Perceptions of Teacher Motivation in Public Schools: From NCLB to Common Core

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Abstract

This study examined how educational accountability reforms (*NCLB* and *CCSSI*) impact teacher work motivation in public schools. Participants included public school teachers from both urban and rural schools. Descriptive statistics determined the motivation levels of teachers and qualitative thematic analysis addressed the perceived impact of education accountability reforms on work motivation.

Commonly identified factors perceived as positive impacts were receiving support of more highly qualified teachers and being mandated to place more emphasis on preparing students for the workforce. Commonly identified factors perceived as negative impacts were the pressure of achieving Adequate Yearly Progress, increase in student testing, universality of standards, and public view of teacher effectiveness.

Introduction and Purpose

School districts across America have responded to the movement of increasing school effectiveness. With budget cuts and compulsory high-stakes testing becoming ever-increasing issues in public education, teacher motivation can be difficult to sustain. With the external pressures and demands to meet the expectations and accountability standards set forth by federal and state governments, teachers must be motivated in order to uphold their professional duties and responsibilities as educators. Even dating back to the early 1980's, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) purported that in order for educational organizations to arrive at their goals, educational excellence requires high motivation from teachers. In spite of the recognition that teacher motivation is and has always been important, can meeting the demanding accountability expectations of school districts and systems pose major challenges for teachers? The purpose of this study was to examine positive and/or negative impacts educational accountability reforms have on work motivation of teachers in public schools.

Review of Literature

Teacher Motivation

Work motivation of teachers is an important concept. The strength of an educational system largely depends upon attracting and maintaining high quality teachers. Defining motivation is a major issue due to the fact that the term itself has no specific meaning in contemporary psychology. Motives are sometimes defined as needs, wants, drives, or impulses within the individual. The same levels of motives may be directed either toward goals that may be conscious or subconscious to an individual. The definition of motivation may include other concepts, such as drive, need, incentive, reward, reinforcement, goal setting, and expectancy (Kocabas, 2009).

Teacher motivation has always been the focus of many investigations dating back decades ago. Sergiovanni (1967) interviewed 71 elementary and secondary teachers to identify the causes of work satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The study indicated that achievement, recognition, and responsibility contributed most to their satisfaction and motivation. Even in 1986, Scott (1986) studied the relationship of motivation factors of 40 elementary teachers from rural and urban Tennessee through the use of in-depth interviews and a modified critical incident technique. Scott (1986) found that achievement, interpersonal relations with peers, parents and other adults, interpersonal relations with administration and the school district, and recognition significantly affected the motivation levels of teachers. In more recent studies, Bareket (2008) compared teachers' perception of the importance of the elements to their job motivation and

satisfaction in schools in high-SES (Socio-Economic Status) and low-SES schools in Santa Clara County, California. This study proves significant when making correlations between a school's socio-economic status and the ease or challenge of teachers meeting the educational accountability expectations. Bareket (2008) found that although several challenges existed in low-SES schools, there was not a significant correlation between the motivation and satisfaction levels of teachers and the socioeconomic status of schools. Bareket (2008) did find that the teachers in the low-SES schools were driven by growth opportunities and relationships with principals, colleagues, and students. Although Bareket's (2008) study occurred many years later than those studies conducted by Sergiovanni (1967) and Scott (1986), the results reveal similar characteristics of teachers' perception of motivation and satisfaction in schools.

Bogler and Nir (2012) indicates that the best teachers cite intrinsic rewards as the factors that make teaching rewarding for them. Only when these intrinsic factors are diminished do extrinsic concerns like salary and working conditions become truly significant. Studies have indicated that although financial incentives can promote specific behaviors and direct teachers' efforts toward measurable goals, they are less promising as tools to improve general teaching performance (Bogler & Nir, 2012). There is extensive evidence that teachers regard professional efficacy, not money, as the primary motivator in their work, and some evidence that the prospect of extrinsic rewards may diminish the potency of intrinsic rewards for them (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Bearing in mind that the importance of "efficacy" contributes to the motivation and satisfaction of teachers, the expectations and demands of educational accountability will continue to be factors that influence the self-perceptions of teachers' effectiveness and desire to teach.

