

## **Exploring the Impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Accountability Pressures on Instructional Practices In Urban School Science Classrooms: Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations** *Obed Norman, Morgan State University*

**Question(s) for Discussion:** What obstacles hinder teachers from applying their learning?

**Session Description:** The impetus behind the NCLB legislation is to ensure more equitable educational outcomes for all. However, at the classroom level, NCLB is largely experienced as an accountability measure that defines student and teacher successes almost exclusively in terms of rising test scores. This narrow interpretation generates pressures for teachers that may have unintended outcomes. One such outcome is that the narrow focus pressures teachers into adopting “teach to the test” instructional strategies that may not enhance substantive student learning. During inquiry science professional development, it is not uncommon to hear teachers complain that using inquiry science teaching may interfere with their need to prepare students for standardized tests. In this interactive session, we will explore this issue by means of a short presentation followed by an interactive question-and-answer session.

The need for exploring the unintended consequences of NCLB becomes even more pressing in light of recent analyses that show that student achievement and the narrowing of the achievement gap have actually declined since NCLB was first authorized in 2002 (Fuller et al., 2007). Additionally, there is a strong suggestion in the literature that when teachers use hands-on and inquiry-based approaches, all students benefit but minority students benefit the most (see, for example, Schoenfeld, 2002; also Boaler (2002, 2006). The irony is that the inquiry-based approaches are less likely to be used in schools with large minority populations (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004).

The relevant broad theoretical underpinning is the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Symbolic interaction theory states that interactions and contexts provide the interpretive lens through which actions, people, and objects acquire meaning. In the context of this theory, accountability can be explored as generating potent incentives for individuals to engage in particular behaviors and avoiding others. Threat rigidity is a related sociological construct relevant to organizational behavior. The basic idea is that organizations whose legitimacy is under threat adopt responsive strategies that can at times be characterized by rigidity. Schools have been subjected to cycles of threats in the form of negative perceptions about educational effectiveness (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Olsen and Sexton (2009) have described how schools can respond to these threats by “emphasizing routinized and simplified instructional/assessment practices, and applying strong pressure for school personnel to conform” (p. 9). Symbolic interaction theory only provides a framework for recognizing the accountability-based incentive structures that promote particular pedagogies. The cultural contexts of urban classrooms and the science discourse of classrooms each require specific theoretical treatments in the overall framework provided by symbolic interaction theory. As we explore accountability in the classroom that presents the distinct characteristic of “cultural interface zone” (Norman, Ault, Bentz, & Meskimen, 2001), we will expand our theoretical framework to include Ladson-Billings’ (1994) notion of culturally responsive pedagogy.