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# Teaching to the Test: How Federal Mandates Affect Elementary Educators' Teaching Styles

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## ABSTRACT

Recent mandates created by the federal government have placed a large emphasis on standardized testing in elementary schools. Educators now face the challenge of how to best prepare their students for these tests. In this qualitative case study research project, I collected data from four third grade teachers to determine how recent governmental laws impact their teaching styles; in this article I tell the story of two of those teachers. Interviews and classroom observations were conducted in a medium-sized, public elementary school outside a large metropolitan city in the Southeast. Preferred and perceived teaching styles as reported by the teachers during interviews were compared with their actual teaching styles as evidenced during observations. Results suggest that government mandates are affecting teaching styles directly and indirectly. It appears that government mandates have had a negative impact on teachers, their preferred styles of teaching, what curricula are emphasized, and how the curricula are taught.

**Keywords:** elementary, education, teaching styles, learning styles, standardized testing, No Child Left Behind Act

## Background

The face of education has been changing, specifically in elementary schools, where lessons have become standards-based and achievement is measured primarily by assessment (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). The government passes mandates, such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, in attempts to improve student performance and raise the quality of education in America. Instruction and learning that occur in the classroom ultimately lie at the heart of education, but these are being impacted by the frequent and numerous changes in the field of education. Children's author and former teacher Phil Bildner apologized for the seemingly ongoing national assault on teachers while presenting at the Annual Conference on Literature for Children and Young Adults at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw,

Georgia (Bildner, notes from a keynote address, March 2011). He hoped that the standards movement with test-driven instruction would eventually pass because of the corresponding negativity directed toward education.

A closer look into how modes of instruction are affected by modern changes in education may give current elementary school teachers an opportunity to reflect on their teaching styles as well as any restrictions or limitations they face in the classroom. Upon doing so, they may be given more power to implement the most beneficial, effective teaching style possible for their students. Similarly, prospective teachers may be able to reflect on what could be the best teaching styles given today's regulations and restrictions. Then, students will directly benefit from the optimal instruction provided by their

teachers and experience maximum learning. In addition, policy-makers at the local, state, and national levels could examine first-hand accounts of the effects of the policies they created or supported in the classroom.

The goal of this study was to consider and analyze the impact of current-day issues related to education in elementary school classrooms within the context of the No Child Left Behind Act and how these issues affect educators' teaching styles. Some issues facing teachers include demands induced by required testing, standards, and other federal mandates; the seeming return to the "Three Rs," namely reading, writing, and arithmetic; the consequential reduction or elimination of other subjects; accountability for test scores; and reduction of teacher autonomy within the classroom. These facets of what now comprise the modern field of education are all interrelated and may play a role in how teachers provide instruction in the classroom.

### **Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to focus specifically on the impact that the No Child Left Behind Act has on elementary teachers' perceived and actual teaching styles. The researcher investigated the following question: How are current governmental and policy mandates in elementary education affecting teaching styles? Specifically, the researcher explored this question within the context of four third grade teachers and their classrooms, and in this article, I present the results from two of those teachers. An important item of consideration was whether teachers were able to implement their ideal methods of teaching; if not, the degree of variation to the actual teaching styles was examined.

### **No Child Left Behind**

According to President Barack Obama, "We know that from the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success ... is the teacher standing at the front of the classroom" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b, para. 1). The significance of the teacher in education does not always seem eminent when one examines recent mandates passed and enacted in the United States, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Over the past decade, this highly controversial act has caused schools across the nation to place great emphasis on assessing students, as delineated in the act itself (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). Schools are held accountable to the federal government to report test score data, and the government implements measures and sanctions to raise scores in repeatedly low-performing schools. Schools are expected to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which is a measurement of students meeting or exceeding state standards, and schools that do not meet AYP must implement approved improvement plans. Priority has been redirected to math, reading, and writing - the most prominent areas on standardized tests. The great focus on testing students has been labeled "teaching to the test" (Popham, 2001, p. 16), and teachers have felt pressure to teach from test preparation materials for several months prior to administering their state's standardized tests.

### **Assessments and Standards**

In Georgia specifically, the state's Department of Education (DOE) identifies six main assessments administered in its public schools. The following apply to third grade: Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), Writing, Criterion-Referenced

Competency Tests-Modified (CRCT-M), and Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) (Georgia Department of Education, 2010). According to the DOE, every student must partake in the mandated standardized testing, regardless of ability and native language background, so the CRCT-M and GAA are offered as alternatives for a marginal percentage of students in special education. The GAA is available to only 1% of students in special education; therefore, the majority of students in special education must take the same test as the one administered to students in the general education population. The DOE has also published the statewide Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) as a way to unify curriculum among its schools and clearly indicate what students are expected to learn for each subject and in each grade (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). Teachers are expected to teach the content of the standards, and instructional tools are provided on the GPS website. According to W. D. Hawley, “the use of the current AYP method... [is] likely to narrow curriculum” (2008, p. 185). Georgia’s standards have changed the focus of curriculum from depth to breadth in order to address the potential items to be included on standardized tests. In other words, a wide amount of content is expected to be covered in a given school year, and as a result, each topic will be studied at a shallower level. The state’s standardized assessments are required to correlate with the curriculum spelled out in the standards, so inevitably, teachers are “teaching to the test.”