No Child Left Behind Act (2001)

Accountability laws have been established to ensure the improvement of public education. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) (*NCLB*) embodied, and even elevated, America's longstanding commitment to public education and the central role it played in maintaining the nation's economic competitiveness, the strength of its institutions, the vitality of its communities, and the well-being of its citizens (Education Commission of the States, 2004). *NCLB* clearly established the improvement of public education as a vital and urgent national priority. Its goals included: (a) eliminating gaps in achievement between students who have traditionally performed well in school and those who have not, (b) ensuring that all students are proficient in reading and mathematics by the 2013-2014 school year, (c) guaranteeing that every classroom in the nation is staffed by a highly qualified teacher, and (d) making all schools safer and more productive learning environments (Education Commission of the States, 2004). According to the United States Department of Education (2003), in amending the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (*ESEA*), *NCLB* represented a sweeping overhaul of federal efforts to support elementary and secondary education in the United States. It was built on four pillars of reform: (a) accountability for results; (b) an emphasis on doing what works, based on scientific research; (c) expanded parental options; and (d) expanded local control and flexibility. *NCLB* was viewed as well-intended, but far beyond the capacity of states, districts, and schools to carry out. To some, the law was seen as a burdensome and unwarranted intrusion on state and local prerogatives and responsibilities (United States Department of Education, 2003).

No Child Left Behind Act (2001) Challenges

The *NCLB* presented challenges for schools and districts to ensure that ALL students met state standards for proficiency by 2014 and that all teachers were *highly qualified*. This "one size fits all" model was a difficult demand, especially for school districts with schools located in areas concentrated with high poverty levels. Also, the demands and requirements of *NCLB* were

uniquely problematic for rural schools and districts that have small student populations and are geographically isolated (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Information retrieved from the 2013-2014 Local Education Agency Universe Survey of the Common Core of Data report indicated that there were 13,491 public school districts in the United States, of which 9,642 (71%) were located in rural areas and/or small towns (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.). Characteristics unique to rural areas include geographic isolation, small populations, and declining enrollments. Particularly with the decline of student enrollment in rural areas, federal funding will also decline. It was very evident the demands of *NCLB* could not be adequately met without sufficient funding. These characteristics of rural schools and districts affect the availability of funding and access to programs, services, and training opportunities. This lack of access played a large role in the ability of rural districts to build local capacity to comply with *NCLB*.

In conjunction with rural areas, urban schools and school districts faced issues with attempting to meet the demands of *NCLB*. Ninety-five percent of all children of immigrants and 91% of students who are limited-English proficient attend urban schools (Clewell, 2007). In 2013–14, the percentage of students in English Language Learner (ELL) programs was generally higher for school districts in more urbanized areas than for those in areas that were less urbanized (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). With this being the case, student achievement of all students in all subgroups posed a serious concern for these schools and school districts. Sadly, the lack of "adequate" progress suggests students have not been well served by its schools and teachers.

In regard to teachers under *NCLB*, every classroom, including those with limited-English proficient students, was required to have a *highly qualified* teacher in place. Many schools and school districts (specifically rural) already had difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers, particularly teachers with credentials in several subject areas, special education teachers, foreign language teachers, and teachers for limited-English proficiency (LEP) and bilingual programs (Selwyn, 2007). In order for teachers to be successful in improving the achievement levels of their students, especially students with academic difficulties, they must have expertise in: (a) constructing and implementing relevant assessments, (b) gathering information using these assessments, (c) interpreting these assessments, and (d) matching instruction programs and strategies to the assessment results. The role of scientifically-based, data-driven research on instructional practices will not impact students' academic achievement unless such practices are actually utilized in classrooms (Yell & Drasgow, 2005). Unfortunately, teachers may be placed in situations in which they are forced to adopt unproven practices by well-intentioned, but ill-informed, school district officials or principals.

Common Core States Standards Initiative

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (*CCSSI*) is a 2010 initiative to create and implement a national education standard in language arts and math. Common Core State Standards Initiative provides schools with a detailed guideline of the knowledge and abilities that students should possess upon completion of each grade. The ultimate goal is to ensure that students across the country are prepared to enter college programs or the workforce after high school (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).

In 2009, in efforts to reshape public school education, governors and state commissioners of education from across the United States formed *CCSSI*. The goal of this initiative was to develop a shared set of national standards to ensure that students in every state would be held to the same level of expectations that students in other countries were, and they would gain

knowledge and skills to prepare them for global competition (Kober, Rentner, Jennings, & Haslam, 2011). In continuing to understand the development of the common core standards themselves, it is noted that the common core state standards were not birthed from state legislators throughout the country. Instead, the standards were born out of two Washington, D.C. based organizations, the National Governors Association for Best Practices (*NGA*) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (*CCSSO*). These two organizations coordinated the *CCSSI* to establish voluntary national elementary and secondary school education standards in mathematics and language arts, and student testing began in the 2014-2015 academic school year. Although *CCSSI* is not a federal law, the federal government supports it by providing grants that are only available to those states that have adopted its guidelines and standards (Eitel & Talbert, 2012).

