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What is a “Good Teacher”? Does “Good” resonate with the edTPA?

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What is a “Good Teacher”? Does “Good” resonate with the edTPA?

Abstract

This study is multi-faceted. The research evolves from the perspective of eight individuals involved in educational settings as either parents or educators. These individuals represent cultural diversity with educational backgrounds from seven different countries. Participants responded to two questions based on what constitutes “good” in “good teacher” and a third question focused on the components of teacher-candidate training. Primarily, the study foci are on the identifying characteristics of an effective teacher. Second, it establishes the components necessary in training programs to produce the effective teacher. Third, an analysis is conducted on the components of the Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA), to determine if passage of the edTPA will produce “good” teachers. Are the conclusions from the eight participants congruent with the elements identified in the edTPA of planning, instruction, and assessment?

Introduction

The teacher-candidate sat across the desk, eyes glazed, a teardrop glistening on her cheek. Contained in the 11-page text were her efforts to prove her readiness for teacher certification. The composite score blazed in a single word. Resubmit. Not good enough. The young teacher candidate reflected on the last four years, and considered the delay before trying again. She reflected on the faces that greeted her each morning. Yes, she would try again; “they” were worth the time, energy, and perseverance needed to accomplish the goal.

Literature Review

The above scenario is not uncommon. As of January 2014, The Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) is consequential in the State of Washington. The edTPA is a performance assessment process for teacher candidates to demonstrate three core classroom functions of planning, instructing, and assessing student learning. It was adopted as part of education reforms focusing on placing highly qualified teacher-candidates in the field ready to teach. Successful passage of the edTPA ensures that teacher-candidates who qualify for teaching certificates are equipped with the tools and knowledge from the start.

Although the edTPA is not the only criteria for obtaining teacher certification in Washington State, it is one of the latest and perhaps the most controversial in recent years. Madeloni, coordinator of the Secondary Teacher Education Program at the University of Massachusetts Amhurst, posits concerns that the edTPA is too narrow in scope, requiring teacher-candidates to answer specific prompts that limit the possibility of answers (Hayes & Sokolower 2013). Currently, the state of Washington is requiring the passage of the edTPA as a prerequisite to teacher certification.

Although improving education in the United States has been a priority since the legislation of No Child Left Behind (Lohman 2010), creating a performance-based teacher assessment has only been in the planning stages. Recently, teacher training has come to the forefront with the unveiling of the edTPA (Sawchuk, 2013). The American Federation of Teachers applauds the new reform stating that such efforts will strengthen the teaching profession, with net results producing life long and successful learners (Gabor 2013). However, with any change in education there are those who would oppose such endeavors.

Students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst refused to participate in a pilot process of the edTPA because of confusion about the scoring procedures. The students queried whether or not the performance assessment evaluators were trained adequately. They had doubts that the evaluators would devote sufficient time when scoring each portfolio, which resulted in a \$75.00 dollar stipend for each evaluation (Gabor, 2013). Dangler, Vice President for Academics at United University Professions, also questions the validity of the edTPA. She inferred that the edTPA was introduced without adequate input from the teachers employed in the K-12 arena (Lucas, 2014). She proposed that positive change in improving the delivery of knowledge and skills to teacher-candidates must involve those who work directly with K-12 students so that outcomes are beneficial to all stakeholders.

The prominent question is whether the edTPA ensures that teacher-candidates who obtain a passing score and receive a teaching license are truly "good teachers." Speculation and a crystal ball can only surmise that successfully passing the edTPA might produce good teachers. That evidence may be found in the teacher-candidates' planning of a lesson segment of 3-5 consecutive lessons, teaching and video taping one or more of those lessons, and evaluating the lesson segment on the appropriateness and depth of student learning. Scores are generated by 18

rubrics employed to evaluate the collection of evidence.

At the time of this research teacher-candidates were required to complete all requirements within the first four weeks of student teaching and submit for external review via an online platform to Pearson Publishing who has the contract for Washington State's assessment materials, online technology, program resources, and other support to teacher candidates that's required for multi-state use of edTPA performance (AACTE, 2014). Will the edTPA separate the sheep from goats, or the chaff from the wheat?

