Teacher Educator's Role in Enhancing Teacher Quality

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Common sense suggests a good teacher matters. Personal experiences with inspirational and challenging teachers reinforce this notion. Research has also shown some teachers have a more significant impact on student achievement than others (McAffrey, D.R., Lockwood, J.R., Koretz, D.L., & Hamilton, L.S., 2003; Rivkin, Haushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004). Teacher quality is seen as a key policy lever to narrow achievement gaps that exist along racial and economic lines. Ensuring the quality profile of the teacher workforce is crucial to extend the democratic mission of public schooling to an unprecedented number of students who are more diverse than at any point in US history.

Two recent publications, timed to go with the 2008 legislative sessions, underscore the importance of the teacher quality movement as part of the larger educational reform conversation. Education Week's *Quality Counts 2008: Tapping into Teaching* issue (Education Week, Jan. 10, 2008) and the National Council for Teacher Quality's (NCTQ) state-by-state *Teacher Policy Yearbook* (NCTQ, 2007) evaluate state policies and performance in enhancing teacher quality. These reports aimed at policy makers describe the teaching profession from 30,000 above ground. To those whose daily work is preparing quality teachers, the terms of the debate feel distant and removed. And, they are. Teacher preparation, particularly university-based teacher preparation, is seen as part of the problem and to be circumvented. Key players shaping the policy debate and funding initiatives are working from outside Schools

of Education, and often outside universities all together. In effect teacher educators have been marginalized and are taking part in their own marginalization. The activity and urgency around teacher quality challenge us to ask this central question – What is the teacher educator's role in enhancing teacher quality? We argue that a more systemic framing is needed, one that examines teacher quality from 30,000 above and on the ground. First, we review definitions and arguments that have framed the movement thus far.

<u>Defining Teacher Quality</u>

Defining teacher quality has been both problematic and elusive. Three terms heard in the discussions are highly qualified teacher, effective teacher, and good teacher. These focus on teacher characteristics or qualifications, teaching outcomes, and teaching practices respectively. None adequately captures the complexity of a system that supports teacher quality.

Legislatively, the federal law No Child Left Behind (2001) defines *highly qualified teacher* as having the following qualifications: a bachelor's degree, a state teaching certification or a passing score on the state teacher licensing examination, and subject matter knowledge (Hess & Petrilli, 2006). Critiques of this definition emphasize the overly narrow focus on content preparation, the imprecision of measures for each qualification, and the variability across states to define when a teacher has met criteria. For example, given the wide variation in state's licensure requirements and pathways to certification, holding a state teaching license, though relatively easy to measure from state data bases, does not say much about a teacher's knowledge or practice. Overall, the federal definition of highly qualified teacher sets a minimum base for teacher knowledge and focuses on input measures.

The term *effective teacher* generally refers to teacher's ability to foster student achievement. There is a long tradition of research on teacher-effectiveness, dating back to the 1960s and 70s (Shulman, 1986). Much of this research examined specific teaching practices (e.g., teacher's questioning strategies) and correlated them with student learning gains. More recent and sophisticated extensions of this line of research include work done by Just for the Kids (http://www.just4kids.org/en/) or by Marzano and colleagues at the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, 2001). Teacher effectiveness research is grounded in classrooms and often uses classroom-based assessments. However, the recent Aspen Institute report, *Beyond NCLB* (Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007), written to guide the reauthorization of NCLB, defines "effective" in terms of teacher's ability to improve student achievement as measured on standardized tests. The Commission draws upon studies using value-added methodologies to argue that in the NCLB reauthorization, emphasis should be placed on developing data systems that allow states and districts to identify those effective teachers who contribute to children's achievement growth each year. This is a shift from a focus on qualifications to describe teacher quality to a focus on achievement outcomes. Critiques have focused on the narrowness and limitations of most state's standardized tests (Nichols & Berliner, 2007), the flaws in current value-added models (Braun, 2003), and the potential to abuse a teacher identifier system in making hiring or retention decisions.

Good teacher is perhaps the most common and least precise of all terms. Shulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, describes a good teacher in the following way:

In the classroom of a good teacher, students are visible, engaged, attentive and participating…In good teaching, students are responsible for their learning; they are accountable for their understanding….Good teaching is passionate, and it induces an emotional response in students….Good teaching starts with inducing habits of mind, but doesn't stop there. Good teaching engages practical thinking and problem-solving skills that can be applied in a variety of settings. And good teaching affects students' values, commitments, and identities. (as cited in Loeb, Rouse, and Shorris, 2007, p.7)

Shulman's definition focuses on teaching practices. Grounded in the moral dimensions of teaching, his description reminds us that a good teacher connects learners with significant ideas, with themselves, and with their world. Good teachers do more than boost achievement, they shape lives. His definition will most likely resonate with teacher educators for it reflects a more complex and holistic understanding of a teacher's interactions with and impact on students. Critiques emphasize the measurement problems associated with this definition. For instance, which aspects of teaching practice does one focus upon, or how does one assess teacher's ability to shape student's identities? Also, the definition of a teacher's impact is too expansive; efforts to enhance teacher quality should focus teaching on academic achievement as this is the unique purview of schools and already a sufficiently large goal.