### Student Learning

The methods by which students learn vary from classroom to classroom, depending on the role the teacher fills and how this role is executed in the classroom. Denise Beutel (2010) identifies a continuum

of five types of pedagogic teacher-student interactions: information providing, instructing, facilitating, guided participation, and mentoring. In *information providing*, teachers use direct instruction to deliver knowledge to the students, who are later expected to reproduce the information in exams or other assessment method. According to Beutel (2010), under *instructing*, teachers utilize a wider range of activities to guide children “in the acquisition and application of skills” (p. 81). This category is marked largely by teacher-directed lessons and a focus on the subject matter. The third category, *facilitating*, focuses on depth of student learning, and teachers focus on teaching students rather than teaching skills. Students are viewed and treated as active participants in the learning process, as evidenced by the amount of discussion in a classroom under a facilitating teacher. In *guided participation*, the focus is also on depth and quality of student learning; however, teachers desire for students to take responsibility for their own learning. Work and activities are more often student-directed, and students are provided with various opportunities to create their own learning experiences. In the fifth and final category, *mentoring*, teachers and students develop close, long-term partnerships in which students and teachers are partners in the learning process as well as active members in one another’s lives. Teachers generally fulfill one of these roles, which dictates how they teach and, as a result, how students learn.

### Student Motivation

The teacher in any classroom, especially in elementary grades, may make a large impact on how students are motivated to learn and work in the classroom setting. The classroom management style, the teacher’s attitude toward the students, the

teacher's expectations of the students, and the behavior management system all contribute to students' motivation. Students may be intrinsically motivated, extrinsically motivated, or amotivated (Deci & Ryan, 1982). Students who are *intrinsically motivated* learn through exploration and learning and find reward in the activity itself, whereas students who are motivated extrinsically are focused more on the product rather than the activity and are guided by external factors, such as grades. Children who are *extrinsically motivated* are seen as reactive, as opposed to proactive, which is more characteristic of those who are motivated intrinsically.

Children who are *amotivated* are likely to be passive or act helplessly, based on the belief that fate or chance dictates outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1982). They do not find value in their own actions and see no connection between their behaviors and the consequences or outcomes of those behaviors. Although children who are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated work to achieve a goal, whether of their own desire to learn or by a tangible reward, children who are amotivated see no reason to attempt in school or strive for achievement. Deci and Ryan (1982) argue that the support, encouragement, attitude, and overall teaching styles of the teacher play a critical role in how students are motivated to work, if at all, in the classroom.

## Teaching Styles

Students may be more motivated to put forth effort in the classroom if teachers instruct to meet their needs and specific styles of learning. Various theories have been proposed that attempt to generalize the most common teaching styles. One theorist, Anthony F. Gregorc, has presented ideas to help maximize teaching and learning

potential. The Gregorc model explains that two types of abilities exist in everybody: *perception*, which is the method through which information is gathered and can be abstract or concrete, and *ordering*, which is the method by which information is organized and can be sequential or random (Gregorc, 1985). Learners may show dominance in any of the following combinations of perception and ordering abilities: concrete/ sequential, abstract/ sequential, abstract/ random, and concrete/ random. The *concrete/sequential* (CS) style is characterized by efficiency, organization, productivity, perfectionism, and reliability. The *abstract/sequential* (AS) style is identified by intellect, precision, opinions, vision, focus, and theory. The *concrete/random* (CR) style is defined by curiosity, impulsiveness, divergence, creativity, innovation, experimentation, independence, and hands-on experiences. The fourth and final style, *abstract/random* (AR) is distinguished by spontaneity, adaptability, cooperation, imagination, emotion, empathy, subjectivity, and sociable tendencies. Teachers can provide opportunities for learning experiences that enhance and promote each set of qualities to address all learners' needs.

David Kolb also developed four distinct styles, which, he claims, are closely related to cognitive processes and contribute to how teachers teach (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). *Diverging*, the first style, is based upon feeling and watching to learn; the greatest strengths in this area are creativity and imagination. *Converging* provides a basis for learning in doing and thinking, and the most prominent characteristic of this style is practicality. *Accommodating* is founded in doing and manipulating to learn; implementing plans and executing experiments best exemplify this style. The final style, *assimilating*, is based on

watching and thinking, and two common elements of this are the ability to understand and create new logical theories. Kolb, like Gregorc, emphasized the differences in teaching and learning styles in their respective theories; teachers should attempt to incorporate all learning styles into their lessons and teach to meet all students' needs. Teachers, though, each have their own learning style and often teach based upon their own style, while at the same time trying to embrace the styles of their potential learners (Marks-Beale, 1994). The resulting products are their actual teaching styles in their classrooms.