Russell, a principal of a public middle school in Harlem, has concerns that the performance assessment will keep out minorities (Gabor 2013). She proposes that those individuals who were not raised in native English speaking homes or who were educated in communities where African American dialects were the norm may be at a disadvantage when completing commentaries focused towards individuals from native English speaking homes. She strives to ensure that her staff is representative ethnically and linguistically similar to enrolled students. She concludes that the edTPA may discriminate against those who are culturally diverse. She posits as do others that the edTPA will not be an adequate measure to ensure that teacher-candidates receiving certification have what it takes to be considered a "good" teacher (Grabor, 2013, Hayes & Sokolower, Lucas 2014).

The quest to define what "good" in "good teacher" prescribes is difficult to quantify. Is it a genetic disposition, an environmental interaction, or elements of both? Locke might have determined it is taught, yet Rousseau would have countered with a thunderous shout that it is environmental (Crain, 2011).

Strong, Ward, and Grant (2011) reflect that affective qualities, such as caring about students positively correlate with higher student achievement levels. Phillips (Hirsch 2011), Director of Education, College Ready for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, shares that teachers want to teach effectively and make a positive difference in students’ lives. Is it possible to quantify effective teaching or making a positive difference with students? Is the “good” in “good teacher” quantified by the implementation of nine educational strategies as suggested by Marzano (2012), or is it much more than composite data? Is it obtaining a passing score on the edTPA? Is it being genetically endowed with a disposition that exhibits caring and empathy? This study endeavors to explore the relationship between “good” in “good teacher” and the foundational elements of planning, instruction, and assessment as evaluated in the edTPA.

Purpose of the Study

This study investigates whether the rigor and major foundational elements of the edTPA are concurrent with the characteristics of a “good” teacher, as well as the essential components that are the cornerstones of an effective teacher-candidate training program. The study represents the opinions of eight adults who were deeply involved in the education system as parents and as educators. Participants were educated in seven diverse countries and each contemplated and analyzed the questions: (1) What do you think a good teacher is? (2) What components are essential in teacher training institutes? (3) Can you reflect on a teacher you had who exemplified the characteristics and dispositions of a good teacher?

The study further develops analyses of the characteristics and dispositions of a good teacher and effective teacher-candidate training programs and compares those essential elements to the major foci and rigor of the edTPA.

Method

The survey questions were structured and clustered around the theme of effective teaching. The survey contained three questions because of the limited time of the participants. Survey questions were completed in person or through E-mail. The questions were as follows:

1. What do you think a good teacher is?
2. What do you think would be the "ideal" teacher-training situation?
3. Describe a teacher that you had that was excellent.

A single E-mail was sent, and seven personal interviews were conducted during a four-week period. A qualitative evaluation was conducted for all the participants' responses and coded according to the key phrases "good teacher, care, fun, empathy, sense of humor, knowledge, passion, zeal, and love." At the time of the interviews, seven of the eight participants lived in Mainland China, with one respondent residing in the United States. Pseudonyms have been used for anonymity.

Participants

Tavis was an elementary teacher, 32 years of age. Originally from Australia, his teaching experience included teaching in both public and private elementary schools in China and Australia for over a decade.

Marnie was an ethnic Chinese female, educated in a rural farming area in Mainland China. Her teaching experience included teaching advanced Chinese in the Chinese Public School System. The class size that she had instructed was never below 50 students. She was accustomed to teaching in a direct instruction format.

A middle-aged female educated in Taiwan was Wanda. Her experience with educators resulted from volunteering in various public and private schools in China, Taiwan, and Britain.

Kim was born and educated in India, and thirty-five years of age. She was a volunteer in a private school in China but her volunteer experience also included India.

The United States was the home of Samantha who was a substitute teacher in Oregon. At the time of the interview she was in her early sixties. Her employment background was spent primarily teaching at the first grade level in a rural public school.

Tom was a citizen of Canada, male, and in his early thirties. His teaching experience included Canada, Thailand, and China.

Canada was also the native country of Dave. At the time of the research he was in his early fifties, and employed as an assistant professor by a community college in British Columbia.

Finally, Jan was raised and educated in Guam. Her classroom consisted of her own three children adopted from China, Viet Nam, and Guatemala. At the time of the survey she was home schooling her children but had been employed as both teacher and principal in Japan. She attended Guam public schools for grammar school and Japan for secondary school.

