic policies that support flexibility, efficiency, outsourcing, and downsizing methods of production.

Under the neoliberal social and economic model, schools must perform much like corporations: raising productivity while reducing costs to increase profitability. And while schools are not intended to be profitable, neoliberalism forces schools to adopt a business model of education ([McLaren & Farahmandpur,](#)

[2001](#)). Hence, just as the Dow Jones Industrial Average measures the performance of companies and represents the pulse of Wall Street, so too the Adequate Yearly Progress (A.Y.P.) report rates and ranks the performance of public schools. One understated consequence of the *No Child Left Behind* laws is that the state can indefinitely close or restructure “underperforming schools” that fail to meet the requirements established by the A.Y.P.

Under the NCLB’s data-driven education reform movement, there is an inordinate emphasis on testing, resulting in a teaching-to-the-test mania, strict accountability schemes, prepackaged and scripted teaching for students of color, and a frenetic push towards more standardized testing (what Jonathan Kozol refers to as “desperation strategies that have come out of the acceptance of inequality”) has been abundantly present since the mid-1990s. But what has this trend produced? According to [Kozol \(2005\)](#), since the early 1990s, the achievement gap between black and white children has substantially widened at about the same time as we began to witness the growing resegregation of the schools (when the courts began to disregard the mandates of the Brown decision). This has led to what Kozol calls “apartheid schooling,” the statistical data is undeniable. Today more than 48% of high schools in the country’s largest districts (those that have the highest concentrations of black and Latina/o students) have less than half of the entering ninth-graders graduating in four years. Between 1993 and 2002, there has been a 75% increase in the number of high schools graduating less than half of their ninth grade high school class in four years. In the 94% of districts in New York State where the majority of the students are white, nearly 80 percent of students graduate from high school in four years. In the 6 percent of districts where Black and Latina/o students make up the majority, the percentage is considerably less—approximately 40%. There are 120 high schools in New York (enrolling nearly 200,000 minority students) where less than 60% of entering ninth-graders make it to the twelfth grade.

Thus, as educators we need to deconstruct, question and seriously challenge the ideological

underpinnings of NCLB data-driven reform movement that uses the discourse of “scientific method,” “objectivity,” “positivism,” and “empiricism” to test and measure the knowledge, skills and experiences of students, especially students of color.

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Ramin Farahmandpur completed his Ph.D. in Curriculum Theory and Teaching Studies from the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. His scholarship focuses on the relationship between schools and society. Dr. Farahmandpur's work examines how social, political, economic and cultural forces shape and influence public education. He has written and published extensively on a wide range of issues and topics, including multicultural education, neoliberalism, imperialism, globalization and critical pedagogy. His most recent book is entitled Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism (2005).

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