### **Impact of No Child Left Behind on Teachers**

Accountability greatly impacts teachers in elementary school classrooms today. The primary goal of No Child Left Behind is to ensure that every public school student is proficient in reading and math by 2014 (GreatSchools Staff, 2009). As a result, teachers must prepare their students to do well on standardized tests. In other words, "test-based accountability policy creates a strong incentive for educators to focus on tested content and skills" in their classrooms, and some "critics have worried that such incentives may cause... [teachers] to change instructional practice in a way that prioritizes narrow test preparation over broader learning" (Dee & Jacob, 2010, p. 28). Increased school accountability has resulted in consistent findings in schools where the majority of instructional time has been directed toward the teaching of tested subjects (Dee & Jacob, 2010). Many districts have indicated an "increasing emphasis on math and reading instruction... [and] decreasing attention on subjects such as art and music" (Dee & Jacob, 2010, p. 31).

Additionally, teachers in kindergarten through third grade are required to teach all children how to read. These teachers "must use research-based methods of teaching and be knowledgeable about phonemic awareness and phonics" (Whitney, 2009, para. 10). They must utilize assessment-driven instruction to guide instruction and vary instructional methods to meet the needs of all students. With the large amount of requirements and accountability, elementary school educators must teach in such a way that their students will be able to perform well on the high-stakes, standardized tests. The mandated approaches may not be effective for all learners, but teachers often are not given permission to utilize other methods that may be more effective for those learners.

The process of choosing and implementing a desired teaching style is not black and white; it is not simply a matter of selecting, for example, one of Gregorc's styles and leading a class based solely upon the ideals of that specific style. Teachers often adapt a style that is based on their personality traits, their beliefs about how children learn, their beliefs about their roles as teachers, and their beliefs about how to manage a classroom of children (Marks-Beale, 1994). The work of Gregorc and Kolb has given us insights into the styles teachers use in the classroom to instruct students as well as the styles students demonstrate as learners (Gregorc, 1985; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). These insights help educators when planning for instruction. However, federal mandates, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, have dictated requirements that all schools and therefore, all teachers and students must meet. These goals are met largely through standardized testing. This impacts what and how much is taught, which controls the amount of time that may be dedicated to each topic and

subject. Given time and subject boundaries, teachers must use appropriate classroom management, lessons, and activities to meet the government-based mandates and prepare their students for the tests. In addition, teachers' roles in the classroom and their interactions with students may greatly influence students' motivation and willingness to work and learn. These factors all contribute to the actual teaching styles that are implemented and observed in elementary school classrooms today.

## **Method**

### **Setting**

This study took place in a medium-sized public school in a suburban area located north of a large metropolitan city in the southeast. The school ranges from kindergarten to fifth grade, and at the time of my study, 471 students were enrolled. As of 2009, the school's student ethnicity distribution was 67% Caucasian, 12% Black, 11% Hispanic, and 5% Asian or Pacific Islander. Twenty-two percent of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. In 2009, 41 full-time teachers were employed at the school, of which all but two were female, and the average number of years the teachers had previously taught was 12. All but three teachers were Caucasian; those three included two who were Asian and one who was Black. In 2010, the school met the Annual Yearly Progress, or AYP.

### **Participants**

Four third grade teachers participated in the study; however, in this article, I describe the cases of two of these teachers. To ensure confidentiality for those involved in the study, I assigned a pseudonym to each. The first teacher, "Ms. Cook," was in her seventh year of teaching, although this

was her first year in third grade after having taught first grade for several years. I included her case study because she had very specific and unique ideas about classroom communities, student motivation, and behavior management models and incorporated research from her graduate level work. "Mr. Davis," the second teacher, had taught for four years and, at the time of the study, led an Early Intervention Program (EIP) class, or class designed to provide additional support and services to students who are performing below grade level, with the occasional assistance from a co-teacher. I chose to include his case study because he was the only third grade teacher at the school who taught an EIP class. Both teachers had a Master's degree. Each class contained 21 or 22 third grade students.

### **Design and Procedure**

This three-part qualitative case study research project began with individual, open-ended interviews with each participant, followed by two, two-hour observations in each classroom. Finally, two post-observation questions were emailed to each participating teacher (see Appendix). A series of open-ended questions dealing with methods of instruction, behavior and classroom management, teacher and student relationships, freedom, and accountability helped guide the tape-recorded, pre-observation interviews. I transcribed the recorded conversations, assigned each teacher a label, and destroyed the tapes to help maintain anonymity. Upon completion of the interview process, observations were held in each teacher's classroom. I noted the various aspects of the lessons, modes of instruction and assessment (if any), disciplinary actions, and teacher and student interactions. Recorded notes were strictly factual and objective in nature. I emailed post-observation questions to the teachers

regarding their beliefs about how No Child Left Behind affected their teaching styles.

### Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed to find patterns, consistencies, inconsistencies, and relationships in an attempt to answer the research question. Data were triangulated from the one-on-one teacher interviews, the observed lessons, and the student-teacher interactions, in order to compare teachers' perceived beliefs, what they claimed to believe and do, and what they actually did during instruction and interaction with their students and colleagues. To ensure that coding was consistent and logical, a faculty member advisor monitored this process.

