

**NORTHCENTRAL UNIVERSITY  
ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET**

Learner: **Steven Diaz**

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**ED5003**

**Dr. Butler Pearson**

**Philosophy of Education**

**Activity 4: Integrative Essay on  
Analyzing Meaning**

**Dr. B-P,**

**This paper took me longer than expected. I had so much information and great ideas in my head, but I had a difficult time putting my ideas and information together. I believe I could have done better. I will be looking forward for your feedback.**

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Integrative Essay on Analyzing Meaning

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This assignment is a unique opportunity to analyze or reflect the meaning of eloquent phrases that are often used by education policy makers that appeal to the public's feelings or emotions, and to gain their trust and support. The average persons (and I belong to this category!) would probably focus on the poetic words used to describe educational policy that divert their attention from its feasibility. These *nice-sounding phrases*, which are how Gutek (2004) described the phrases with vague and ambiguous meanings, make many of us believe in a promise that all education's problems will be solved once for all. I consider myself an idealist teacher, who uses these *nice-sounding phrases* as motivational tools to strive to do my best for my students. However, I am not unaware of the real issues that are affecting everyday our classrooms and society. My life and classroom experiences have modified my perceptions of the realities that I live in and using common sense and being practical are necessary skills for survival. We are bombarded constantly with so much information that is necessary to learn how to discriminate which information is good, useful, meaningful, and practical. As Gutek (2004) said, "In our ordinary life, we need to be able to unload, unpack, and critically assess the claims made by commentators, preachers, politicians, self-help gurus, drug companies, and advertiser" (p. 110).

The objective of this assignment is to analyze the meaning of the following popular phrases about education aims or policies: *authentic assessments*, *excellence in education*, *no child left behind*, *educating the whole child*, and *education that makes a difference*. In my attempts to meet the objectives of this assignment, I took the role of a *Linguistic Analyst*, which by no means I want to claim being an expert in this field, but I do believe that everyone should become one to a certain degree. Using Gutek's description (2004) of what a linguistic analyst does to establish and analyze meaning, I must define and redefine the words contained in the above popular

educational phrases, so I can arrive to a clear understanding of what is being said in such phrases. My strategy consisted in using three sources of information to help me define and redefine the meaning of the assignment's phrases. First, I decided to find out how these phrases are interpreted by average people like me, and see any similarities and/or differences in the interpretations. I chose a coworker who is an educated person with children attending public schools. Second, I used a dictionary and a thesaurus to find the definition and relationship of the words contained in the phrases. Third, I did research about each of the assignment's phrases using the course's textbooks, NCU electronic library and internet search engines. During my research, I found interesting that while searching for the meaning of one particular phrase, the other phrases were showing up as part of my search results. I incorrectly assumed that each of these phrases were not connected or related to its overall meaning. As a matter of fact, I have inferred from my research that four out of the five assignment phrases are being used to criticize or lessen the implied promise of one particular phrase, *no child left behind*.

What does it mean *no child left behind*? According to my coworker, it means "to help your child to move forward meeting their goals and dreams" (M. Rivera, personal communication, July 31, 2007). I must agree with her interpretation since I thought similarly when I first read this phrase in a newspaper and it quickly appealed to my idealistic views of education that students come to schools to become the best they can be. However, appealing to my emotions to analyze meaning is not a reliable and verifiable source as Gutek (2004) clearly said, "While these are important feelings ... the meaning is exclusively ours and cannot be shared in the same way with others (p. 112)." Therefore, I decided to look at the keywords *left behind* to better understand its meaning. Cambridge dictionary defines *left behind* as "to leave a place without taking someone or something with you" ("left behind," n.d.). There is no doubt that when

students leave school, the something they should be taking with them is knowledge and skills, so they can be productive individuals and members of our society. Then the question is how we know for certain when a child has not taken knowledge and skills with them after leaving school? Our current president and its administration have been answering this question for the last seven years by using a polemic or controversial measuring tool: standardized testing.

One of the many complaints of the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) is the overdependence on standardized tests to prove that students have received an efficient education. According to Betty Sternberg (2004), Commissioner of Education for the state of Connecticut, NCLB massive testing requirements are not providing additional information that is already known. Recently, Hilary Clinton stated in her speech for the National Education Association (NEA) in New Hampshire, “Excessive testing diminishes the opportunities for memorable and original education” (Lieborwitz, 2007, para. 15). She then shared the learning experience of participating in a mock convention organized by her teacher in 1964, which she described “It was one of the greatest educational experiences I ever had” (Lieborwitz, 2007, para. 15). In other words, many educational experts and politicians have been asking for measuring tools other than the standardized test to provide *authentic assessments* of what students have learned in school.

