

Some Plain Talk about Quality Teaching

In this interview with freelance education writer John Norton, SECTQ Executive Director Barnett Berry explains why the Center's work is sharply focused on teaching quality and how accomplished teaching matters most in raising the achievement of all children. Berry also shares some ideas about how education writers and reporters can take their own measure of teaching quality in a school.

The agenda of your organization seems apparent in its name — Southeast Center for Teaching Quality. But just how does your Center define “teaching quality”? And is *teaching* quality different from *teacher* quality?

Yes, in our way of thinking there *is* a difference. And if we want to improve academic achievement for all students, we need to pay attention to both.

When we talk about *teacher quality*, we're referring to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions a teacher brings to a classroom. *Teaching quality* is a bigger idea that encompasses a whole school or school district. It refers to how students are taught throughout the day and year by all the teachers who teach them. “Teaching quality” also gets at how schools are organized. A school with high-quality *teaching* has supports in place that make high-quality *teachers* able to function at their peak levels. By focusing just on teacher quality we get fixated on the individual, and not the system. I can be a quality teacher and still find myself in a situation where I'm not able to do a quality teaching job.

There's kind of a catch phrase you hear in education circles these days. It may seem like jargon to outsiders, but to those of us who have watched for many years as teachers closed their classroom doors and worked in isolation from one another, it has real meaning. The phrase is “learning community.” And sometimes we also hear “professional learning community,” referring to the teachers and administrators in a school.

The word “community” recognizes that a school has broken down the traditional isolation among teachers, and that professionals in the school have accepted joint responsibility for student success. Schools that are learning communities always have quality principals who know how to lead instructional improvement. They make time for teachers to identify individual and group learning issues and solve them together. They make sure their schools are well connected to their communities and organize support services that allow quality teaching to happen, even when many of their students come from difficult circumstances.

The federal No Child Left Behind legislation stresses the importance of well-qualified teachers. It says, for example, that all teachers in the public schools must be “highly qualified” by 2006. And Title I schools must meet this standard immediately. Will the new law succeed in forcing school systems to meet your Center's standard of a “competent, caring and qualified” teacher in every classroom?

The new legislation can help us get to where we need to be. It just does not go far enough. The law says teachers must be fully licensed or certified by the state and that teachers must demonstrate competency in each subject they teach. The emphasis is on subject matter knowledge. There is less attention being paid to how teachers *teach* the subject matter and whether they have the supports to teach well.

Don't get me wrong. We need to be sure teachers have subject matter knowledge. But there's a lot more to the equation. For example, you may be extremely knowledgeable about mathematics. But do you know how to teach it to diverse learners at different levels of achievement? We need to make sure teachers have these skills *before* they begin to teach. There's plenty of evidence that very few of them will get the support they need to develop these skills *after* they enter the classroom.

Most teachers who are hired with a subject-matter degree but without teacher education end up working in schools and classrooms filled with low-income and minority students. They quickly find that there's more to teaching math or science or history than knowing and loving your subject. And these underprepared teachers leave in droves after a year or two of struggle. When you consider that a major focus of the new law is closing the achievement gap between middle class kids and poor and minority kids, this kind of teacher staffing doesn't make much sense.

Yet, in announcing the Bush Administration's position on teacher quality, Secretary of Education Rod Paige said that current certification laws block many talented people from teaching. He cited some research that verbal ability and subject-matter mastery are the only two "measurable" qualities of first-rate teachers.

If you were debating the Secretary before a national conference of business leaders, how would you convince the audience that there's more to teaching than knowing your subject?

Well, the first thing I would say is that, with all due respect, the Secretary is just plain wrong.

There is substantial evidence that teacher education matters to student achievement. Subject matter knowledge and verbal ability also matter. You need all three. We have numerous peer-reviewed studies here at the Center that clearly show these facts. What teachers know about *how to teach* significantly increases their ability to teach their subject matter.