Common Core States Standards Initiative Challenges

The *CCSSI* has faced many controversial concerns and challenges since its inception. According to Stotsky and Wurman (2010), the common core state standards undermine the decentralized, federalist principles on which education had been governed since America's founding. The "one-size-fits-all, centrally controlled curriculum," does not make sense given that only weak evidence supports the push for national standards. International test data are not significant enough evidence since most countries have national standards. The few countries that do not have national standards, including Canada and Germany, have both impressive and non-impressive test scores (Stotsky & Wurman, 2010). Conzemius (2010) purports the common core state standards are overloaded and perplexing, and the level of incoherence typify the plight of educators and society in general. Over the years, previous accountability reforms have inundated educators in school districts across the nation with possible sanctions that can be enforced if students are not performing at desired levels (Conzemius, 2010). The same goes for the *CCSSI*. With the idea of punishments for low student performance and rewards and/or recognitions for high student performance in schools and school districts driving the success or failure of teacher efficacy, it is not surprising to find there have been instances where teachers and schools participated in cheating on high-stakes tests (Henningfeld, 2008). Although such occurrences have not surfaced in the literature regarding the CCSSI, this could also very easily become a reality for many teachers implementing the *CCSSI* curriculum. Cala (2008) stated that teachers are cheating for the desperate purpose of raising test scores, maintaining their jobs, and preventing children from being labeled as failures. As a result of teacher effectiveness being solely based on testing and test results, fraud and cheating to meet mandated standards will continue to be a concern. One final concern, according to Tienken (2011), is that some critics site that there is no empirical evidence to support the common core state standards will improve student achievement. The *NGA* and the *CCSSO* stated that the common core state standards are standards founded on evidence derived from scientific experiments and discoveries as written in two documents: *Myths v. Facts About the Common Core Standards* and *Benchmarking for Success* (Tienken, 2011). After examining these documents provided by the *NGA* and *CCSSO* to prove that common core state standards will increase student achievement, Tienken (2001) found that there was no large body of evidence to support this claim. Tienken (2001) also purported that the claim of the two organizations originated from only one document, *Benchmarking for Success.* Based solely on Tienken's (2001) findings, the evidence gathered from the scientific experiments is unethical and uninformed.

From No Child Left Behind Act (2001) to Common Core States Standards Initiative

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 can be considered a predecessor to the Common Core States Standards Initiative. *NCLB* established a new approach to education policy by the federal government. *NCLB* required the establishment of high achievement standards in math and reading/language arts in every state. Math and reading/language arts were identified as the foundation for success in all other subjects. *NCLB* required every child in grades three through eight to be tested in math, reading, and language usage (Education Commission of the States, 2004). In 2010, the Obama administration addressed the reauthorization of ESEA and amended *NCLB*. The Obama-Biden Education Plan includes four target areas – (a) early childhood education, (b) K-12, (c) higher education, (d) supports students with disabilities, and (e) lists of 18 goals. In accordance, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and President Obama have pledged federal money to three central areas of reform that they believe will drive school improvement. The three central areas include (a) adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace, (b) recruiting, developing, retaining, and rewarding effective teachers and principals, and (c) turning around the lower-performing schools (Obama, 2009).

As reported by FindLaw (n.d.), supporters of the *CCSSI* believe that it refines *NCLB* by providing clearer, more specific education guidelines for states to adopt. From this perspective, the *CCSSI* is a more refined extension of *NCLB*. Rather than using standardized exams that could possibly encourage "teaching to the test," the CCSSI tests involve short answer and essay questions to measure students' logic and reasoning skills. Many critics dislike the use of testing to measure school performance and are not appeased by the *CCSSI's* focus away from standardized exams. Others believe that *NCLB* and the *CCSSI* fail to take into consideration the difficulties faced by schools with large numbers of English-learning or low-income students (FindLaw, n.d.). Although both educational accountability reforms share many similarities, it is evident from the goals of each, the seemingly inflexible *CCSSI* shifts accountability for student performance from the schools and school districts to the teachers.

Methodology

The participants for this case study included 20 veteran teachers with at least ten years of teaching experience from a purposeful sample of three schools in an urban school district and three schools in a rural school district containing grades K-12. Three or more of the 20 participants selected were represented from each school. The locality of the schools was chosen for this purposeful design in efforts to find out how, or if, geographic location plays a part in self-perceptions of teacher work motivation. Also, participants with at least ten years of teaching experience were chosen because they have experienced working under both *NCLB* and the *CCSSI*.