### Findings

In order to gain the most accurate perspective on specific teachers' styles, collecting data from both interviews and observations on multiple occasions was essential. During the data collection process, I began to detect how factors beyond teachers' preferred styles of teaching directly impacted the classroom setting and ultimately, how and what students learned. Teacher responses during interviews and first-hand observations of a sample of lessons were considered, and comparisons were constructed among the teachers in order to best generalize how teaching styles were affected by governmental demands.

### Case Studies

Table 1 shows the categories of the various interview questions asked in my study, which I coded into four major categories.

Table 1  
*Categories of Interview Questions*

Categories of Interview Questions	Questions
<b>Perceived beliefs about learning and teaching styles</b>	1. How do you believe students learn best?
	2. How would you describe your teaching style?
	3. How much freedom do you have in deciding what you teach and how you teach; what activities do you use in the classroom? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you limited by school rules (and/or principal's rules)? Government rules or regulations?</li> </ul>
<b>Perceived levels of autonomy and accountability</b>	4. Do you plan your lesson plans by yourself or cooperatively with other teachers in your grade? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you like this? Why or why not?</li> </ul>
	5. How would you describe what the relationship should be between a teacher and his/her students? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you believe the teacher should act toward the students and students toward the teacher?</li> </ul>
	6. What role do you think the teacher should play in the classroom? What roles and responsibilities do you think the students have as part of the classroom community and in their learning experiences? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why do you believe this?</li> </ul>



<p><b>Beliefs about classroom management and perceived levels of student freedom in the classroom</b></p>	<p>7. What do you believe is the most effective method to manage the behavior of your students? What is your best technique to correct off-task behavior?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What other methods have you used in the past, if any? Did or didn't they work for you and why?</li> </ul> <p>8. How much freedom do you provide for your students within the classroom?</p>
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### The Case of Ms. Cook

The first teacher, Ms. Cook, worked closely with another teacher in the study, which was evident in some of her practices, but she also carried a handful of unique beliefs, varying to a certain extent from those of the other third grade teachers. Her strict yet efficient, calm nature was reflected in the atmosphere of the classroom, as the students generally stayed on task and maintained a low noise level, especially during their independent work time. This aligned with Ms. Cook's belief of students' ability to be intrinsically motivated, although she recognized many ways in which this was not possible for her and her students due to today's society and government policies. Table 2 shows examples of Ms. Cook's responses to the pre-observation interview questions. The examples chosen best exemplify responses to the interview questions as coded but are not necessarily listed in the sequence of the interview.

Table 2  
*Samples of Ms. Cook's Responses to Pre-Observation Interview Questions by Category*

Categories of Interview Questions	Responses
<b>Perceived beliefs about learning and teaching styles</b>	<p>"It depends on the age group, but for elementary, definitely hands-on, real-life approaches....Whether or not they learn best a certain way...they should be exposed to a variety of ways."</p>
<b>Perceived levels of autonomy and accountability</b>	<p>"Our administration... want us to do what's best for kids, but there is that time constraint....We squeeze [science and social studies] in as much as we can....We touch base a lot to make sure we're on the same standards."</p>
<b>Perceived roles, responsibilities, and teacher-student relationships</b>	<p>"I see myself not so much as the teacher but as the facilitator....I can't make them learn....Ultimately they have to find that within themselves....I'm not here to be their friend, [but] we still have fun."</p>
<b>Beliefs about classroom management and perceived levels of student freedom in the classroom</b>	<p>"It's changed a lot....My whole graduate work was done on positive discipline and class meetings....They [students] have changed a lot since my first year....There's just no time....I give them quite a bit of freedom....You have to train them."</p>

To begin the interview, I asked Ms. Cook how she believed students learn best (Question 1), to which she replied, "for elementary, definitely [by] hands-on, real-life approaches." She tried to make learning "real for them so that they know how they're going to use it in the future later on." She

also added, “Whether or not they learn best a certain way, I think they need to be exposed to a variety of ways,” so she incorporated individual and collaborative activities in her classroom, similar to the other teachers. During my observations, I witnessed a variety of methods, including a whole group activity, guided math groups, individual work, and collaborative work, both with a partner and in small groups. Guided math and guided reading groups were required in all classrooms. The students’ behaviors suggested that, for the most part, they understood her expectations when working in each situation. While Ms. Cook worked with guided math groups, the remaining students, who were working in centers, knew to “Ask three before you ask me [the teacher]” about task-related questions. I witnessed this more than once. Also, students in centers followed the teacher’s expectations of working either individually or quietly with others, as the noise level in the room did not escalate, even with the flute music playing in the background. This class remained overall quieter than the other classes I observed and did not need reminders to stay on task.

When I asked Ms. Cook to define her teaching style (Question 2), she described her role in the classroom (Question 6) as “not so much...the teacher but as the facilitator.... I can’t make them learn.... Ultimately they have to find that within themselves, but I’m here to guide them and give them the opportunity.” She believed that students “have to take responsibility and ownership of their own education.” To assist in that process, she did her best to “give them the experiences, try to make it fun and engaging, [and use] hands-on [activities]” as much as she could, “given everything we have to teach in the short amount of time.” I did not witness her stand in front of the classroom at all to instruct the

class; rather, she walked around the room to monitor student work, provided center activities, and worked with small groups. Students took initiative to complete their required center work activities, which were listed on a weekly checklist provided to each student. During the whole group activity I witnessed, the teacher sat in a rocking chair with students on the floor, and various students took turns at the small board next to her to complete an activity.