The sad truth, however, is that many states and districts are currently doing what Secretary Paige seems to want. They're making it easier for folks to become teachers. In many cities and some states (like California, Texas, New York City) there is no real bar to hiring uncertified teachers. And where are those uncertified teachers usually placed? Not in suburban schools, you can be sure. Despite the strong correlations between race, socioeconomic status, uncertified teachers, and student achievement, we keep putting untrained teachers in our highest-need schools.

We can see how Secretary Paige's policy would work out across the nation by looking at California right now. There are 42,000 teachers without standard credentials in California. Research conducted by SRI International has shown that these teachers are far more likely to be teaching students of color and poverty — and that these alternatively certified teachers are far more likely to produce much lower student achievement results.

The Secretary's report claims to rest its case on "solid research," but it fails to cite a single peer-reviewed journal article on the topic of teacher education or teacher quality to back up its claims.

Secretary Paige also said: "Many schools of education have continued business as usual, focusing heavily on pedagogy, how to be a teacher, when the evidence cries out that what future teachers need most is a deeper understanding of the subject they'll be teaching, of how to monitor student progress, and how to help students who are falling behind."

What is "pedagogy" exactly and why has it gotten such a bad reputation? Do people really need all those education courses in college? I know my wife didn't think much of hers!

Good questions. First, *pedagogy* is simply a term that refers to the teaching skills necessary to help children and adolescents learn. Unfortunately, I would agree with your wife and many other critics of teacher education, that what we have had as pedagogy in the past was often not very good. But just because teacher education is not good enough doesn't mean we should do away with it.

What does good pedagogy look like in today's school? For one thing, good teaching means knowing how to teach your *specific* content. You don't teach biology using exactly the same strategies you use to teach history or literacy. Good teaching also means being able to assess why your particular students do not get the content they are supposed to be learning. A good teacher has to have diagnostic skills. You have to be able to look at the work students are doing in your classroom, find out what's working and what's not working in your teaching, and then figure out what will work. And you have to do that for every student.

You don't learn these kinds of skills in a math or science course in college. These are specialized professional skills unique to teaching. And they are skills that high-quality teacher education programs must help preservice teachers learn before they ever have sole responsibility for the education of real students in real schools.

Do you think "pedagogy" is more important today than it once was?

Well, it's always been important for teachers to know how to transfer knowledge and help students build their skills. But yes, it's more important than ever today. Think about this: A teacher survey conducted in 2000 found that 41 percent of America's teachers now teach students who have limited English proficiency. They come to classrooms without having English as their primary language. Now you tell me — how well do you think a brand-new graduate in mathematics with no significant teacher preparation is

going to do with those students? We already have too many teachers in our schools who are unprepared for this LEP (limited English proficient) challenge. It makes no sense to open the floodgates and add thousands more each year by downplaying the importance of teacher education.

If you examine the Secretary's comments closely, you'll see something of a contradiction in what he says. He downplays pedagogy, but he also calls for teachers to know "how to monitor student progress, and how to help students who are falling behind." Isn't that pedagogy? These are exactly the kind of teaching skills built into "pedagogical" coursework at places like Michigan State University, Bank Street College, Alverno College, Trinity University, and many other highly effective teacher education programs around the nation.

I believe the Secretary believes in and understands exactly what I am talking about. Perhaps he just chooses to label it differently. Certainly we agree on the need to make *major* improvements in teacher education in our colleges and universities. And I think that is happening and can be accelerated by the NCLB legislation, with the right leadership.

But to suggest that we do away with requirements that subject-matter specialists learn how to teach is like suggesting that we let anyone with a military background become a police officer, without training them to deal with the complexities of life on the streets. It defies common sense.

I was lurking on a teacher discussion listserv and overheard this conversation. One teacher said: "I would like to see how effective a Ph.D. in history would be in my middle school classroom. Yes, they would know the history. But if they couldn't relate it to these kids, most of whom do not speak English at home, most of whom are poor, what good is the knowledge they have?"

But another teacher said: "There should be more emphasis on subject-matter knowledge in education. If the teacher doesn't comprehend the 'big picture' of the subject, and how all of the discrete pieces of information fit into a coherent whole, then he or she is incapable of leading the students to those connections. I have seen much 'from the book' teaching from individuals who had many education classes and few (content) classes. I feel that students are cheated by this."