Locating the Teacher Quality Problem

The varied players with stakes in enhancing teacher quality locate the teacher quality problem in different places. Where one locates the problem, in turn, shapes the policy and practice recommendations and initiatives pursued. Each location reflects a "theory of action"

for improving teacher quality as well as values and understandings regarding the teacher's role(s) in schools.

Some see the problem as a *supply/demand* issue: The profession is not attracting the "right" individuals into teaching. Multiple criteria, some focused on characteristics others on qualifications, influence definitions of "right." Though the empirical research that undergirds teacher attributes is far from conclusive (Rice, 2003), criteria often considered in teacher quality discussions include overall academic ability or "smarts," strong academic preparation or knowledge in particular content areas (e.g., math or science or foreign language), racial or linguistic diversity, or a commitment to serve in high-poverty or rural schools. When the problem is located as a *supply/demand* problem, policy recommendations often focus on incentives to recruit those who have desired qualities into schools/districts or on the development of systems that allow districts/states to understand and predict demand and to redress flawed hiring practices.

Some view the quality problem as a concern about *preparation*. From this vantage point, teachers who complete university-based programs do not leave with the appropriate knowledge and practices to be effective in contemporary classrooms. Critics tend to outline the following weaknesses: low admission standards, curricular fragmentation, excessive requirements, disconnection with classroom worlds, and inadequate quality control mechanisms (Levine, 2006). Teacher educator's attention to candidate's beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge often translates into teachers having a principled understanding of what they want to do (e.g., adapt instruction to meet the needs of English language learners) without sufficient practical tools to enact that commitment (McDonald, 2005). Those who see

preparation as the critical leverage point for change have pursued two contradictory policy efforts. On the one hand, over the last ten years, many state legislators have passed laws requiring standards and accountability systems for university-based teacher preparation; yet, on the other hand, they have encouraged the development of alternative pathways that circumvent these same accountability systems. Recent initiatives by teacher educators to elevate the quality and status of the profession include significant work within the two national accrediting bodies (National Council for the Accreditation ofTeacher Education and Teacher Education Accreditation Council) to develop rigorous assessment systems. Despite efforts to improve teacher preparation from both the outside and inside, negative views persist. There is compelling evidence of highly effective teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2006), though these exemplary programs are not yet the norm in the field.

Others construct the problem as a *retention* matter. The profession is failing to identify and/or keep those teachers with greatest potential to improve teaching and learning. Ingersoll (2001) describes the "revolving door" that many new teachers go through. Within the first five years, a significant number of teachers either leave the profession altogether or move from high-poverty schools to more low-poverty schools. Given the role that experience appears to play in teacher's ability to foster student learning (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996), this phenomenon contributes to what has been dubbed the "teacher quality gap," a situation where poor and minority students are most likely to have least experienced teachers (Peske & Haycock, 2006). Concerns regarding the equitable distribution of experienced teachers are compounded by the relatively high cost of hiring and supporting a new employee in his or her first year. According to a recent study by the National Commission for Teaching and America's

Future, estimates range from around $4,400 to $17,800, depending on a district's size, location, and complexity (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaeffer, 2007). For these reasons, retention has garnered significant attention.

Many factors are in play including teacher age, teacher salaries, and teacher working conditions. Of these, teacher working conditions appear to be critical (Johnson, 2006). Conditions include appropriateness of a first-year teacher's teaching assignment, quality of induction and mentoring, curriculum alignment within the school and/or district, quality of continued professional development and the professional learning culture among teachers, adequacy of facilities and resources, and the quality of the building-level leadership. In addition to the problem of a disproportionately high number of new teachers leaving the profession in the first five years, others argue that evaluation systems are not well honed to identify those who are able to impact student learning. As a result, weak teachers are retained rather than let go. This situation argues for policies to strengthen evaluation systems, particularly those used in teacher's initial teaching years.

We contend that it is best to see the challenges associated with teacher quality as a complex, overlapping *systems* problem. To enhance teacher quality policy ideas and proposals need to address, in concert, concerns associated with supply/demand, preparation, and retention. Policies and initiatives directed toward one facet of the teacher quality problem tend to yield fragile results because weaknesses in other parts of the system overwhelm progress made in one area. For example, meaningful reforms in teacher preparation implemented in the 1990s may not be sufficient to help new teachers buffer the vicissitudes of the first year of teaching if they land in schools with poor, or worse, toxic working conditions.