In response to the level of freedom in deciding how and what to teach (Question 3), Ms. Cook praised the school administration for wanting the teachers “to do what’s best for the kids,” but she explained the time constraint during the school year. Often, if science and social studies “cut in to what [they] need to be doing for math and language arts...the high stakes [testing] areas...then [they] have to make those judgment calls...and do what’s best for the kids.” Ms. Cook’s class schedule, which is posted on the front board, devoted 70 minutes to math and 30 to either social studies or science, but during two of my observations in her class, social studies was eliminated from the day’s schedule, once for a SMART Board lesson in the media center and again because math lasted longer than originally planned. Ms. Cook summarized by stating, “You’ve got to prioritize.”

Next, I asked Ms. Cook if she planned her lessons by herself or cooperatively with the other third grade teachers (Question 4). She stated, “We touch based a lot to make sure we’re on the same standards, but as far as sitting down and planning something out, that’s really hard to do because we’re all different...[with] different styles...[and] approaches.” She explained that her goal

was to cover the same standards and topics simultaneously with the other teachers.

Ms. Cook then described what she believed the relationship should be between a teacher and her students (Question 5). She stated that she was “not here to be their friend.” She and her students “have fun...and joke around, but [Ms. Cook is] their teacher. There is that boundary there.... [Otherwise] they don’t respect you and take your role seriously. It’s a constant juggling act.” This relationship was exemplified in Ms. Cook’s classroom, as the students listened to her directions and talked to her with respect. She spoke with authority to them but in a calm manner.

When I asked Ms. Cook about her behavior management system (Question 7), she explained that it had “changed a lot” since she began teaching. Her “graduate work was done on positive discipline and class meetings,” which she had used in the past in first grade in combination with a “wheel of choices” to problem solve, but in third grade, “there’s just no time.” Instead, she utilized a book, similar to some of the other third grade teachers, in which students wrote their names if they continually did not listen. I did not witness any instance of misbehavior or writing in the book. In addition to a lack of time, Ms. Cook believed that “kids are changing.... Now, it’s almost like if you don’t have that reward or that little carrot, forget it.” This made her “sad because it shouldn’t be that way.” She had completed research about “extrinsic motivation versus intrinsic motivation,” with the mindset that children could be intrinsically motivated, but at the time of study, she believed that changes in “parenting” had also contributed to children becoming largely extrinsically motivated.

Ms. Cook felt as though she gave her students “quite a bit of freedom” in the classroom (Question 8). She “tr[ie]d not to stand up and teach for more than ten or fifteen minutes...and after that...the rest is centers...and small groups [for math and language arts].” Also, she said that she incorporated opportunities for students to talk with a partner and share during shared reading time. In order to use these methods, she explained that “you have to train them well, otherwise they are going to end up talking about this, that, or the other.” My observations of a well-behaved class demonstrated that the students did not take advantage of the freedoms offered by their teacher, even though these students seemed to have the most freedom out of all the third grade classes. Ms. Cook did not respond to the two post-observation interview questions; therefore, no post interview data are available for follow-up analysis.

### **The Case of Mr. Davis**

Mr. Davis, the second teacher, was unavailable for a formal interview, but he agreed to allow me in his classroom for observations and answered informal interview questions in relation to his teaching style and classroom management techniques. While I found many commonalities among the other classrooms I observed, I witnessed a differently structured class in this room. Mr. Davis primarily led his Early Intervention Program (EIP) class but collaborated with a co-teacher for math and reading. Table 3 shows examples of Mr. Davis’ responses to the pre-observation interview questions. Data are paraphrased.

Table 3  
*Samples of Paraphrased Responses to Mr. Davis' Informal Interview Questions by Category*

<b>Categories of Interview Questions</b>	<b>Responses</b>
<b>Perceived beliefs about learning and teaching styles</b>	He led an EIP class and said they fall behind, so he could not do the same activities as other classes. He believed in hands-on learning, used music, and co-taught for math and reading.
<b>Perceived levels of autonomy and accountability</b>	He taught primarily to meet the needs of his students, even if he was not on schedule with the rest of the grade level.
<b>Perceived roles, responsibilities, and teacher-student relationships</b>	The teacher guided students as needed but expected them to behave and monitor their own learning. He acted very patiently to set the tone of the class.
<b>Beliefs about classroom management and perceived levels of student freedom in the classroom</b>	He gave clear expectations for the students and used a class constitution, "Give me 5" method, and a book to record good and bad behavior. He believed it is fine for children to talk, especially in cooperative learning, which is a group effort.