Who's right? Or are they both right?

Each of these teachers has half of the answer. Teachers need content knowledge and the specific pedagogical or teaching skills of how to teach it. I am afraid one reason there's a battle going on over this issue is that if we really enforced the kind of higher teaching standards I'm speaking of, it would raise the price of teachers substantially. So we see states go through the motions of standards. They create licensing requirements and then build backdoors into the system to meet supply needs. These "emergency" credentialing strategies allow states and school districts to staff schools without facing up to the real cost of quality. And then they wonder why we can't close the achievement gap.

Another teacher in the listserv discussion expressed the belief that “a good teacher can teach just about anything.” I know some principals share that opinion and feel comfortable assigning teachers with a good track record to just about any subject or grade level. Do you agree?

A good teacher cannot teach “just about anything.” They most likely could learn to do so, given enough time, training and experience. Here’s the bottom line: Teachers need to know their subjects so well they can organize that knowledge in lots of different ways so that every student can learn it. This takes time, experience, coaching, feedback and analysis. It’s highly unlikely that the best of teachers could do all of this for physics as well as for algebra, history, literacy and literature. Maybe in a 40-year career! Good teaching is discipline-specific, student age-specific, and, to some extent, specific to the communities in which teachers are working with students and their families.

How does all of this relate to non-traditional teacher recruitment and training programs? I know that many states now have fast-track alternative certification. And one of the most prominent recruiting programs, Teach for America, has received a lot of praise for creating opportunities for bright young college graduates to perform a public service and help out high-poverty schools. What’s wrong with programs like that? Isn’t there a teacher shortage?

First let me say that we need programs to attract non-traditional candidates into teaching. We just need to go to the expense of preparing them to teach before they start teaching. The preparation they receive may very well look different than a traditional program, but it must meet the same high standards we want for *all* teacher preparation.

If you look closely at the teacher shortage statistics, you’ll see our real shortages are in challenging content areas like math and science, in areas like special education, and in high-challenge schools. In every one of these shortage areas, high-quality teacher preparation is a must.

You may hear that programs like Teacher for America are effective. Well, unfortunately, this is just politics, and reflects a willingness to alter data for political purposes.

For example, Secretary Paige cites a recently released study of Teach for America by Raymond and others (2001). The Secretary’s report claims that TFA teachers do as well or better than other teachers. This is not accurate. In fact, it’s not even what the researchers found. Their study found that students of experienced teachers performed significantly *better* than students of inexperienced teachers, including TFA teachers.

The study also did not compare certified to uncertified teachers. Although they had the data to do so, the authors chose *not* to report how TFA teachers performed in comparison to trained or certified teachers. Instead, they compared TFA recruits with other inexperienced teachers in high-minority schools in Houston. They found that about 50% of Houston’s new hires are uncertified and about 35% lacked a bachelor’s degree. These proportions are even higher in high-minority schools. So TFA recruits in this study were compared to an extraordinarily underprepared set of teachers. In this comparison, students of TFA teachers did about as well as those of other inexperienced, largely untrained teachers — many of them without bachelor’s degrees. I would not call this a stunning endorsement of a program’s effectiveness!

This study also found that a large majority of Houston's TFA recruits left by the end of their second year of teaching. Earlier data from the Maryland Department of Education showed that TFA recruits in Baltimore had similar attrition rates, with 62% gone by the third year of teaching. Over the last ten years, TFA has spent about \$80 million and has about 2000 teachers still teaching. And how many teachers teach in American public schools? About 2.8 million.

A new study released in September 2002 by a peer review journal sheds even more light on the failings of TFA teachers. Using a national standardized test, Ildiko Laczko-Kerr and David Berliner found that TFA teachers' students make about 20% less academic growth per year than fully certified teachers. This amounts to these students falling about 2 months behind the others on the grade-level scale.

