Teacher Quality

Educators, politicians, the general public—everyone wants excellent teachers in our nation's classrooms. Teachers want to be held to high standards, teacher educators want to inspire quality teaching in prospective teachers, educational researchers want to ascertain the most effective methods for evaluating teachers, and community members and policymakers want to make sure American teachers challenge students to achieve and become future leaders. This attention to teacher quality is justified because research has long acknowledged that teachers are the single most important factor when it comes to student learning.¹

However, recent expressions of concern about teacher quality and Race to the Top legislation have led to policies that define teacher quality in terms of student performance on standardized tests. As of October 2011, 24 states require that determinations of teacher quality include measures of student achievement, and 13 of these states require that student standardized test scores be the majority determinant of teacher quality.² Defining teacher quality in terms of student test scores has a significant impact on the evaluation of English/language arts teachers. Accordingly, this brief interrogates teacher quality, including the meanings attached to it and ways of evaluating it. This brief also offers approaches that will support policymakers, researchers, and educators in their common pursuit of excellent teaching in our nation's classrooms.

Definitions

Defining teacher quality in terms of students' scores on standardized tests is one way of emphasizing the importance of student achievement. It has the advantage of clarity and expediency. However, this definition does not take into account the body of research on teacher effectiveness or quality. Most of this research portrays teacher quality as a complex phenomenon that can vary with context and includes manifestations of these observable dimensions:

- Preparation
- Planning
- Instructional practices
- Professionalism.³

The details of these dimensions, as illuminated by research, vary. Preparation, which includes subject matter knowledge and teacher education, can be correlated with student achievement.⁴ Planning, or designing instruction and assessments, appears to be most effective when it includes frequent collaboration with colleagues.⁵ Instructional practices, which occur mainly in the classroom, benefit from effectiveness measures that take teachers' contexts into account; they have a greater impact on teachers' professional
learning than evaluation methods that rely solely on one form of data. Professionalism includes varying combinations of communication with community members, self-evaluation, reflective practice, record-keeping, and communities of practice. One aspect of professionalism that merits special attention in relation to teacher quality is self-reflection. Recent studies have established strong relationships between self-reflection and effective teaching. Researchers have identified three types of reflection effective teachers practice: reflection-for-action (before teaching), reflection-in-action (while teaching), and reflection-on-action (after teaching) that enhance instructional practices. Currently, however, only five states in the US explicitly include reflection as an important criterion in teacher evaluation, and a handful of other states include reflection as an optional or supplementary component of teacher evaluations.

Overall, research shows the importance of considering multiple factors in defining teacher quality; no one dimension and no one measure provides an accurate representation. Furthermore, research offers information and models that can be adapted to create evaluation processes that build on knowledge about teacher quality. Emerging approaches to evaluation show the multiple factors that should be taken into account when evaluating teachers, including subjective measures such as peer feedback, teacher self-evaluations, and teacher reflections, and objective measures such as student achievement data and demographic information.

Evaluators

Schools that use more than standardized tests to evaluate teachers need to make a number of choices, including selecting from among local and external evaluators. External evaluators include individual consultants and corporations such as the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS), Teacher Assessment Program (TAP), and the Danielson Group. Some evaluations are combined with an already robust system of teacher professional development. However, in other cases, evaluation is not connected with professional development, thereby omitting one of the central functions of evaluation—to provide the basis for further learning. Furthermore, research on the validity of one external system of evaluation found a number of logical and empirical weaknesses, which suggests the need for more validation research on external measures of these high-stakes evaluations of teachers.

While internal evaluators such as school administrators know the local context and can make connections between evaluation and professional development, they may know nothing about a given subject area. A recent study of student performance on standardized tests found that factors of poverty and diversity, where teacher quality was held constant, affected student performance differentially in reading and math. In other words, English/language arts teachers face different challenges than their counterparts in math, and evaluators without any background in literacy learning have limited ability to assess effectiveness in this field or support ongoing professional learning to improve teaching over time.

Validity

Equating teacher quality with gains in students’ standardized test scores has advantages for administrators because it uses data schools are already required to collect; it speaks to the concern with student achievement; and it addresses the mandate of Race to the Top.