On a daily basis, the students in Mr. Davis' class experienced a variety of teaching and learning methods, including individual work time, whole group instruction, guided math and reading groups, and cooperative learning, similar to the other classes. Mr. Davis believed that students, especially those who struggle academically, need to be engaged with numerous different types of activities. For an EIP class, he thought that using many techniques helped best to meet everyone's needs. He

mentioned that students in third grade are able to begin working with abstract concepts, so he also incorporated time for students to read the textbook and write responses. According to Mr. Davis, this was how they are tested in standardized testing; he needed to prepare them. In addition, he played his guitar to aid in teaching most topics and sang songs to grab their attention or sometimes to transition from one activity to the next. I observed two songs that had coordinating dance moves for the students. Mr. Davis found great importance in addressing multiple intelligences to help his students succeed.

Mr. Davis, like all teachers in the state, had to teach material based upon the Georgia Performance Standards, but planned his lessons either alone or with the co-teacher. He explained that his class fell behind sometimes, so he often could not coordinate activities with the other third grade teachers. During my observations, I noticed that a handout activity he used with his students regarding types of triangles was later utilized in Ms. Cook's guided math groups. While this contradicted his statement, I did not notice anything else parallel between his and the other classes. For example, his class, at the time of the study, was immersed in a science unit about weathering and erosion, while the others were involved in a social studies unit about Frederick Douglass.

The interactions I witnessed between Mr. Davis and his students suggested that mutual respect existed among them. He clearly outlined his expectations for assignments and behaviors, through oral and written means, and, even though I witnessed occasional protesting, the class as a whole followed his directions. While he was firm throughout my observations, Mr. Davis joked and laughed with the students, more

so than the other teachers. The students understood that even though they could have fun, they also had to uphold their responsibilities, such as marking their attendance and lunch choices every morning and remaining involved in activities. Also, he attempted to engage students in the teaching and learning process as much as possible, such as by verbally listing relevant standards for each activity and discussing the importance of topics they studied.

During my observation, Mr. Davis provided more behavioral guidance for the students than the other third grade teachers I observed; I witnessed him remind students to stay on task more frequently than any other teacher. Often, he simply stated, "Give me 5," to which the students appropriately responded by raising their hands and ceasing any noise they were making. Although Mr. Davis utilized the same book system as the other third grade teachers, he also used it to record instances of positive student behavior.

Mr. Davis provided some extent of freedom to the students but set more strict guidelines than the other teachers to keep structure. For example, he did not allow students to walk around the room or get up out of their seats as frequently as in Ms. Cook's room. His classroom overall was the loudest, especially during small group science activities. The children acted more sociably with each other and the teacher and seemed very eager to participate in any kind of discussion. Mr. Davis explained that he supported students talking in the classroom because it demonstrated group effort and cooperative learning, which excited the children. He claimed that he could always recognize who was on task and who was not, and I observed him as he reminded students who were not working on the given tasks to refocus. He told them how they

were off task and what they should be doing instead with simple, firm statements.

In response to the emailed, post-observation interview questions regarding the impact of No Child Left Behind on his teaching style (see Appendix), Mr. Davis stated that the act "has impacted how instruction is given" because "it is woven into the fiber of standards and curriculum maps [he] use[s]." He explained, "Once the structure and pace you teach at is guided by this factor, needless to say it affects the outcome of one's teaching." Mr. Davis also believed that the mandated testing, which may not directly affect his teaching each day, indirectly affects how he teaches. He "love[d] to use outside-the-box teaching strategies" but had "to be cognizant that the tests done by the students are not tiered in this way." The instruction he provided and assessments he administered throughout the year had to prepare the students for their non-differentiated, mandated testing.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The two teachers discussed in this article exemplified varying teaching styles. The administration at the participating school in this study allowed a great amount of autonomy to its teachers in decision-making power within the boundaries of their classrooms. Even with this freedom in choosing teaching styles, these teachers were required to implement guided reading and guided math instruction, as well as follow all guidelines set forth in No Child Left Behind and in state mandates. These factors have contributed to the educators' teaching styles. I categorized both based on the research of teaching and learning styles of Beutel (2010), Gregorc (1985), and Kolb and Kolb (2005).

Ms. Cook attempted to facilitate learning in her classroom by allowing her students to take responsibility for their education, with the hopes that they would use intrinsic motivation to do so. According to this teacher, due to a lack of time and a required set of topics to teach, she could not incorporate classroom meetings and problem solving discussions like she desired. She explained that she tried to make the best use of the time she had to “do what’s best for [the] kids because you know they need it!” Ms. Cook strived to teach using the *facilitating*, *guided participation*, and *mentoring* pedagogical teacher-student interactions, as described by Beutel (2010), but with time limitations, she could not do so as successfully as she desired. Interestingly, I believe that Ms. Cook embodied characteristics from all four of Gregorc’s styles: *concrete/sequential*, *abstract/sequential*, *concrete/random*, and *abstract/random* (Gregorc, 1985). She taught for the students and instructed how she perceived that they would learn best. In addition, I believe that she drew elements of her instruction from each of Kolb’s styles, as well (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). She provided opportunities for *diverging* learning but also seemed to incorporate opportunities for *converging*, *accommodating*, and *assimilating* to occur.