Results

The first question on the survey asked what do you think a good teacher is? All respondents answered this question. Three main themes were recognized in the answers. Being knowledgeable about subject matter, individualizing instruction, and having a passion for teaching were the dominant threads. Empathy for students and being a student guide followed.

The foremost theme in the respondents' answers was the importance of good teachers being knowledgeable in the content area they teach. Shulman refers to the lack of knowledge concerning subject area as the *missing paradigm* (Shulman 2004 p. 194). One native Chinese speaker replied, "her (the teacher) knowledge is like a deep sea that her students can drink from to nurture their brains." Jan shared that "a good teacher is a person who knows the subject matter." Individualizing instruction was also high on the list of expectations for a good educator. Based on the respondent's answers, 75 % indicated that teachers must individualize instruction and meet all academic levels of the students. Jan reflected:

They (the teacher) can relate their current lesson content to other subjects in the curriculum; and make lessons their own by changing, combining, and adding to them

according to their students' needs and their own goals. They can quickly see something in the classroom, which will affect the teaching and learning of a subject and can guess what types of errors a student might make. They understand how to make students successful and can quickly think of the best way to help a student.

The third theme stemming from the first question was *passion*. More than 50% interviewed believed that a passion for teaching was a prominent value. Tom reported "good teachers give a sense of meaning in what they do. They are able to draw or at least assign meaning to their job as teachers."

When presented with the question of what an ideal teaching training program should consist of, respondents offered three main foci. The top priority was authentic classroom teaching, followed by studies in educational theory, and finally multiple hours spent observing students.

Authentic and practical experience dominated all answers. Jan answered the question with the specific number of hours that should be spent in the actual classroom. She reported, "Four months of practice teaching under a veteran teacher in the home country with daily reflective logs required. Four months of clinical teaching service in a third world country with daily reflective logs should be required." The requirement of reflective logs is comparable with Shulman's thoughts concerning case studies. Shulman stated, "I believe that the admonition that practitioners should reflect on their own practice is both absolutely correct and painfully demanding" (2004 p. 463).

Reflective journals would also help professionals remember their successes and failures and enable them to organize these successes and failures into case studies to be analyzed at a later

date. Shulman asserted that the challenge for the educator was to hold experiences in memory in a form that would later be information that would be helpful in determining future practices (2004 p. 464).

Samantha agreed with the above respondent by replying, “I learned a lot in classes when I was training to be a teacher but it didn’t really prepare me for the classroom. There’s nothing that compares to the REAL classroom.”

Participants reported that classroom theory was important in training a teacher. Jan explicit answered, “Thorough academic preparation in the foundations of psychology, psychology of learning, special needs identification and remediation, public relations, conflict resolution, educational pedagogy, how the brain works, nutrition, and emotional intelligence.” Dave felt that those instructing in institutions of higher education sometimes have no formal pedagogical training with the exception of those in the education faculty. His assumption was that higher education professors may have the subject content knowledge, yet lack in delivery styles and techniques of delivering information in interactive engaging ways. All respondents felt that some theory classes were essential with most reporting that the ideal teacher-training program would involve both classroom theory and authentic classroom experience.

The third and final question asked participants to reminisce about an excellent teacher they had experienced. These answers were both reflective and rich with meaning. The overriding theme came boldly to the surface. The care, concern, and personal attention teachers gave each participant was remembered and mentioned more than any other theme. Direct transcriptions are included because of the richness and powerfulness of the responses. Pseudonyms have been used for anonymity.

Kim

I liked my history teacher a lot when I was in school. For her, all students were alike. She liked to spend her days in the pursuit of studies.

Marnie

A teacher impressed me deeply when I was a little child. Sometimes he is just like a father, who is extremely strict in his class. If you are careless with your studies or did not concentrate, he talked to you. His stern face is like the heavy cloud that would make your heart beat fast. You will feel sorry for not trying to do your best to learn. Sometimes he is just like a mother. He taught us volleyball in the spring and skating in the winter. Joyful laughing and good memories were left in our playground. He convoyed us in snow day and spent his salary for math materials for us. When I disliked steamed bread that my mama brought me for lunch, he took it away silently and then returned with a delicious crisp piece of bread. I learned from him; learned to study, learned how to have fun.

