

Documenting Characteristics of Highly Qualified Teachers

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Abstract

Primarily because it is an aspect of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the concept of “highly qualified teacher” has become more important and more widely implemented throughout the schools of the United States. NCLB requires teachers in all pertinent schools to be highly qualified. Before NCLB, the concept was associated mainly with the earlier Elementary and Secondary Act which stipulated that all newly hired teachers in Title I schools must be highly qualified. Early interpretations of the meaning of the phrase focused, largely, on teachers’ college education and knowledge of the subject matter they would teach. In almost all cases, teachers’ knowledge of subject matter was determined by their performances on tests and the evidence of a baccalaureate degree. It is being increasingly recognized that characteristics of highly qualified teachers include, but are not limited to, their knowledge of subject matter and evidence of college graduation.

An assessment means that can show the wide spectrum of teacher qualities should be used to determine teacher quality. Portfolios as traditionally conceived and implemented can fulfill this need. Electronic portfolios, however, are better suited to the task. Graduate students at Bowie State University, Bowie, Maryland have effectively documented their characteristics as highly qualified teachers for several years through use of electronic portfolios.

Introduction

The concept of “highly qualified teacher” is of great importance in educational reform, generally, and in reading instruction, specifically. It is well known that the teacher is the key to the learning process of students in classrooms. Impetus was given to implementation of the meaning of the concept by the impact of two federal initiatives. First, attention was drawn to the phrase “highly qualified teacher” by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which stipulated that “any new teacher hired and working in a program supported by Title I funds had to meet requirements as a “highly qualified teacher” Secondly, the ESEA was succeeded by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which required all Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to ensure that all elementary school teachers were highly qualified to teach basic elementary school curricula. In that a specified date, 2005-2006, was set for all LEAs to be in compliance with the provisions of NCLB, the concept became an urgent one as the deadline date approached and arrived.

Now in 2007, the concept of “highly qualified teacher” affects all prospective teachers and many experienced teachers in schools throughout the United States. It is a major concern in teacher preparation programs whether at undergraduate or graduate level. Under NCLB, the focus of high qualifications for teachers of reading was not specifically indicated. Not surprisingly, however, the concept of highly qualified teachers of reading is now distinctly

recognized and emphasized by major professional organizations and agencies related to reading and reading education, particularly in early childhood, elementary and special education.

International Reading Association (IRA) publicized an outline of the key points of its support of the reauthorization of NCLB in its August/September, 2006 issue of *Reading Today*. (August/September, 2006, p. 19) Heading the list was that “IRA believes it is important that every child has a teacher who at a minimum can be defined as a highly qualified teacher as defined by NCLB. In the November/December issue of *Reading Today* (November/December, Page 8) IRA extended its stance to include children at every level of schooling. It stated “IRA believes that the success of educational reform efforts depends upon having a well-prepared, high quality teacher in every classroom. Excellent teachers motivate children, encourage independent learning, have high expectations for achievement and help children who are having difficulty” IRA pointed out that qualified teachers understand that reading is a developmental process that begins well before children enter school and continues throughout their lifetime and that teachers also work with colleagues to build a school community to ensure that every student receives appropriate reading instruction (*Reading Today*, Page 8) These two statements by IRA help to make clear the breadth of challenges facing highly qualified teachers. Subject-matter knowledge is only one among many challenges required for effective teaching.

In the sections of this paper that follow, attention is given to several aspects of the spectrum of characteristics required of highly qualified teachers, especially teachers of reading. A means of assessment that is capable of providing evidence of all major characteristics of highly qualified teachers is presented. Finally, an example of the way in which the characteristics of highly qualified teachers are assessed in the graduate reading education program of Bowie State University, Bowie, Maryland are discussed..

Characteristics of Highly Qualified Teachers of Reading

A specific definition of a highly qualified teacher of reading is sometimes hard to find. This may be due to the fact that students in various classrooms at various levels and types of schooling have so many different needs. For example, in a recent workshop session in which the focus was on development of reading ability of students in special education, the leaders seemed unsure of specific meaning of the phrase: “highly qualified teachers” although they used it

frequently during their presentation. This is often the case when everyone assumes a meaning is so clear that everyone knows it without actual definition.

Definitions of the meaning of highly qualified teachers as given by the United States Department of Education and many of the states of the United States tend to emphasize the characteristics of:(1) possession of a bachelor's degree, (2) full state certification/licensure and (3) proof of knowledge of subject matter for each subject taught. Obviously, documentation of these characteristics takes little more than responses to tests and proof of college graduation. But are these characteristics all that are needed to be highly qualified as a teacher of reading or a teacher of any other subject matter in schools?

