THE UNFORGIVING COMPLEXITY OF TEACHING
AVOIDING SIMPLICITY IN THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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Editor

The current unprecedented emphasis on teaching quality emerged from the standards and accountability movement of the 1990s. From the beginning, the issue of “teaching quality” was framed as part of the larger movement to make schools, school districts, and teachers more responsible and accountable for students’ learning.

As a policy matter, a political priority, and in public opinion polls, teaching quality and teacher accountability are now inextricably tied. For example, the most recent Hart-Teeter poll, commissioned by the Educational Testing Service (Hart & Teeter, 2002), is entitled “A National Priority: Americans Speak on Teacher Quality.” This bipartisan public opinion survey found that even since September 11, improving education is a top priority for American adults, with only family values and fighting terrorism ranked higher. The link between teaching quality and teaching accountability is crystal clear in the poll’s highlights:

- The public strongly supports standards and accountability. Although Americans support measures to raise teacher quality, they continue to insist on reforms that raise standards and accountability for both students and teachers.
- All groups recognize that the quality of teaching determines the quality of education. Americans want more and better teachers in the nation’s schools. . . . Nine in ten (91%) adults support offering more training programs so teachers can continue to learn and become better teachers. (Hart & Teeter, 2002, p. 2)

The poll also indicates that Americans are willing to pay higher taxes for better teachers—including improved working conditions, higher salaries, and ongoing professional development—as long as these are linked to greater accountability. Along these lines, more than 73% of adults surveyed favored testing student achievement and holding teachers and schools responsible for their scores, and 70% wanted teachers tested on subject knowledge and skills.

There is little debate in the education community about the assertion that quality of teaching and teacher preparation ought to be defined (at least in part) in terms of student learning. Few question the idea that the public has a right to expect that how teachers are prepared has something to do with what they know, how they teach, and what and how much their students learn. There are also few who question the assertion that higher education institutions ought to take some of the responsibility for these connections. Increasingly, however, the accountability bottom line—higher scores on standardized student achievement tests—is the singular focus of state and federal policies related to teaching quality and teacher preparation and a major focus of external funders and professional accrediting agencies that deal with teacher preparation. Increasingly, teaching quality and students’ learning are equated with high-stakes test scores. It is this simplistic equating that is problematic rather than the larger notion of accountability itself.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001 established an unprecedented and greatly enlarged federal role in educational matters previously considered the purview of the states and/or of
the educational community. ESEA legislates mandatory annual statewide testing of K-12 students in multiple subject areas and requires that schools hire only “highly qualified” teachers, certified through traditional or alternate routes and with passing scores on state teacher certification tests. As Richard Elmore (2002) rightly points out, ESEA also cements into law the equating of teaching quality and student learning with scores on high-stakes tests:

The federal government further mandates a single definition of adequate yearly progress, the amount by which schools must increase their test scores in order to avoid some sort of sanction . . . the law sets a single target date by which all students must exceed a state-defined proficiency level. . . . Thus the federal government is now accelerating the worst trend of the current accountability movement: that performance-based accountability has come to mean testing alone. (p. 35)

Policies intended to improve teaching quality can only be as good as the underlying conceptions of teaching, learning, and schooling on which they are based. Unfortunately, as a number of critics (including myself) have argued (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Earley, 2000; Engel, 2000), many current policies and policy recommendations share narrow—and some would say impoverished—notions of teaching and learning that do not account for the complexities that are at the heart of the educational enterprise in a democratic society.

Oddly enough, a book about writing—Anne Lamott’s (1994) Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life—is helpful along these lines. In her chapter on the “moral point of view,” Lamott advises writers to avoid simple oppositions in their development of plots and characters:

I used to think that paired opposites were a given, that love was the opposite of hate, right the opposite of wrong. But now I think we sometimes buy into these concepts because it is so much easier to embrace absolutes than to suffer reality. [Now] I don’t think anything is the opposite of love. Reality is unforgivingly complex [emphasis added]. (p. 104)

Lamott admonishes writers not to avoid the intense complexity of real life but to embrace it and write with passion about its biggest questions.

Although in a different way, Lamott’s advice about how to write applies equally well to how we need to conceptualize teaching quality if we are ultimately to understand, assess, and improve it. Teaching is unforgivingly complex. It is not simply good or bad, right or wrong, working or failing. Although absolutes and dichotomies such as these are popular in the headlines and in campaign slogans, they are limited in their usefulness. They tacitly assume there is consensus across our diverse society about the purposes of schooling and what it means to be engaged in the process of becoming an educated person as well as consensus about whose knowledge and values are of most worth and what counts as evidence of the effectiveness of teaching and learning. They ignore almost completely the nuances of “good” (or “bad”) teaching of real students collected in actual classrooms in the context of particular times and places. They mistake reductionism for clarity, myopia for insight. And, as Elmore (2002) suggests, they “utterly fail” (p. 35) to appreciate the institutional realities and complexities of accountability in various schools and school districts as well as in particular states.

As teachers—and teacher educators—we must be held accountable for our work. But measures of this work cannot be determined by narrow conceptions of teaching quality and student learning that focus exclusively on test scores and ignore the incredible complexity of teaching and learning and the institutional realities inherent in the accountability context. Part of what we need in teacher education right now are efforts to be responsible and responsive to the concerns of the public, to acknowledge the exigencies of public policy, and to preserve complexity in the press for accountability. Such efforts need to transcend rhetoric and clearly demonstrate that we are taking responsibility for examining our programs in order to assess and ultimately strengthen the performance of our graduates and their students in K-12 schools.

One such initiative is the Ohio Partnership for Accountability (OPA), which is a consortium of Ohio’s 51 teacher preparation institutions, the
Ohio Department of Education, and the Ohio Board of Regents (Ohio Accountability Project, 2002). The 5-year project combines three studies to examine the relationships among features of teacher preparation, school students’ performances on standardized tests as well as their broader learning, and multiple systems of accountability. OPA relies on a mixed-methods approach, combining K-12 student data based on value-added assessment techniques, prospective teacher data intended to identify differing configurations of their teacher preparation experiences, and experienced teacher data about classroom discourse patterns and instructional practices that are linked with both the development of higher order thinking processes and teacher effectiveness as measured by value-added techniques.

The significance and strength of this project is not simply that it links three distinct but interrelated studies in order to preserve the complexity of teaching quality, teacher preparation, student learning, and multiple accountability contexts, although this is certainly a central and critical feature of its design. The worth of the project is also derived from its success (so far) in bringing to the table (a) a multi-institutional research team with interests in many aspects of teaching quality and teacher preparation and with expertise in multiple research methods, (b) an advisory board that includes representatives from all of the relevant Ohio stakeholders, and (c) a national external review panel that quite intentionally includes those with diverse methodological and ideological positions.

The Ohio initiative is not the perfect research study nor the perfect accountability project that asks all of the significant questions about the exceedingly important issues of teaching quality and teacher preparation. Of course, no project ever is or ever could be. But this project, which is still in the planning stages, represents the kind of effort it will take for institutions to be accountable while honoring complexity. Einstein is reported to have said that everything should be as simple as possible—but no simpler. The position in this editorial is not that the teacher education community should avoid simplicity merely because we prefer the elegance and sophistication of more complex models. Rather, we must avoid what is too simple—isomorphic equations between teaching quality and test scores and between student learning and test scores—because they are grossly inadequate to the task of understanding (and ultimately improving) teaching and learning in a diverse but democratic society in the 21st century.

REFERENCES