Dave

A teacher I thought was effective was a philosophy professor in my third year at the university. He was knowledgeable, very passionate about his subject, well-organized, and implemented instructional strategies that were varied and supported learning. He was clear in expectations for all activities and assignments. He gave prompt feedback and all assignments were reflective of the course material. He also had a great sense of humor and rapport with the class. Most importantly he KNEW my name.

Jan

I cannot narrow it down to one. There are three absolutely, outstanding teachers I have had in my life. First, my mother was an excellent teacher. She taught me to tirelessly seek for answers and the truth; a love of literature, how to live a creative life, serve mankind for its betterment, and to have courage. She did this through: 1) example, 2) providing me with copious, thought provoking literature, 3) taking me around the world many times to experience many different countries and cultures, 4) asking me to make her bulletin boards in her first grade classroom, hang the alphabet on the classroom walls yearly, and discussed students' problems daily at the dinner table. I also joined her in shopping for classroom supplies to enhance student learning. When I was in the second grade at a parochial school with 65 students per class, my teacher used to "lose it" every Friday. She would scream at the misbehaved boys all day. I cried and was upset every Friday evening. So, my mother's solution was, "You can stay at home or go to your father's music company and do what you like every Friday." I am eternally grateful to her for

this. I loved being at home or at my father's music company. I drew pictures, played with my younger brother, watched my father repair musical instruments (and thereby learned how to fix many things), and learned to play the accordion and the clarinet.

Second, was Mrs. Rosa. I grew up on Guam Island in the days when English was not the people's first language, hence I spoke English better than many of my teachers. The Chamorro teachers were gentle and kindly – always wanting the best for me. So, they told me, "You can sit here and read the textbook by yourself". At first, I thought they were terrible teachers. I wanted somebody to teach me. Then I realized they were excellent in that they guided me to learn to teach myself! Mrs. Rosa was my ninth grade English teacher. Ironically, she could barely speak English. She allowed me to spend each class period in the library reading any book I wanted. Oh, how wonderful this was! The library became my haven. Wonderful books! I still remember that I started with O'Henry's short stories. Mrs. Rosa further engrained in me a love of literature and being a life long learner.

Third was Mr. Beach, my high school chemistry instructor. He made chemistry exciting and interesting. We really learned it because he never announced tests. He said we must know the subject matter inside and out. We spent each class period doing experiments. It was a joy to be in his class and so interesting! We all learned and we all made A's on his tests. He taught me to learn for learning's sake and for the joy of learning.

Tavis

In grade 10, I had an English teacher named Mr. Lament who was passionate about life and showed a genuine care for his students. He didn't try to be our friend but stayed in the role of teacher while still relating to us extremely well. His classes were always interesting and often fun. I learned a lot from him about life as well as the basics of literature and essay writing.

Wanda

Suzanne is the teacher that influenced me the most. When I asked her questions, she didn't answer me directly most of the time. She always led me to think of the answer by myself. Once I got it, it was with me forever. While I encountered difficulties, she always said it's normal not to know, no need to be embarrassed. That's the reason we learn. If we know so much, then we can teach. Yes, I am not afraid of learning any more. I have the right not to know, but I don't have the right not to ask. I carry that spirit with me all the time now.

Samantha

I don't know if I ever had an "excellent" teacher but there is one that I remember and grew to respect. Her name was Mrs. Thomas and she was my fourth grade teacher. I don't remember all the details, but one time I got angry with her and tore up her picture. It was one she had given me. I remember that we had a talk about what I had done and

she gave me another picture to replace it. Whenever I came to town, I would go visit her because I respected her and appreciated her patience with me.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my research findings suggest that it is imperative that effective teachers have an intrinsic desire to serve the community through educating children and youth. From the reflections of those surveyed, passion for the teaching profession seemed to be the overriding theme. The study's participants concluded that the three main characteristics of effective teachers were (1) knowledge of subject matter, (2) individualizing instruction, and (3) having a passion for educating. Shulman addresses all those values when he says "these are ways of talking, showing, enacting, or otherwise representing ideas so that the unknown can come to know, those without understanding can comprehend and discern, and the unskilled can become adept" (2004 p. 227).