One barrier to systemic thinking is that policy is made by different stakeholders who have different points of leverage within the system. Another is the lack of alignment regarding teaching standards about what constitutes high quality practice; in many states, teaching standards and performance expectations in teacher preparation differ from district evaluation standards for novice or veteran teachers. Another possible barrier is the lack of longitudinal data systems that allow stakeholders to tease out relationships among teacher qualifications, teacher preparation, and student learning. But perhaps the greatest barrier is the will to act in bold and visionary ways.

Recently, Kamras and Rotherham (2007) provocatively pressed for a systemic approach by making the case for the development of a "human-capital system" in education. They assert, "despite the centrality of people to education, current strategies for teacher recruitment, training, evaluation, and compensation are largely divorced from the goals of effectiveness and equity and are misaligned with what we know works" (p. 21). They further argue for more entrepreneurial and innovative market-based approaches to teacher preparation and professional development. In their model universities would compete with other organizations to provide teacher learning opportunities. Darling-Hammond (2007) also envisions a systemic approach, one that recognizes society's commitments to provide all its citizens quality early childhood education and healthcare, one that sees schools as a places where teachers and youth learn, and one where the curriculum and assessment system expects all students to develop critical thinking and conceptual understanding. She describes teacher education within high-achieving nations international comparisons. From them, she outlines features of a system that truly supports teaching and teacher learning. We welcome the debate over proposals that

address teacher quality from a systems perspective. Though difficult to achieve, systemic approaches to teacher quality highlight learning to teach as a developmental process that benefits from consistent and high standards for performance, appropriate incentives, a commitment of resources at each point along the developmental continuum, and broad political support.

<u>Teacher Educator's Role(s) in Enhancing Teacher Quality</u>

We contend teacher educators have much to contribute to the development of a systemic approach to teacher quality. More importantly, if teacher educators do not contribute, they will move from their current marginalized status to one of irrelevance. Teacher educators might respond at both a conceptual/empirical and pedagogical/programmatic level in ways that build broader political support.

A first step involves understanding the framing and quality of research underpinning the teacher quality movement writ large and as it pertains to one's local contexts. Teacher quality research emerges from different conceptual lenses, some less familiar to educators (e.g., labor economics). It is important to grasp varied "theories of action" implied and to analyze assumptions and values in different research designs. Many studies commonly cited in teacher quality discussions contain methodological weaknesses. Mary Kennedy and Betsy Jane Becker's Teacher Qualifications and the Quality of Teaching (TQQT) project provides a searchable data base of research on teacher qualifications that analyzes each study selected for critical design weaknesses such as biased samples, ill-defined qualifications (http://www.msu.edu/user/mkennedy/TQQT/). TQQT project papers on methods and issues analyze challenges associated with synthesizing the literature to make policy

recommendations (Kennedy, 2007). We join Grossman (2008) in her call for teacher educators to contribute methodologically rigorous studies that inform policy.

In addition to understanding the general affordances and constraints of the research base on teacher quality, teacher educators need to review and contextualize widely-publicized reports such as Education Week's *Quality Counts 2008: Tapping into Teaching* (Education Week, 2008) or the National Council for Teacher Quality's state-by-state *Teacher Policy Yearbook* (NCTQ, 2007). It is also important to understand the research support for indicators reports use. Reports like *Quality Counts* or the *Yearbook* often provide ratings based on data gathered at the state level. The ratings sometimes appear artificially low because data gathered from 30,000 above ground does not capture local realities. For example, in both *Quality Counts* and the *NCTQ Yearbook*, Colorado received low marks on indicators about content coursework required of teacher candidates. We know, however, that CU Boulder's program and many others in the state have content course requirements that far exceed state policies examined to formulate ratings. It's important for teacher educators to communicate with the larger community concrete information about our university-based program's quality standards, particularly when the news is positive and contradicts generic information in published reports.

A second way teacher educators might respond to the teacher quality conversation is to examine our pedagogy and programs from a systemic perspective. This necessitates asking hard questions and possibly making controversial decisions. For example, with regard to supply/demand issues, it's important to understand and respond to local/regional labor markets. For many universities, this might mean accepting fewer secondary social studies

candidates, developing recruitment plans for shortage areas, and tapping into the strong pull

many feel to work in careers that contribute to greater social equality. In thinking about the

curriculum and performance-based assessments in teacher preparation, we have much to

offer in the development of sophisticated assessments of teacher's knowledge and practice.

These can provide compelling and credible evidence that we are preparing teachers who have

both conceptual and practical tools needed to foster children and youths' conceptual

understanding in highly diverse classrooms. If we don't have that evidence, we have to be

willing to radically reinvent curriculum. Assessments can also be used to build more

coherence within the system and to enhance evaluations used in initial years of teaching.

Finally, with regard to retention, while we have little control over many working conditions,

we bear considerable responsibility in principal and teacher leadership preparation. Principals

and teacher leaders create professional learning communities within the workplace. And,

these learning communities nurture new teacher's growth.

In closing, teacher educator's understanding of the systemic features of the teacher

quality movement is essential, particularly if we are to lead efforts to enhance teacher quality

in the coming years.

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