The research design chosen for this study was a mixed-method case study design. A researcher-designed questionnaire that included open-ended questions was utilized to collect data on perceived factors that influence teacher work motivation. The questionnaire consisted of 12 question items derived from theories and research on teacher motivation. A four-point Likert scale was used to determine the frequency of scores of the 12 items when examining questionnaire responses. The open-ended portion of the questionnaire contained four open-ended questions seeking patterns that exist among participants that are related to the perceived impact of education accountability reforms on work motivation. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to address the influential factors perceived to have an impact on teacher motivation.

Findings

Questionnaire responses revealed that 100% of the participants were *very satisfied* with the way they got along with their co-workers/colleagues and the respect they received from their students; 100% were also *satisfied* with the freedom to use their own judgment when necessary and being able to empathize with, encourage, and assist co-workers. One-hundred percent of the participants were *very* s*atisfied* and/or *satisfied* with seven out of 12 perceived motivational items presented on the questionnaire. However, 75% of the participants were *very dissatisfied* with the opportunities to use their abilities to lead/direct co-workers and 50% were *very dissatisfied* with being included on important matters. In addition, 50% of the participants were *very dissatisfied* and/or *dissatisfied* with the opportunities to grow and advance and the sense of accomplishment they received from the job. Fifty-five percent were *very dissatisfied* and/or *dissatisfied* with the support they received from their principal when needed.

Overall, it is important to note that the majority of the participants were *very satisfied* and/or *satisfied* with the motivational aspects of their jobs. Also, an overwhelming 85% of the participants were *satisfied* with their inner happiness from job achievements and recognitions, while the other 15% were *very satisfied*. On the contrary, it should also be noted that only 20% of the participants were *satisfied* with the opportunities to use their abilities to lead/direct co-workers, while the remaining 80% were *very dissatisfied* and/or *dissatisfied*. It is also interesting to acknowledge that 100% of the participants that were *very dissatisfied* with (a) the sense of accomplishment they received from the job and (b) the support they received from their principal when needed were all teachers in the rural schools. (*see table below*)

TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Frequencies and Percentages of Teachers' Perceptions of Work Motivation (*n* = 20)

Items	**Very Dissatisfied**	**Dissatisfied**	**Satisfied**	**Very Satisfied**
1. The opportunities to grow and advance	*f* = 2 10%	*f* = 8 40%	*f* = 7 35%	*f* = 3 15%
2. The sense of accomplishment I received from the job	*f* = 9 45%	*f* = 1 5%	*f* = 10 50%	*f* = 0 0%
3. The praise and appreciation I received for doing a good job	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 15 75%	*f* = 5 25%
4. Being included on important matters	*f* = 10 50%	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 8 40%	*f* = 2 10%
5. The freedom to use my own judgment when necessary	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 20 100%	*f* = 0 0%
6. The way I got along with my co-workers/colleagues	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 20 100%
7. The support I received from my principal when needed	*f* = 9 45%	*f* = 2 10%	*f* = 3 15%	*f* = 6 30%
8. The respect I received from my students	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 20 100%
9. The relationships established with my	*f* = 0	*f* = 0	*f* = 5	*f* = 15

students' parents	0%	0%	25%	75%
10. The opportunities to use my abilities to lead/direct co-workers	*f* = 15 75%	*f* = 1 5%	*f* = 4 20%	*f* = 0 0%
11. My inner happiness from job achievements and recognitions	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 17 85%	*f* = 3 15%
12. Being able to empathize with, encourage, and assist co-workers	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 0 0%	*f* = 20 100%	*f* = 0 0%

To address the qualitative portion of the study, an interview was conducted. The four open-ended interview questions were the following:

1) What are your perceptions of the positive impact(s) *NCLB* had on your work motivation?
2) What are your perceptions of the negative impact(s) *NCLB* had on your work motivation?
3) What are your perceptions of the positive impact(s) the *CCSSI* has had on your work motivation?
4) What are your perceptions of the negative impact(s) the *CCSSI* has had on your work motivation?

The most commonly identified factor of *NCLB* that had a positive impact on the motivation levels of teachers was having the support needed to achieve improved test scores. Teachers at both the rural and urban schools felt more highly qualified teachers were needed in their schools in order to make Adequate Yearly Progress (*AYP*). According to responses from the teachers of the rural schools, one stated:

> Our school was in desperate need of not only qualified teachers, but also more teachers, period. It seemed no one ever listened to our cries about needing additional help. Our classes were overcrowded until NCLB mandated our school receive more teachers.