This research suggests that an ideal teacher-training program should involve constructivism (hands-on) methods with "real" children in authentic classroom settings, partnered with a healthy dose of theory as the cornerstone. Over 50% of the respondents stated that authentic practical experience was more important than knowledge of the theoretical, but that there was a place for learning theory in the context of the training institute.

The third and final question asked respondents to anecdotally express the characteristics of a teacher they had who was excellent. The heart-rendered responses were a good reminder that we

must respect students and demonstrate care through a genuine sincerity for students' physical and mental efficacy. They also remind us that what students find characteristic of good teaching can and does vary widely. This finding suggests that, for students, good teaching is contextual to time, place, and personal needs.

Does the successful completion and passage of the edTPA measure up to the “good” in “good teacher?” On the surface, the edTPA represents a set of skills demonstrated by a teacher-candidate who is ready to teach. Those skills as demonstrated by the passage of the edTPA are skills that every teacher should demonstrate from the first day of student teaching to the final day before retirement. Evidence of the ability to plan a lesson, reflect on it, video tape it, and develop deep analytical decisions about the quality of student learning are key components to the foundational framework of the edTPA. The controversial question of whether teacher licensure should be based on a passing score on a performance assessment or if the edTPA really determines the worth of a teacher-candidate as a “good” teacher is an emotional and heated topic of conversation at the present (Gabor, 2013; Sanchez, 2013; Sawchuk, 2013).

The education faculty associated with a Midwestern state university chose to complete the edTPA themselves to investigate if the edTPA is really an effective tool that gives evidence of teachers who are competent and ready to address the challenges of a teaching career. Five faculty members who represented five different teacher preparation departments volunteered to complete the edTPA themselves. Their findings included fears that the edTPA would interfere with their autonomy of instruction resulting in losing control of current courses taught. Another area of possible conflict led to the realization that the education classes offered at the Midwestern University need to be redesigned to ensure that teacher-candidates were adequately prepared.

The need to redesign courses was also a concern for those attending a recent breakfast meeting at the annual American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) 66th annual meeting. Those in attendance were concerned with "teaching to the test," curriculum resources, and the edTPA dominating all other courses resulting in content that may not be taught because of time limitations. Other discussions prevailed around the lack of predictive validity research, lack of small group instruction, and the shortage of scorers (AACTE, 2014). The final criticism revolved around supporting English language learners who would need support and scaffolding to complete the commentaries that reflect that teacher-candidates not only have contextual understanding of theory, but also an in-depth understanding of syntax, grammar, and writing structure.

As presented earlier in this research Russell, a principal in Harlem, showed deep concern that persons of diverse ethnicity would be at a deficit when completing the writing components of the edTPA (Grabor, 2013). Continued controversies involve the number of high stakes tests necessary for teacher licensure. Mirisola-Sullivan, a graduate student in education at the University of Illinois-Chicago, posits that failed attempts to pass the edTPA profit large companies such as Pearson, because of resubmission costs. Pearson Publishing stands to make millions administering and controlling the edTPA (Sanchez, 2014).

In a contrasting view, Robinson (2013) defends the edTPA sharing that the intent is to "increase learning opportunities for the nation's students by setting high and manageable standards for the teachers who will serve them." Darling-Hammond (2012) concludes that the successful passage

of all three elements of the edTPA shows evidence that the first-year teacher has proven he or she is “ready.” However, the participants surveyed in this research project conclude that teacher-candidates who fail to demonstrate passion for the teaching profession will not make the grade even though they successfully demonstrate successful passage of all components of the edTPA.

Samantha stated

Passion is what drives the profession; those without passion should never enter the profession as an undergraduate student. To do so violates responsibility as citizens to educate a society that thinks deeply, shares freely, and gives back to better the community. Those who look to the teaching profession as just a way to earn an income are irresponsible and should never be given the honor of the title “teacher.”

Although the results of this research are limited to the experience and opinions of eight individuals involved with the educational system, their opinions are certainly worthy of consideration. Moreover, they represent diverse backgrounds yet their conclusions are consistent. Passion is what makes the “good” in good teacher.

Will successful passage of the edTPA result in teacher-candidates who are passionate? Will the sheep be separated from the goats, or the chaff from the wheat? Time will be the judge.

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