We care about many teacher qualities and have many ways of assessing them, Ms. Kennedy argues. What we lack is a strategy for organizing our assessments into a coherent system.

By Mary M. Kennedy

TEACHER quality has become a hot topic. Everyone wants to measure it, reward it, or improve it. One reason for this interest is that we now have evidence that teachers differ dramatically in their ability to raise student test scores. We don’t know why some teachers are better than others, so we say the differences are due to “teacher quality.” Another reason for our current interest in teacher quality is that recent No Child Left Behind requirements focus on highly qualified teachers, so we tend to think about indicators of “teacher quality.” Yet another reason for this interest is that advocates for equity often seek to ensure that schools serving lower-income students provide the same quality of teachers as those serving more advantaged students.

The problem is that teacher quality has become such a ubiquitous term that it lacks a clear meaning. As researchers and policy analysts enter into debates about teacher quality, they often use the phrase to refer to very different things. For example, people interested in recruitment tend to use the phrase “teacher quality” to refer to tested ability.¹ These writers want us to design recruitment practices that entice people with higher test scores to become teachers. For them, test scores are an indicator of teacher quality.

Meanwhile, people interested in the equitable distribution of teachers across student populations often use the phrase “teacher quality” to refer to credentials.² These writers want to ensure that all students have access to teachers who have obtained comparable licenses and certificates. For them, certificates and teaching experience are indicators of teacher quality.

Still other people use the phrase “teacher quality” to refer to the quality of teachers’ classroom practices.³ These writers want to improve the work teachers do inside their classrooms, when actually teaching students. For them, specific teaching practices are indicators of teacher quality.

Then there are people who think about school finance and who seek the most productive use of expenditures.⁴ They often use the phrase “teacher quality” to refer to teachers’ effectiveness in raising student achievement. For them, gains in student achievement are indicators of teacher quality.

And, of course, there are people who want teachers to subscribe to particular beliefs and values. In their minds,
such values are the chief indicators of teacher quality.

These are not the only definitions available, nor are these indicators — test scores, certificates, and so forth — the only available indicators of teacher quality. Such variations in meanings should not be a surprise, for there are indeed numerous dimensions to teacher quality, each of which may be important for different reasons to different people. But unless we can become more precise in our use of the term, we will not improve our ability to measure it, improve it, or reward it. True understanding of teacher quality requires us to recognize that these many facets are distinct, not always overlapping, and not always related to one another. Moreover, we aren’t even sure how they influence and interact with one another when they do.

A TAXONOMY OF QUALITIES

Recognizing all these aspects of teacher quality means that we need to start talking about teacher qualities, rather than “teacher quality.” This slight change in language reminds us that there are many different dimensions of teacher quality and if we want to improve the broad, general quality of the American teacher work force, we need to be able to sort out all the specific qualities that are part of it. More important, we need to understand how these different qualities are related to one another and how they complement, contradict, or influence one another. For example, do teachers’ own higher test scores actually lead to different or better classroom practices? Do the practices defined in national curriculum frameworks actually yield better student achievement? Perhaps there are no relationships linking these different qualities, but perhaps each quality is still valuable in its own right.

As a first step toward sorting out the confusion, I propose three broad groupings of teacher qualities: those teachers bring with them to their jobs, which I call personal resources; those related to teachers’ day-to-day work, which I call performance; and those that refer to teachers’ impact on students, which I call effectiveness.

By “personal resources,” I mean those qualities that teachers have even before they are employed as teachers and that are often assumed to contribute to the quality of their teaching practice. Personal resources include the following:

* beliefs, attitudes, and values (for instance, believing all students can learn, holding a positive attitude toward student diversity, valuing equitable treatment of students);
* personality traits (for instance, being extroverted or introverted, calm or anxious, decisive or indecisive);
* knowledge, skill, and expertise (for instance, knowing the content, understanding different cultural backgrounds, being able to manage group discussions); and
* credentials (for instance, having a major in a particular subject, holding a certificate, or holding an advanced degree).