What is most striking about all of this is that we know that in the low-performing schools where most of these TFA recruits are placed, the students need a stable set of well prepared teachers to work with them. The last thing struggling kids need is a supply of inexperienced, underprepared teachers with very short expiration dates.

How does your opposition to programs like Teach for America jibe with your statement that we need to attract more non-traditional people into teaching?

Teach for America draws on a pool of graduates from mostly elite colleges. They're academically able, intelligent young people. We should be recruiting this kind of dedicated person into teaching — people who are highly capable and feel some call to serve and teach. But we *must* prepare them for their challenging assignments. Otherwise, they give up and drop out of teaching, as the data shows.

There are ways to do this. One stunning example is from Los Angeles where UCLA has launched an urban teacher education program that recruits a very bright, diverse group of young people. They use incentives to attract them into a quality preparation program where they train together as a group. They learn how to teach to standards, assess student work, collaborate as professionals, and solve learning problems together. They gain their skills and knowledge working in real schools and communities. And they have a 90 percent retention rate after five years of teaching. The bottom line is that these quality programs cost more money on the front end — but they save the system money on the back end because these people *stay in teaching*.

You keep mentioning new-teacher attrition rates. Aren't those rates high for *all* new teachers?

If you look at the research, you see a progression in new-teacher retention rates, based on the quality of preparation they receive. Teachers who come in through short-cut programs, with six or eight weeks of training, are the quickest to leave. Graduates of four-year teacher preparation programs have better retention rates, although they are still too high. But those who complete five-year programs really stick with teaching. Usually, they've had time for internships and extensive in-school training episodes under master mentor teachers. Believe it or not, when you account for the costs associated

with high attrition rates, a five-year program is actually less costly to the taxpayers than an eight-week alternative route program.

Are there any leadership activities within a principal's control that you believe can positively influence retaining good teachers?

The first thing a principal can do is make sure that their least experienced and prepared teachers do NOT teach the most challenging students. Giving our novices the toughest teaching assignments may be education's most dysfunctional teaching policy and practice. Principals should stop this practice tomorrow.

Second, principals can re-think the school schedule so that teachers have more time to work with each other. Our Center is involved in a research study in Texas where we have visited several high-performing elementary schools that offer more than one hour a day for team planning and two mentors for each new teacher. Some schools we have studied give teachers up to 10 hours a week of collective planning time — and structured opportunities for teachers to assess student work, how well their lessons work, and to build new curriculum.

These actions are at the heart of sustaining a teaching profession at the ground level. These strategies will greatly reduce the 50 percent turnover rate for new teachers in many schools. Teachers will stay in schools where they have a chance to learn from their colleagues and do good things for kids. To do this takes creativity on the part of principals, but it can and must be done. I will say that education administration programs in universities and principal leadership academies must teach these skills to aspiring and practicing principals. If not, those programs are not doing their job.

Third, principals can create unique opportunities for teachers to lead in meaningful ways. Most schools give teachers all kinds of committee assignments and the like. I am not talking about that. I am speaking about principals who find ways for teachers to be involved in selecting new colleagues, assessing their peers, conducting and presenting findings from action research, working together in becoming National Board Certified, and presenting data they assemble about student achievement to the PTA or the school board. Again, principals must find time and resources for teachers to take on these roles — but they are critical for building a dynamic and rewarding professional life for teachers.

Finally, my last suggestion is a bit more simple and straightforward. Principals can set up structured opportunities to listen to the ideas and concerns of the teachers in their schools. Collectively, teachers know a great deal about how and why students learn. Smart principals will use surveys, interviews, and study groups to assemble and synthesize those ideas and then act on them.

What is your own background in education? As you work on teaching quality issues, what understandings do you bring from your own experience?

I began my career in education by teaching in an inner-city high school. I came in like many — I had lots of content knowledge in my field (social studies), but was not well prepared at all to teach students who could not read a high school history textbook. I

also worked in a highly dysfunctional school and school district — one where I taught over 175 students in my first year, was assigned four different course preparations, and had no access to decent materials that were appropriate for my students. Did I mention I was coaching, too?