In 2004, as the deadline approached for meeting the stipulations of NCLB, the United States Department of Education issued an edict that provided states with some flexibility for meeting requirements of highly qualified teachers. This edict referred, specifically, to rural teachers, science teachers, and teachers of multi-subjects. It allowed rural teachers who were highly qualified in one area an extension of three years to become highly qualified in the additional subjects they teach. Science teachers were given opportunity to demonstrate that they were highly qualified either in broad-field science or in individual fields of science such as physics, biology or chemistry. Multi-subject, experienced teachers were allowed to continue teaching without returning to school or take a test in every subject taught in order to demonstrate that they were highly qualified.

This new flexibility allowed states to create alternative methods for determining highly qualified teachers. . This method for use with experienced teachers is known as the High,Objective,Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE). Accordingly, each state is required to determine how best teachers can show their knowledge of the subject matter they teach. States can streamline the process by creating one procedure for assessing qualifications for each subject taught by an individual.

Most teachers of reading in the elementary schools in the United States are, in actuality, teacher .of multi-subjects. As such they are held responsible for knowing all of the subjects commonly required in the curriculum of elementary schools. Besides knowing how to teach reading or how to develop literacy skills, they need to know the subject matter of mathematics, science, social studies, art, and the like.

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It seems clear that the meaning of the phrase, highly qualified teachers, varies as to the context in which it is being used. It also varies according to whether it is stemming from the federal or state governments or from a view held in the curriculum of an academic community. After reflecting on their own experiences and examining the literature related to the topic, Glatthorn, Jones and Bullock defined the phrase, as pertaining to teachers having (1) the necessary credentials: a bachelor's degree and full certification, (2) ability to demonstrate competence in three major areas: (a) quality learning, (b) the science of teaching: including the essential skills and the subject skills, and (c) teacher professionalism. (Glatthorn, Jones and Bullock, pages 3-9)..

Probably it is incontestable that the most important characteristic to be expected of a highly qualified teacher, regardless of the area of specialization, is the ability to cause quality learning by students. The results of many studies have shown that students of highly qualified teachers learn more effectively than do the students of taught by teachers who are less qualified. Several studies using data from Teach for America (TFA) show that students of uncertified teachers achieve less well than do those taught by teachers who are certified. One study compared student achievement for 110 matched pairs of under-certified and certified teachers from five low-income school districts in Arizona and found that students of certified teachers outperformed students of uncertified teachers on all three areas of the SAT 9: reading, mathematics, and language arts. In reading, students of certified teachers outperformed students of uncertified teachers by approximately four months on a grade-equivalent scale. Students of certified teachers were ahead of students of uncertified teachers in mathematics by approximately three months. Similar results were found in language arts achievement in which students of certified teachers were approximately three months ahead of those taught by uncertified teachers. (Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, (2002)

Data from Houston, Texas representing over 132, 000 students and 4400 teachers in grades 3-5 over a six-year period on six achievement tests (the TAAS, SAT9, and APRENDA (for Spanish-speaking students) in reading and mathematics showed that certified teachers consistently produced stronger student-achievement gains than did uncertified teachers (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin and Hellig, 2005).

High-quality learning is also a product of the science of teaching. Teachers who are highly qualified possess the knowledge and skills that research has shown to be essential in

producing student learning. The science of teaching is composed of (1) the essential skills: planning, knowledge, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment and feedback strategies and (2) subject skills. (Glatthorn, Jones and Bullock, page 5) According to these authors, “subject matter by itself is not sufficient. The teacher also needs pedagogical content knowledge, the ability to make the subject understandable to the students as well as knowledge of the subject skills that have been associated with increasing learning in specific subject areas (Glatthorn, Jones and Bullock, page 7).

Teacher professionalism is also an essential category of characteristics of a highly qualified teacher. In this category of characteristics, a teacher recognizes and implements all responsibilities essential for making sure the impact of teaching goes beyond the classroom. The impact of teaching should also reach the families and communities of students.(Glatthorn, Jones and Bullock, page 7).

Highly qualified teachers of reading possess all of the skills and competencies mentioned above. Additionally, they should possess the knowledge and competencies enabling them to implement the research-based information recommended by the National Reading Panel on five areas of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. International Reading Association recently recommended that classroom organization, differentiated instruction, expert intensive tutoring, motivation and engagement, writing, and oral language should be included in the list..(*Reading Today*, August/September, 2006, page 8).

Documentation by Use of Portfolios

An array of characteristics so extensive as required to indicate a highly qualified teacher clearly needs a means of documentation that provides data related to most if not all of the characteristics. Multiple means of assessment are needed. Yet, from a practical point of view, that documentation must not be cumbersome and inefficient Above all it must be accurate to the highest degree possible. By its nature, a portfolio is uniquely suited to the task. While tests of subject-matter knowledge and verification of college completion are not sufficient by themselves, a portfolio can accommodate these types of evidence and much more. Put another way, a portfolio can provide an over-all, virtually complete picture of the entire spectrum of a teacher’s characteristics. A portfolio can be dynamic, providing continuing evidence of a teacher’s growth and development.

