Quality Teachers: Eyes Focused on Students and Instructional Practice

It is not by chance that we decided to begin our editorship by focusing our first issue of *Voices* on the topic of quality teaching. Like you, we can visualize teachers who made a difference in our lives because of the things they taught us about a particular subject, about ourselves, and about how to function in and outside of the world of school. Was it what they said, how they said it, or that they modeled a difficult concept as a way to support our understanding?

It was probably an amalgamation of these, because there is no one model or factor that characterizes a quality teacher. What does distinguish quality teachers is the significance of the interactions occurring between them and their students that cause major learning to occur (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Thompson, Rousseau, & Ransdell, 2005).

This issue of *Voices* is dedicated to all of the quality teachers who have been marginalized or forgotten throughout the years while the public has focused on teachers of lesser quality, like those depicted in films like *Waiting for Superman*.

Complexity of Measurement

We all set out to be these quality teachers: those who know their subject matter well, are enthusiastic about learning, convey information through motivating lessons, support various ways of looking at a problem, manage discipline and the environment well, accommodate differences without suggesting weakness, think of endless significant interventions, have high expectations for students, and use a tone that promotes and never stifles. Do you wonder if any of your students ever think of you as a quality teacher, one who has made a noteworthy difference in their lives?

Quality teachers do make a difference in the lives of all students, especially low-performing students, for whom a good teacher can make a difference equivalent to one grade level of academic learning (Hanushek, 1992; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006), and the effects are both additive and cumulative (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). While insights such as these tend to imply that the test scores of one’s students are evidence of one’s teaching quality, we propose that a linear statistical measure camouflages the complex behaviors exhibited by a quality teacher. This is especially true for one who is teaching in a school attended by students who have been emotionally bruised by their families and society, or in a school with large populations of English learners or economically poor children.

Although it is generally agreed that the educational outcomes for all students are dependent on more than just their teachers, in these schools, teachers (like their colleagues at other schools) must offer rich opportunities for students to learn basic literacy skills, extensive content knowledge, and how to use these to critically function in the world. They must also provide their students with the emotional support and love needed to make attending and succeeding at school an achievable reality that has a positive, personal payoff. This is not to suggest that instructional rigor should be absent from any classroom, or that an articulated curriculum with well-identified standards should...
be ignored. Instead, we propose—as do many of the voices in Gitomer’s edited text (2009)—that since economic, social, and emotional development impact learning so strongly and are quite difficult to measure, a determination of teaching quality should not be based on a single score purported to measure students’ cognitive growth. Instead, it should also be envisioned within the context of who the students are and who they see themselves becoming through their relationship with the teacher.

Within this perspective, we ponder several things: Would a quality teacher in one community be as highly successful in another very different community? Should the social and emotional growth of students also be assessed as a determinant of quality teaching? Or is cognitive gain all that matters? Until teachers are arbitrarily assigned to communities and classrooms, we will not be able to answer these questions or offer a definitive judgment about what exactly constitutes teacher quality. However, we believe that while quality teaching can be characterized by an agreed upon set of core behaviors, success of performance can only become concretized when educational outcomes also include the incremental differences that occur emotionally and cognitively for students due to the relationships they have with their teachers.

**Every Student Deserves Many Quality Teachers**

As Darling-Hammond (2010) suggests, all students must have quality teachers and an excellent education that equips them to “learn how to learn, create, and invent the new world they are entering” (p. 3). Articles in this issue of *Voices* exemplify teachers who are doing just this. In the first article, Robbins illustrates the power of a teacher’s scaffolded feedback to influence the writing growth experienced by students who collaborate with her in a writer’s workshop. She allows us to witness not only the significant growth of her students, but her own as well. We next experience rigorous and culturally sensitive learning through the eyes of students in the two classrooms described by Brock and Boyd, who validate the belief that quality teachers applaud the uniqueness of students’ backgrounds and utilize these as foundations for their learning.

Also focused on multiple indicators of growth, Parsons, Williams, Burrowbridge, and Mauk illustrate how quality teachers adapt instruction to accommodate the growing knowledge bases of their students, and identify the positive learning effects that occur by doing so. Then Roser, Martinez, and Fowler-Amato reveal the power of the picturebook to encourage middle schoolers’ visualization and critical interpretation of themselves and their roles in the world. They take us inside the classrooms of two quality teachers who illustrate that the complexity of each student must be considered if deep learning is to occur.

In the next article Bell, Ewaida, Lynch, and Zenkov demonstrate how they reversed student apathy by inviting middle-schoolers to share their views of what defined school and what supported or hindered school success. Their students shared their perspectives through multimodal, photographic essays. Finally, Schaefer, intent on reflecting on her practice as a way to refine instruction for her students, chronicled her use of systematic self-inquiry as a way to study tensions between her students’ and her own perceptions of their literacy performance and needs. She, like all of the teachers portrayed in these articles, illustrates that quality teachers envision every student as successful and believe that it is within their instructional power to identify the methods or materials to make this a reality. They know there cannot be one instructional plan that meets the needs of all of their students, and they realize that to find the right way(s), connection(s), and content that result in learning for each student, they too must keep on learning, studying their discipline(s), and reflecting and redesigning their instruction by maintaining a gauge of each student’s avenue of interests, as well as their assessed performance. This means that they take every opportunity to listen closely to their students, even those who seem noncompliant. They hear their voices, review their performance with a thought-
ful stance, make an effort to understand their thinking, identify their perceptions and misperceptions, and then plan the next instructional and motivational steps—steps that will support their students’ paths of success.

How about You?

If you are reading this journal, you are probably also a quality teacher—you are interested in your professional development and are continually reflecting on your practice, with the goal of making a positive difference in the lives of each of your students. You may want to share your knowledge about quality teaching, as well as articles you find valuable, with your colleagues. You may also want to invite collegial conversations about your instructional practice as a vehicle for continually reflecting on your teaching.

Just imagine a self-initiated professional learning community that commonly shares, debates, and refines the professional practice of its members, a place where there is no demarcation between theory and practice, but instead where the teachers study instructional questions related to their students. While this may be a new professional development design at your school, the time could be ripe for your initiation. You have nothing to lose if your colleagues do not share your vision, but if you ignite a spark, think of how exciting it will be to have a professional learning community whose purpose it is to maintain a good grasp of quality practice—one that promotes each other’s attempts to facilitate learning for every student at your school. You may come to realize that this is not a dream, but rather your new, very exciting professional reality.

Thanks for subscribing to Voices. We hope to hear from you. Please send your responses to the articles, your students’ contributions to the Student to Student book reviews, and your articles. We’d love to hear about your quality teaching experiences.

References