It's a sad but familiar story. My principal refused to find help for me when I was struggling, and I was really struggling. Yet my colleagues thought I was one of the best teachers in the school. That may be the saddest part of the story! I left after three years, convinced that I needed to do something about the sorry state of teacher education and support.

I returned to graduate school to study school organizations and education policy. I ended up, no surprise, focusing my dissertation on the development of the teaching profession. My doctoral study looked at the sociological and political implications of a school system's attempt to transform its teacher development system. That work guided me into a career path that has taken me to working at a think tank, a state department of education, and a university.

I have been fortunate that ever since I left classroom teaching some 20 years ago, my research has put me right in the middle of classrooms all across the nation. I've had a chance to learn first-hand from teachers, principals, and students about why things change and why they do not change in public education and the teaching profession. And while it's sobering to realize how many schools like my 1970s high school still exist, I've never seen a greater opportunity to really bring about positive change than I see now.

Can you describe a school where you've done research that had all or most of the right ingredients to assure "teaching quality"?

I must say I have yet to see a school with all of the right ingredients to assure "teaching quality" over long periods of time. Sometimes I will see a school where a principal and a highly motivated group of teachers are really moving — but then the district office gets in the way. They change the principal. They institute a blanket "reform de jour" that breaks the momentum and the spirit of the school's initiative. In other cases, I have seen schools working well with their district people, but then Byzantine state policies (e.g., recertification, compensation) get in the way.

But my glimpses of success always reveal the same key ingredients: a strong principal who knows a lot about developing teacher leadership. A strong university relationship where college and school faculty work together to prepare new teachers and develop experienced ones. An administration that aggressively recruits highly qualified teachers (those who know subjects and how to teach them).

In schools that are changing for the better, we always find a reasonable ratio of expert, master teachers to novice teachers, and we always see a culture of professional learning. Teachers have time to learn from each other; they're excited about the progress they're making and want to have more and more success. Quite often, they also work with the same students for multiple years, and they know their students and families well.

I will say that I think we are seeing more schools with more of these ingredients more often. And we need to single them out as evidence that a quality teaching environment makes a big difference in student success.

If you were a district superintendent with ample resources and strong support from your school board, what system would you create to assure quality teaching for the long term throughout every school in your district? What would the components be?

I would start with identifying my best teachers. I would single out my National Board Certified and other accomplished teachers and pay them more than anybody else. In return, I would expect them to take on more responsibility in leading the district's teacher development program, which would include mentoring novice teachers and turning out-of-field, underprepared teachers into qualified teachers. These master teachers would be at the core of each school's efforts to assess student performance, and they would be spokespeople for the profession in the community.

By showcasing accomplished teachers with strong leadership skills, I would build continuing support to pay teachers a professional wage. We keep seeing the research that, of all the factors within a school administrator's control, accomplished teaching has the greatest impact on student achievement. Since student achievement is the measure of any school CEO's success, it's really a no-brainer. Build a learning organization fueled by the power of accomplished teacher leaders.

Americans seem to have a love-hate relationship with schoolteachers. We often express our admiration for particular teachers who meant a lot to us when we were in school. Sometimes we speak about teachers the way we speak about firefighters or police — admiring their courage and commitment. Yet when the latest report is published about the inadequacies of our schools, we're quick to blame the teachers. What do you think accounts for our ambivalence — and what can we do in our communities to change it?

There's a lot of interesting history and sociology behind the answers to these questions. One issue is that Americans tend not to trust people they don't know. That's why they don't like Congress but they often like their own representative. Or why they believe their local neighborhood school is good (even though it may not be), but also believe the American school system as a whole is failing. You see this over and over again in education polls.

Another issue: In the United States, most teachers are women. And sociologists find that professions dominated by women, like teaching and nursing, have been viewed historically with some skepticism by the American public. Teaching was long seen as something less than a profession — something one did for "awhile" or something held in reserve "to fall back on." These beliefs are rooted in our culture and are not easily discarded, despite ample evidence that the complex skills required to teach effectively in today's schools certainly qualifies teaching as "professional work."