What is the meaning of authentic assessments? WordNet dictionary defines *authentic* as “conforming to fact and therefore worthy of belief,” (“authentic,” n.d.) and *assessment* as “the classification of someone or something with respect to its worth” (“assessment,” n.d.). Trying to put the definitions together, authentic assessment is then the classification of someone or something conforming to fact and therefore worthy to belief.” I am sorry to state that the dictionary was not a helpful source to analyze the meaning *authentic assessment*, which helps me understand why my coworker responded “I do not know what that is!” (M. Rivera, personal

communication, July 31, 2007) The keyword in this phrase is *authentic*, and “authenticity is subjective and is dependent on perceptions.” (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschhner, 2004; p.69). What I do perceive as authentic or worthy, someone else may perceive it differently. Probably, the best way to find what authentic assessment means, it is to find what not authentic assessment is. As Warman (2002) said, “Authentic assessment is not as simple to define as alternative, portfolio, or performance assessment” (p. 4).

Another complaint about the NCLB law was stated by Noddings (2005), “But the aims promoted by NCLB are far too narrow. Surely, we should demand more from our schools than to educate people to be proficient in reading and mathematics” (p.10). This overemphasis of only testing on the subjects of reading and mathematics (and recently science) has provoked educators to use the phrase *educating the whole child*. At first, I found this phrase comical and absurd due to my background in mathematics, where the concept of a whole means not fractional or divided. How can we educate a fraction of a child? This phrase did not make sense! On the other hand my coworker provided a quick and good interpretation of this phrase, “It means that schools not only prepare students academically but also humanely; to be good people” (M. Rivera, personal communication, July 31, 2007). *Educating the whole child* means that schools should also address all the other needs and interest (e.g. physical, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetics) a child has other than the academic goals. Jane Abelove (“Educating the,” n.d), President of the Central Region of the Pennsylvania State Education Association, quoted Aristotle to describe perfectly what is the meaning of the phrase of *educating the whole child*, “Educating the mind, without educating the heart is no education at all.”

The phrase *education that makes a difference* is a catchword commonly used by educators and schools to promote or sell their educational programs to the public. Using again my

mathematical background, the word difference implies a comparison, and to compare, two objects or amounts are required. Cambridge dictionary defines *make a difference* as “to improve a situation” (“make a difference,” n.d.). Once again, to improve implies a comparison. The obvious question is what is being compared? During my research, I found many sites of educational programs which use the catchword but each site was directed or focused to a particular interest or need of the child. The International Reading Association (2000) stated in one of its publications that “making a difference means making it differently.” In other words, education that makes a difference means that to improve a child situation, his or her needs and interests must be take in consideration, and the actions to meet the child’s needs or interest must be different from what was done before.

While driving around the city to do different personal chores, I had noticed many schools proudly displaying under the school’s name *excellence in education*. WordNet dictionary defines *excellence* as “possessing good qualities in high degree” (“excellence,” n.d.). Which qualities these schools possess to be considered excellent? What schools do to maintain their qualities in the highest possible degree? My coworker stated that “excellent schools prepare their students for the best” (M. Rivera, personal communication, July 31, 2007). However, I believed there was something missing in her interpretation, since I believe that all schools prepare their students for the best. I once had the opportunity to work in a new public school with an inspirational, committed, and supportive principal, who was constantly inculcating to his staff, faculty, students, and parents the following school value “Good is the enemy of Great!” In other words, he was attempting to build up a school tradition or culture where everyone should be capable of doing better than good effort. He had demanding and clear high expectations and standards but he also made certain there were enough support to meet such expectations and

standards. He promoted a school spirit where everyone should feel proud and safe of being part of this school. The traits of excellence were starting to bloom in this new school and that was the goal of this principal. In an excerpt of his book *Choosing Excellence*, Merrow (2001) states “I believe that excellent schools have a strong sense of purpose, and that is the development of the individual and his or her intellectual life.... Purposeful schools aid in building self” (p. 4).

Excellence in education is not to a prize to be achieved; instead it is how we experience learning.

As Gutek (2004) said “Public education in the United States is political” (p. 114) which implies the possibility of ulterior motives by those who are in power when writing and sponsoring education policies. Using eloquent statements, policy makers can easily distract our attention from the real issues that are necessary to be addressed. For such reason, analyzing the meaning of these eloquent statements is a necessary skill to clear out the emotive words and break it down to a language that allow us to observe, measure, and verify the feasibility of the policy. It is our duty to make a difference in our society!

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