By using a wide variety of instructional strategies and activities that addressed multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2006), such as music and movement, Mr. Davis sought to meet the wide range of needs of his students, even though end-of-year testing admittedly dictated how he assessed his students. The atmosphere of the classroom, while structured, allowed students to feel comfortable to explore and learn, largely through collaboration. I believe that Mr. Davis best exemplified Beutel’s (2010) *facilitating* and *guided*

*participation* teaching styles because he rarely led the class in instruction. Many activities were student-centered or in guided groups. Mr. Davis taught with the *concrete/sequential*, *abstract/sequential*, and *concrete/random* styles; his teaching style and classroom incorporated high expectations, creativity, precision, vision, and more (Gregorc, 1985). Mr. Davis seemed to address many of Kolb’s cognitive learning and teaching styles (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). My findings suggest that while Kolb’s four styles, *diverging*, *converging*, *accommodating*, and *assimilating*, are separate and distinct, they were not implemented in isolation. These teachers incorporated a variety of learning and teaching styles to best meet the needs of a variety of learners (Beutel, 2010; Gregorc, 1985; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

When asked directly about how No Child Left Behind affects teachers, Mr. Davis explained that the act did impact how he taught because it has determined the standards and curriculum maps that he used. Every topic that he taught was based upon the standards, so No Child Left Behind, in effect, impacted every move that he made. All the teachers in the study agreed that what they taught was based solely on the Georgia Performance Standards, which have been created to connect with state mandated, end-of-the-year testing for students (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). With time restraints due to the requirements set forth by the district to cover the standards, these teachers had been limited to what they can teach, which is one major aspect of an educator’s teaching style.

The information being taught in these third grade classes seemed to align very closely with what is tested on the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, which focuses heavily on math,

reading, and language arts (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). The majority of their school days, based on posted schedules in the classrooms and on observations, were devoted to math, reading, and language arts. Science and social studies shared a generally half-hour time block, entitled “content area,” and health had no designated time in any class schedule. I witnessed one class that had to entirely eliminate the content area lesson of the day because math lasted longer than the allotted time. Students were missing vitally important instruction simply because those areas are not heavily emphasized on mandated tests. This seeming return to the “three R’s” is not productive to students in today’s society, where innovation, technology, and intelligence are expanding at more rapid paces than ever before (Dee & Jacob, 2010). Given that these teachers were held accountable for student mastery of the standards for their particular grade level, the teachers seemed constricted in what they were able to teach, and based upon my interviews and observations, they did not teach beyond the standards. The children were being limited to the information to which they were exposed. It was evident that state-mandated curriculum standards, a product of the federally mandated No Child Left Behind Act, has resulted in teaching for breadth in content subject areas, such as social studies, science, and health, rather than depth, if taught at all (Hawley, 2008).

While the teachers in this study stated that they preferred to use a variety of teaching methods to address the needs of all their students, the activities they implemented were often dictated by accountability and time constraints. The school administration had required that the teachers implement guided math and guided reading groups, which the teachers enjoyed, but this meant that the mode of instruction

of the two most prominent subject areas in the daily schedule of each teacher had been determined for him or her. The amount of time the teachers had for each activity and subject area was largely based on what was most likely to be assessed at the end of the year, so they knew that for social studies and science, they must plan lessons and assignments that could be completed in limited periods of time. The units they taught for these content areas alternated between science and social studies, so the classes were not able to devote time to long-term projects in either area. The continuity of learning, both conceptually and chronologically, would have been interrupted for students in both social studies and science when teachers switched from one subject to the other every couple weeks. Time and accountability constraints hindered how and when the educators taught the required subject matter, as dictated by No Child Left Behind’s required testing.

In addition to the content being taught, I found that the classroom management styles of the teachers in this study had been negatively affected by the limitations placed on educators by No Child Left Behind. Due to time constrictions, the teachers did not have time to implement their personal, preferred behavior management systems. While the teachers each explained their unique systems during the one-on-one interviews, I did not see the practices implemented during my observations. I did not witness any extreme instances of misbehavior, but when students were off task, teachers simply called their names, rather than using their purported systems. The teachers did not have time to fully execute their discipline systems because of the content they needed to cover in the given time they had. Ms. Cook was not able to implement the system she had thoroughly studied and researched for her

Master's degree because she did not have time to conduct class meetings or incorporate the other aspects of her preferred style. She strongly believed that children are fully capable of being intrinsically motivated, but because of time limitations in the classroom and parent management styles, she had to resort to using extrinsically based systems of behavior management. Therefore, many students in her class were extrinsically motivated, much to her dismay (Deci & Ryan, 1982). Classroom management was an aspect of teaching styles that, for these third grade teachers, suffered negative consequences, partially due to No Child Left Behind.

These third grade teachers taught to the best of their abilities, given the requirements and limitations placed upon them by No Child Left Behind and state mandated curriculum. The goals of these teachers were to teach their students all that they could within the boundaries of the standards so that the students could perform well on mandated testing for the sake of the school. The results of my study suggest that current mandates in elementary education affect teaching styles in ways that cause teachers to adjust their preferred styles to accommodate the narrowed views and approaches to education dictated by governmental policies and standards. Teachers now find themselves less focused on student-centered instruction and more focused on test-based instruction due to accountability for their own and school performance. With this in mind, I am forced to ask: Is education today still focused on the student?