In addition, the American people are more likely to believe that kids do well in school more because of their "genes," and not because of hard work and good teaching.

Therefore, many Americans tend to believe that almost anyone can teach, with the right aptitude and a bit of subject matter knowledge. The smart students will get it, and the not-so-smart ones may not, but the outcomes — the thinking goes — have little to do with teacher skills and knowledge. Unfortunately, nothing could be farther from the truth. All kids benefit when quality teaching pervades a school. And all kids suffer when it doesn't. We don't often hear about the highly talented student who was "under-taught." But it happens all over our country every day.

If we document more fully what quality teaching is doing to improve schooling in America — and market that information to the public — then we will raise the awareness of teaching's critical role in student success. At that point, I think, Americans will be much more likely to support investments in teacher education, professional development, and teacher salaries.

Finally, if you were teaching a seminar on teaching quality for education reporters, what would you tell them to look for as they visit schools and observe in classrooms? How can a journalist tell whether there's good teaching going on? What key elements must be present?

First of all, I would look hard at the kids in the classrooms — what are they doing and what kinds of work are they producing? Are the students passively listening and regurgitating facts or are they actively investigating issues, developing papers, and producing projects? Even this can be insufficient evidence. It's all too easy for teachers to make their classes *look* interesting, without any rigor or attention to standards and assessments.

In fact, I sometimes see an education news story that makes me wonder if the writer was misled by a "fun" activity into thinking great teaching and learning was going on in a teacher's classroom. It's understandable, given the dreary classroom experiences many of us had as children. I once had the opportunity to work with a group of reporters. We visited schools and classrooms together and then "debriefed" about what we saw. I think this helped all of us think more deeply about the reality behind the facade.

If I were a reporter, I'd be looking for evidence that both teachers and the students themselves are critically reviewing student work. I'd look around the classroom and the school for evidence of work that has real intellectual quality. I'd look to see if the work has been measured by clear standards and benchmarks for excellence.

Reporters should also look for evidence that the teacher is working to reach every student. Does the teacher know how to connect with the Limited English Proficient student? The special needs student? The kid who is performing below grade level? Ask the students what they are learning and how they know they are learning. If a student does not know what he is learning, then all is not going well.

Quality teachers reach each of their students in a variety of ways. A given student may not be performing at "grade level" at a particular point in time, but a good teacher knows a lot about what students are learning, and where they're struggling. Ask teachers how they know what a student has learned, and how they decide what to do next if a student hasn't learned something.

You can't make a judgment in a single visit to a classroom, but over time you can take a measure of a teacher's level of accomplishment. And the same is true for a school. As I said at the beginning of this interview, I think it's important to make that distinction between *teacher* quality and *teaching* quality. And to measure the quality of teaching, you have to look at the whole school.

Do teachers talk about their professional work when they're away from students — on the playground, in the teacher's lounge, in the hallway? Has the school moved beyond the "one-day workshop" model of staff development to the point where teachers are trying new strategies in their own classrooms and conferring with one another about the results? Does the school regularly analyze student data (not just test scores, but all kinds of performance and environmental data)? How does the school use the data to improve?

What's the teacher turnover rate? Are new and inexperienced teachers mentored and supported as they learn and grow, or are they left to sink or swim on their own? Does the school know how to engage parents and the community in school improvement? Does the school have the kind of reputation that draws outsiders into the school to observe outstanding teaching practices? Take a measure of the school and you'll have a measure of the teaching.

Writers and reporters have good instincts. They need to talk to as many teachers, students and parents as they can. Once they've done that, they'll be able to sniff out the truth. They'll know whether they've entered a school in name only, or a true learning community.

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Reporters and editors are welcome to quote Barnett Berry by excerpting comments from this interview. To interview Barnett by phone or email, contact him at the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27515. (919) 843-6392. Send email to: bberry@teachingquality.org

Through research and policy advocacy, the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality promotes opportunities for all students in the region to have competent, caring, and qualified teachers. Find out more by visiting our website: www.teachingquality.org