By “performance,” I mean the work teachers actually do in their daily practice. Performance includes the following:

* practices that occur outside the classroom (for instance, interacting with colleagues and parents, planning a curriculum that engages students, providing supervision to the chess club);
* practices within the classroom (for instance, being efficient, being a good role model, being organized, providing clear goals and standards, or keeping students on task); and
* learning activities provided for students (for instance, providing students with rote memorization tasks or tasks that require complex problem solving and reasoning or tasks that draw on superficial understanding of the content versus tasks that require deeper knowledge).

Finally, “effectiveness” usually refers to how good teachers are at raising student scores on achievement tests. But even effectiveness isn’t a unitary concept and can mean many things:

* fostering student learning (for instance, raising scores on standardized achievement tests or on state competency tests);
* motivating students (for instance, increasing the level of effort they invest in school work or in academic pursuits more broadly); and
* fostering personal responsibility and social concern (for instance, promoting civil discussions within and outside the classroom or increasing student participation in community development and interest in public policy).

All three lists above are arranged in a specific sequence, which I believe is approximately right, though other arrangements are clearly defensible. We suspect that young adults who choose teaching as a career do so because
they have certain beliefs and values about teaching, schools, students, and subject matter. We also suspect that these beliefs, attitudes, and values will influence what they choose to study and what they learn in college. And most states require teachers to obtain specific credentials related to specific domains of knowledge, which they believe will influence the teachers' classroom practice and their students' learning.

These simple lists, then, can help us see the tremendous variety of qualities that are brought to mind when the general term "teacher quality" is mentioned. They also hint at myriad possible relationships among them. Two points can be made about this range of qualities.

First, I should point out that each item described could easily be subdivided further, for each contains a plethora of specific ideas within it. There are numerous theories of what constitutes good classroom practice and numerous wish lists for ideal personalities, beliefs, knowledge, and skills. For instance, among the people who give priority to beliefs, we find some who are interested in teachers' beliefs about the nature of particular content, others who are interested in teachers' beliefs about differences between students, still others who are interested in teachers' beliefs about their own ability to make a difference, and so forth. Similarly, when we think about knowledge, we find that numerous ways to outline a knowledge base for teaching are possible.

Even if we were to rely on a very narrow definition of effectiveness, such as raising student scores on achievement tests, we might still find multiple qualities within this ostensibly narrow area. Teachers might be more effective in some subjects than in others, or they might be more effective with some types of students than with others. Thus a complete list of all the possibly relevant qualities would run into hundreds of items.

Second, these many different qualities are valued for different reasons. Some are presumed to influence others, while some are considered valuable in their own right. For instance, some people who care about teachers' beliefs and values may expect these beliefs to influence the quality of classroom practice, while others may expect them to influence students' beliefs and attitudes, and still others may simply want honest or virtuous teachers in the classroom, even if they don't see any direct link between these qualities and anything else. Similarly, some people who care about the quality of classroom practice may believe that certain practices are likely to influence student outcomes, while others care about classroom practices because they are inherently valuable.

A PLETHORA OF ASSESSMENTS

Few people realize how many of these qualities are routinely evaluated. Advocates often write as if the only assessments we have are the tests used for licensure, but, in fact, we not only embrace multiple definitions of teacher quality, we also employ multiple assessments of teacher quality. Ultimately, nearly all of the qualities described here — from attitudes and values to gains in student test scores — are assessed. Table 1 illustrates the variety of assessment practices that we use and shows how they map against the qualities we've been discussing.

Each row of Table 1 lists a particular quality of teaching and then gives one or more examples of common assessments of that quality. For instance, many states require teachers to take a state licensure test, which aims to assess teacher knowledge. Many districts require teachers seeking employment to take an online hiring interview to ascertain their beliefs and values. Districts also check to see whether teachers' credentials match the requirements for the particular job they are filling, and, once teachers are employed, they are typically subjected...
to some form of annual performance evaluation.