The most commonly identified factors of *NCLB* that had a negative impact on the motivation levels of teachers included student achievement and too much testing. It was very obvious that the pressure of student achievement (making *AYP*) and increased student testing were common factors perceived to have negative impacts on teacher motivation for all the teachers. When reviewing the comments, all of the teachers felt the goals of *NCLB*, as the Act relates to student achievement, were unreachable and unrealistic. Also, all of the teachers expressed their disdain for the amount of required student testing. According to responses from the teachers of the urban schools, one stated:

> We spent a lot of time testing our students. It seemed we tested more than we taught! I am guilty of teaching what will be tested to ensure student success. I did not want to be the only teacher that did not show an improvement in test scores. I probably experienced more stress than the students during test times.

The most commonly identified factor of the *CCSSI* perceived as a positive impact on the motivation levels of teachers was the focus on preparing students for the workforce, as well as college. A teacher stated, "It's great to see we are moving back toward preparing our students for vocations and job skills that can lead to careers. All students are not college material."

Another teacher stated, "I am all for teaching our young people skills and information relevant to the real world."

The most commonly identified factors of the *CCSSI* perceived as negative impacts on the motivation levels of teachers were the universality of standards and the public view of teacher effectiveness. Despite the fact that the *CCSSI* standards are consistent and clear, the teachers still expressed concerns with the robust curriculum. One teacher stated, "The idea of holding all students accountable for the same content, regardless of social, economic, or academic background is absurd." According to responses from the teachers of the rural schools, one stated:

> Not all students learn the same way or at the same speed. I have to teach them where they are when I receive them. If they are not on grade level, how in the world they expect me to move them to grade level and still keep up with the pace of students all over the nation? Common core is no better than No Child Left Behind. They are still expecting a miracle. There are some students in my school more worried about having power (electricity) in their homes than mastering a test at school! These students have real-life issues and challenges that need attention, and to expect teachers to overlook these problems and focus on "common core standards" is inhumane.

In addition to having concerns over the universality of standards, the teachers also have issues with being viewed by the public as ineffective. One of the teachers from the urban schools stated:

> I chose to teach because I have a passion for helping children. It is heartbreaking to hear people in the community say the students are not passing because the teachers are not teaching. We go through a lot of scrutiny in this profession. Not only are students tested to death, we are too. Before becoming a teacher, numerous tests must be passed in order to even be considered highly qualified. No one sees that. No one takes in consideration how hard we work for so little. Yet when test scores drop, we're the first on the chopping block. Policymakers seem to not care how No Child Left Behind and this Common Core have led to demoralization of teachers.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

It was evident that 100% of the participants were *very satisfied* and/or *satisfied* with their work motivational levels (the way they got along with their co-workers/colleagues, the respect they received from their students, the freedom to use their own judgment when necessary, and being able to empathize with, encourage, and assist co-workers). Teachers who are self-efficacious are able to create and maintain situations whereby they derive both recognition from others and intrinsic rewards. Research suggests that teachers' self-efficacy influences their motivation, performance, and commitment to teaching (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). In relation to how educational accountability reforms impact work motivation of teachers in public schools, it was found through the open-ended responses that both the *CCSSI* and *NCLB* affected teacher motivation positively and negatively. Commonly identified factors perceived as positive impacts were receiving support of more highly qualified teachers (*NCLB*) and being mandated to place more emphasis on preparing students for the workforce (*CCSSI*). Commonly identified factors perceived as negative impacts were the pressure of achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (*NCLB*), increase in student testing (*NCLB* and *CCSSI*), universality of standards (*CCSSI*), and public view of teacher effectiveness (*NCLB* and *CCSSI*). However, the *CCSSI* and *NCLB* both had

more negative impacts on teacher motivation than positive impacts. Interestingly enough, it is important to note that sufficient evidence gathered from the teacher questionnaire and the open-ended interview questions indicated teachers from the rural schools faced more challenges, as it relates to meeting the demands of *NCLB* and *CCSSI*.

America's educational system today is faced with many challenges; one of these challenges is meeting the accountability standards of federal and state governments. Although these challenges seem daunting, they are not insurmountable. However, the challenges and expectations are inescapable. Teachers play vital roles in ensuring accountability demands are met and student success is achievement. Therefore, teachers' perceived work motivation is key. In order to attract and maintain a highly motivated teaching force, student achievement and realistic expectations must outweigh the challenges. Effective education is dependent upon competent, cognizant, and motivated participants in all parts of the educational process, including policymakers. It is essential that policymakers become aware of the unique challenges faced by all schools (urban and rural) and the importance of developing policies that address those unique challenges.

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