However, this method of evaluation raises questions about validity. Just because it is easy to match teachers and their students’ test scores does not mean that it is valid to do so. Construct validity, or what is known about the structural relationship between a single set of student test scores and the research-based construct of teacher quality, has not been satisfied. Substantive validity, or the theoretical rationale for connecting students’ test-taking behaviors with teacher quality, has not been developed. Correlational validity, or the relationship between student scores and other measures of teacher quality, has not been established. Consequential validity, or the intended and unintended consequences of using student scores to assess teacher quality, has not been addressed. In addition to the potentially punitive effects on teachers, testing-related graduation requirements appear to be leading more students to drop out of school, an unintended consequence of this method of evaluation.

Challenges

As this brief suggests, there are a number of discontinuities between the practice of evaluating teachers in terms of student test scores and the research on teacher quality.

- Research shows a much more robust and complex conception of teacher quality than does using student test scores as the sole measure.
- Research demonstrates that effective evaluation connects teacher learning and professional development as well as student achievement.
- Research indicates that evaluators, whether internal or external, need to know about school context and the teacher’s subject area.
Research suggests that expediency cannot substitute for validity in evaluating teacher quality, and value-added measures lack validity in several dimensions. Disparities like these produce ineffective and wildly variable feedback that misrepresents teachers’ work.18

Policy Recommendations

The distance between current policy and research on teacher effectiveness and evaluation suggests the need for alternative models. While the specifics of alternative models may vary, it is clear that any version should reflect what research shows about teacher quality and effective assessment. This suggests the need for linkage among three main areas: features associated with teacher quality; the context in which teacher assessment occurs; and professional development that responds to areas identified as needing improvement. A valid systems approach, then, includes these three dimensions:

Dimensions of Teacher Quality

- Preparation, including professional training, prior teaching experience and content knowledge
- Planning, including design of instruction, linkage between instruction and assessment, and collaboration with peers
- Instructional practices, including observable aspects of classroom interactions with students, representation of subject matter, and use of formative evaluation
- Professionalism, including reflective self-evaluation, communication with school and community stakeholders, and ongoing professional development

In addition to providing an enriched perspective on teacher quality, including all of these elements in the assessment of teachers ensures that teacher performance is being evaluated by a range of people and instruments, thereby enhancing the validity of the assessment. This range of voices and data should include “expert subjectivity” or individuals who know a teacher’s work well. Teachers’ reflections and assessments of their own goals and instruction provide another key piece of information in a fully developed plan for assessment.

Contexts of Teaching

- Instructional supports provided by local school context, including curriculum, teaching materials, and technologies available
- Student population, including demographics, previous performance on standardized tests, and applicable special needs

Context of assessment, including school, state, and national structures that shape an individual teacher’s practice, local affordances for teacher decision making, and specifics of teacher assignment at the time of assessment

Teacher effectiveness is necessarily related to the resources or instructional supports available in a specific school and classroom setting, and valid measures of teacher quality also consider the difficulty of separating poverty and racial diversity from considerations of teacher effectiveness.

Research shows that the same teachers who work with less advantaged students usually receive lower effectiveness ratings than when they teach more advantaged students in a given course or year. This means that teacher evaluation needs to take student demographics into account so that teachers who work with a majority of low-income, limited English proficient, or lower tracked students will be evaluated appropriately. A systems approach model includes these factors in discussions about and evaluations of a teacher’s effectiveness.19

Professional Development

- Connections among multiple learning communities, including student learning with teacher learning, teacher learning with teacher assessment, and preparation in teacher education programs with professional development conversations
- Learning opportunities, including attention to questions of practice that emerge from teachers’ classroom work with students
- Engagement with current conversations and research, including areas of the teachers’ disciplinary fields of study, instruction, and pedagogy
- Professional goals and action plans, including teachers’ goals for ongoing inquiry and learning with colleagues

Assessment that is not connected to opportunities for further learning cannot be effective. Accordingly, opportunities for professional development are an essential part of teacher evaluation. Teacher evaluation should be based on teachers’ ongoing professional learning opportunities made available through regular professional development that supports and develops teachers’ instructional practices and knowledge. The teacher whose students do not achieve learning goals needs more than a ranking based on test scores in order to enhance student achievement; this teacher requires professional development that addresses student needs and at the same time makes connections with previous teacher learning, including teacher preparation programs.20
Linkages among these elements of teacher assessment are forged by the state and national mandates that gave rise to them; these mandates circulate within and between each part of the system. The systems approach to teacher assessment that results from these linkages offers the promise of validity. More important, the systems approach, like the forces that give rise to it, is designed to reach the goal of ensuring that we will have excellent teachers in our nation’s classrooms.

Endnotes

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