Perhaps the most remarkable message we can take from Table 1 is that teachers are assessed frequently and in many different ways. I say this message is remarkable because many discussions of teacher quality seem to accept the assumptions that we are failing to evaluate our teachers adequately, that many practicing teachers do not meet the standards we think they should meet, and that something needs to be done and soon. Usually, the solution proposed after such a discussion is more formal assessment. This is not to say, however, that our assessments are as good as they could be or that they are being used as well as they could be when we make important decisions about teachers, such as hiring decisions, tenure decisions, or decisions regarding dismissal.

**ANNUAL PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS**

Though state licensure tests are often assumed to be the dominant method of assessing teacher quality, school districts may actually bear the heaviest burden for ensuring teacher quality. They evaluate many different qualities when they decide whom to hire; they also create induction programs and professional development programs for their teachers, knowing that these programs will focus on some qualities more than others; and they engage in annual performance evaluations to monitor some of their teachers’ qualities. And districts rely on a range of assessment strategies and sources of evidence to carry out these tasks.

Let’s look more closely at the kinds of performance evaluations districts employ. Almost every school district in the country relies on some form of annual performance assessment. The specifics of these assessments are often negotiated into a district’s contract with the teacher union, along with rules about how the results are recorded, who has access to them, and how they may be used.

Though the structural features of annual evaluations are relatively similar across districts, their contents can vary substantially from one district to another. Some systems emphasize practices outside the classroom, others focus more on practices within the classroom, and some stress students’ learning.

Teachers do many things within their classrooms, and assessment instruments are remarkably different in what they record about teaching practices within the classroom. There seems to be no consistency across evaluation systems with respect to which qualities should be assessed or how much attention should be given to different qualities. Of course, these systems look so different in part because they were selected to do different things. Some attend heavily to teachers’ professional responsibilities, others focus more on classroom practice, still others focus on “reform” teaching, and a somewhat smaller family of assessments focuses on students’ learning activities. These assessments represent fundamentally different approaches to the question of what should be assessed and why.

**GETTING SMART ABOUT PRIORITIES**

I have argued that we have not done a very good job of sorting out all of the kinds of qualities that the term “teacher quality” refers to. Arguments about how to assess teacher quality, how to improve teacher quality, how to allocate high-quality teachers, or how to reward teacher quality all tend to get contentious, in part because different actors are making different assumptions about what “teacher quality” actually is, about how to find and foster it, and about why it matters to students. We are unlikely to succeed at any of these tasks until we get smarter about distinguishing among these various types of qualities, smarter about prioritizing the attention we pay them, and smarter about enhancing what we learn from each one.

A good first step toward getting smarter would be to think about the priorities that might be assigned to some of the teacher qualities I discussed above. For instance, imagine that three districts are hiring new teachers. Each considers many qualities: credentials, beliefs and values, and personality traits. All three districts use a commercial online questionnaire to learn about teachers’ beliefs and values, all three use college transcripts and state licensure status to assess credentials, and all three use personal interviews to assess personality traits.

However, these districts engage in these assessments in a different sequence. One district begins with credentials and then invites only those teachers who have passed this screen to complete the online survey of beliefs and values. Then the district interviews only those who have passed both of the first two screens. The second district asks all teachers to complete the online survey of beliefs and values first and examines credentials only if teachers pass the first screen. Neither of these districts interviews teachers unless they have passed both of these first two screens. The third district begins with a personal interview. If the interviewing committee, typically the teachers and principal in the school with the vacancy, find the teacher to be personally appealing and a good fit for their school, they then examine credentials and ask the teacher to take the online survey of beliefs.
In principle, all three districts are using the same set of criteria. In reality, each gives different weights to its own criteria simply by introducing them in a different order. When the online survey of beliefs comes first, teachers who don’t pass that screen are never interviewed, nor are their credentials examined. When the interview comes first, the reverse occurs, for only those teachers found to be personally compatible are examined further. Thus the choice of sequence effectively means that the first assessment is the most important.

Clearly, we all need to think harder about teacher qualities. We care about a plethora of qualities in our teachers, and we have access to a plethora of devices for assessing them all. What we lack today is a coherent strategy for orchestrating our assessments into coherent systems that ultimately enhance the qualities we value most.


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<td>San Francisco, CA: Dec. 16-17</td>
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