### **Implications**

While the results of this particular study cannot be generalized for all elementary school classrooms across the

nation, hints of how government mandates affect teaching styles can be gleaned from the interviews with and observations of these teachers. No Child Left Behind is a federal mandate and therefore impacts education and schools across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). This particular study can serve as insight into some of the current issues educators in elementary schools face, and teachers may use this as a tool to analyze how governmentally mandated policies relating to education affect them.

Education should aim to meet the needs of students, but with required testing, the priorities of education seem to have shifted from real learning to passing tests (GreatSchools Staff, 2009). Time constraints, increased accountability, reduced teacher autonomy, and the seeming return to the "Three Rs" appear to be common occurrences in classrooms in recent years, all resulting from testing requirements (Dee & Jacob, 2010). Teachers, administrators, school district officials, and state and federal government legislators may use this study to reflect over how mandates are impacting events inside the classroom, which is ultimately where the heart of education occurs. This study provides a glimpse into how teachers provide instruction to their students and gives first-hand accounts of teachers' opinions of education today. As professionals who are connected with the field of education critically analyze the impact of No Child Left Behind on teachers and their styles of instruction, they will be able to consider the act as a whole and determine if it is having the anticipated positive impact on improving education.



## **Limitations**

The school involved in this study is a medium-sized public school in a suburban area, located north of a large metropolitan city in the southeast. As a result, data collected cannot be generalized for all elementary schools in the United States. Schools located in other parts of the country in more rural or urban areas would likely face varying impacts from No Child Left Behind. The characteristics of this particular school, teachers, and students, as well as the leadership of its principal, likely contributed to the results.

This study focused solely on third grade. This is a grade level that faces standardized testing each spring, so this adds a limitation to the data gathered. Third grade students must be prepared for end-of-the-year tests, whereas students in younger grades, for example, do not face state-mandated testing. Third grade is a critical year because students who do not pass the tests may be retained rather than permitted to move on to fourth grade if they do not pass the retake of the test after remediation classes. Therefore, there is another layer of accountability on teachers in addition to an added layer of stress on children taking the tests. Because the teachers in this study educated students with the knowledge and expectation of upcoming standardized testing, the implication of No Child Left Behind on their teaching styles was likely different from implications of the act on teachers in lower grade levels of students who are not tested. In addition, how teachers teach depends partially on the age of their students, and classroom management techniques that work for kindergarten students may not work for students in fifth grade. Lastly, only one grade level was considered. This limits the

potential span of consequences teachers may face from government mandates.

Both the sample size and time of data collection also provided limitations. The sample size of this study was small, as the research was conducted to provide case studies of four teachers. A larger sample size may produce varying results. Also, this study occurred in fall. Testing generally takes place in the spring. How teachers teach in one semester as compared with the other semester may change, so results may have been entirely different if the study had occurred in the spring or stretched from the fall to the spring. This study did not account for possible differences and changes in teaching styles from the beginning of the school year to the time of standardized tests.

## **Suggestions for Further Research**

Results of a nation-wide study structured similarly to this may provide fascinating results. More appropriate generalizations could be gleaned from data gathered through interviews and observations with teachers across the country, as results would come from a diverse collection of schools in terms of socioeconomic status and diversity. Studying grade levels other than third would also produce results more suggestive of how No Child Left Behind impacts all elementary school teachers. In addition, this study could be expanded to compare data from both the fall and spring semesters. Observations could be held throughout the entire school year to capture any changes in teaching styles from the beginning to the end. Testing occurs in the spring, thus, differences in teaching styles may be discovered. A more in-depth study with additional questions regarding the specific implications of No Child Left Behind, as well as more detailed questions about

teaching styles, flexibility, and views of freedom within the classroom, could provide additional insight into the impact of the act on how educators teach. Teachers' feelings about levels of freedom may vary; some may prefer more or less freedom than others, depending on the level of acceptability they find in a carefully controlled or monitored work environment. This study has presented specific examples of how government mandates in the field of education have impacted educators' teaching styles, and further research would serve as a great asset in critically considering the role of government mandates in elementary school classrooms.

## Closing Thoughts

The teaching and learning process is not black and white. It is a vibrant process involving fluid interaction between humans that is constantly changing. The dynamics between teachers and students are fundamental in this process, and the whole child must be taken into account. Teaching styles, which are based upon teachers' own learning styles and personalities, must address the social, emotional, physical, and academic needs of each child in order to be truly effective, and this cannot be measured by a multiple choice test. Unfortunately, government mandates, such as No Child Left Behind, have impacted teachers in ways that leave little room for them to implement their preferred teaching styles.

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### **Appendix: Post-Observation Interview Questions**

1. Do you believe that No Child Left Behind has impacted how you provide instruction? If so, how?
2. How does mandated testing affect how you plan and execute your instructional lessons throughout the year?