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FIRST PERSON

Let's Be Honest: We Don't Know How to Make Great Teachers

By Bernard Fryshman

It is hard to avoid the tone of conviction, even certitude in the national dialogue surrounding teacher quality. We read of states instituting teacher evaluation schemes, new standards of rigor in admissions, licensure contingent on candidate demonstration of specific skills, and increased clinical training as some of the initiatives aimed at ensuring teacher quality. These well-intended efforts are based on reasonable theoretical constructs, and on the assumption that we know what constitutes great teaching.

The fact is, however, we don't really know. We are choking on data, but there are few if any properly validated experiments, and therefore no real knowledge.

Admittedly, experiments are hard. We are dealing with too many variables—both teacher and student—to readily isolate and examine a hypothesis. But this should engender caution, rather than certainty in our collective voice.

We can't identify great teachers, let alone determine how to prepare them. At best, we can recognize teachers who, by dint of good fortune, have found a successful niche. Like me.

I teach at the college level, grateful that I have respectful, fairly capable, and sometimes genuinely interested students. I find teaching pleasant and seeing a former student usually results in smiles on both of our faces. My classes are well attended, and my teaching evaluations highly gratifying. In a word, people think of me as a successful teacher.

But what if I were to teach at the elementary or secondary level? My classes might include troubled and troublesome students oblivious to the culture of the classroom. In some cities I would meet children from as many as a hundred different language groups and cultures, of widely different levels of preparation, ability, and motivation. I suspect I would not be nearly as successful, even though I am the same person with the same preparation, and the same skills.

This is why we should be suspicious of proclamations received from on high, regarding measures of teacher effectiveness. And we should object loudly to those who would place failure to educate at the feet of teachers and, as a second level proxy, to colleges where they trained.

We should argue that there are questions to be resolved before imposing barely relevant "scores" on practicing teachers—the first being "what experiments to scientific standard have been carried out to establish the validity of the measures in use?" There are dozens of aspects to the teacher's craft. Why select a measure which depends on student outcomes, when these outcomes can depend on dozens of variables?

And why the readiness to indict colleges? Preparing a teacher is in a certain sense far more challenging than preparing other professionals. For all its variations, the physician's focus on the human body is limited. So is the building studied by the architect and the court of law facing the lawyer.

The classroom awaiting the teacher, on the other hand, is almost infinite in its variations. We mentioned the hundred or so language groups. Now consider categories such as race, religion, sex, economic background, and age. Keep in mind variations in ability, in social problems—interests, physical and mental changes—the list is unending. In a word, there is no professional preparatory program that can encompass every population, let alone every eventuality. As noted, a little modesty on our part is in order here.

There is a possible trajectory we might want to follow. We established that we cannot identify the 'great' teacher, but we share a qualitative sense of who is effective in their current roles. We should build on this by trying to identify elements of effectiveness by scouring the billions of data elements in our various states for correlations with successful outcomes. Always remembering to resist the temptation to act on preliminary indicators without careful, rigorous experimentation.

As we approach the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, we must resist the desire to "do something," to impose measures which have not been shown to be reliable and valid, and avoid imposing legislative fixes until we have hard evidence of a kind that education researchers have yet to produce.

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