The concept of a portfolio for showing characteristics of an individual is not new. For a long time, portfolios have been used to show an individual's competencies, achievements or any number of other characteristics. Originally, the word, "portfolio" was used to refer merely to the receptacle for holding the owner's loose papers, drawings, and the like. The concept of a model's portfolio carrying photographs for presentation to prospective employers is familiar to everyone. Over the years, the word, "portfolio" became useful for referring to the container in which aspirants for various positions placed artifacts related to their accomplishments and talents to interested parties. Gradually, the concept became useful at all levels of education for displaying tangible evidence of a student's or teacher's achievement and development. For students and teachers alike, one of the most negative characteristics of the portfolio is its tendency to grow bulky and cumbersome. Closely related to this negative factor is the lack of organization of materials in some portfolios.

Documentation by Use of Electronic Portfolios

Discovery and use of the electronic portfolio are alleviating most of the negative factors associated with traditional types of portfolios used in education. Instead of the bulky collections of often poorly organized artifacts characterizing traditional types of portfolios, the electronic portfolio promises a streamlined, well-organized approach that can be useful in many ways, including documentation of the characteristics of highly qualified teachers. Of the promise of electronic portfolios, E. Todd Gibson stated "the most recent on portfolio assessment, the electronic portfolio, takes the incorporation of existing genres to an entirely new level as the electronic portfolio makes it relatively easy and efficient to include artifacts that go beyond the printed text. An electronic portfolio might include lesson plans, student work samples, videos of classroom performances, use of multimedia. All of these genres are absorbed and digested by the new complex genre and take on a new life, with a new purpose in a different context, and for a different audience". (Gibson, E. Todd (2007) *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* , page 432.)

The usefulness of electronic portfolios for documenting the wide range of characteristics essential for indicating a highly qualified teacher can hardly be overdrawn.

Not only do the values pertain to the amassing of artifacts for perusal by persons concerned, but they also pertain to personal gains for the individual constructing such a portfolio. Among

personal values made possible by constructing the electronic portfolio may be found improvement of critical and reflective thinking abilities, holistic thinking about educational experiences, and clarification of philosophy, goals, and objectives. Among advantages afforded examiners of the electronic portfolio are viewing an on-going record of accomplishments, documentation of teaching effectiveness, and possibly, tangible evidence of an understanding of local, state and national standards.

Use of Electronic Portfolios in the Bowie State University Graduate Reading Education Program

During the past three years, candidates for the master's degree in the reading program of Bowie State University, Bowie, Maryland have constructed electronic portfolios during their final practicum course. One of the purposes of the portfolios has been to provide a means whereby students could display their professional characteristics to future employers or in the interest of promotions or other advancements sought in their professional careers. Another purpose has been to help students envision the parameters of their total educational experiences and how these have contributed to their teaching abilities. The electronic portfolio was conceived of as a vehicle by which evidence of their capabilities as highly qualified teachers could be shown.

The first step in developing the electronic portfolio was students' clarification of their educational philosophies. Students began this process in an early stage of their requirements in the program and were well aware of their beliefs before beginning construction of the electronic portfolios.

In that the electronic portfolios were constructed within the framework of local, state and national standards, close attention to and clarification of meanings of standards claimed early attention. Standards identified by professional organizations such as IRA, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and others were recognized in the framework of standards governing the curriculum in the School of Education at Bowie State University. Essence of the standards were captured in the following categories: (a) academic scholar, (b) effective practitioner, (c) multiple assessments, (d) global and multicultural education, (e) special education perspectives, (f) reflective practitioner, and (g) personal and interpersonal perspectives. Students amassed artifacts and records that showed their achievements in relation

to each category of standards. For example, students attested to their academic scholarship by presenting in their electronic portfolios evidence of their college and university degrees, awards they had amassed for scholarly achievements, recent books they had read, test results and other academic accomplishments. They used videotapes to show their behaviors as effective practitioners in their classrooms, emphasizing their uses of instructional strategies, classroom environments, technology, management. They used videos as well to show their characteristics when working with individual students needing extra attention. In short, the whole spectrum of a candidate's characteristics was visible in the electronic portfolio.

Conclusion

The concept of "highly qualified teacher" is an old concept that has achieved wide implementation under the ESEA and NCLB Acts. The NCLB Act which extended the concept to include all levels of elementary schools, not just Title I schools has made great impact on the preparation of teachers at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Once identified, characteristics of highly qualified teachers cannot be fully documented with a narrow range of measures such as tests and/or evidence of college completion.

Portfolios provide a means for documentation of the wide range of characteristics needed by teachers who are deemed highly qualified. Weaknesses in traditional types of portfolios can be remedied by construction and use of electronic portfolios. Use of electronic portfolios in a graduate program in reading and reading education at Bowie State University, Bowie, Maryland has been highly successful in documenting all the characteristics of highly qualified teachers.

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