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Highly-Qualified Teachers Are Not Necessarily High-Quality Teachers

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Education Trust (www.edtrust.org) is a very well-informed think-tank that conducts research in a variety of important areas related to education. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind, Education Trust has been beating on a drum that is very near and dear to my heart – teacher quality.

Education Trust has published a number of studies of teacher quality in the past 5 years, most of them sounding alarms both about the critical importance of improving teacher quality, and the terrible and unjust shortage of high-quality teachers in high-needs schools.

Education Trust released a study this summer (Peske & Haycock, 2006) showing that schools with high rates of poverty and large populations of minority students have fewer highly qualified teachers than more advantaged, low-needs schools. They cite a recent study by Pressley, White, and Gong (2005) that showed that schools in Illinois with higher rates of poverty almost never had a staff of high-quality teachers.

There can be no doubt that teacher quality is critically important for academic success of at-risk students, especially when it comes to teaching literacy skills. However, since No Child Left Behind increased the focus on teacher quality, we really have not been able to agree on a definition of what teacher quality is. Education Trust has focused much energy and study on the topic of teacher quality, but they have not been very clear on how they determine teacher quality.

I would argue that much confusion has come from the conflation of the terms “highly qualified” and “high quality.” Legislation passed since 2001 has called for more “highly qualified” teachers, and the focus has shifted away from “high quality” teachers. The term “highly qualified” does have a clear definition – highly qualified teachers are teachers with degrees and certification in the areas in which they teach. Thus, high school math teachers should have degrees in math (or at least substantial college credit hours in math), history teachers should have a clear and documented background in history. But what about elementary school reading teachers? There is no degree in elementary school reading at most universities.

Research on Teacher Quality

The National Reading Panel (2000) broached the subject of teacher quality in their influential report. In addition to introducing the world to the five “Big Ideas” of reading instruction, they also reviewed the literature on teacher education and its impact on reading instruction. However, most of the studies they examined involved providing long-term professional development for current teachers. There was usually no certification or granting of degrees involved in the studies they reviewed – the question addressed in these various studies was simply whether providing professional development to existing teachers positively influenced their students' achievement in reading. In nearly all of the studies reviewed by the National Reading Panel, the answer was, yes – high-quality, long-term professional development for existing teachers does significantly improve reading achievement for students.

“Highly qualified” teachers are those with degrees and certifications in the areas in which they teach. “High quality” teachers, however, are those with talent, knowledge, and skill. Alas, when it comes to reading instruction, there is very little evidence that the two are related. In other words, recruiting and retaining “highly qualified” teachers is no guarantee of “high quality.”

While we define “highly qualified” teachers by the degrees and certificates they hold, I think it is important for us to think more broadly about “high quality” teachers. Over the years, I have observed hundreds of teachers teaching students to read. When I walk into a class and watch a teacher, I have little knowledge of the certificates or degrees that teacher has earned. However, I can tell very quickly whether that teacher is a “high quality” reading teacher.

Disturbingly, as I have come to know the teachers better, I rarely find any relationship between the quality of their instruction and the number or types of certificates they hold. I am sad to say that I have seen many awful reading teachers who are certified reading specialists, certified master reading teachers, and National Board Certificate holders. And I am pleased to say that I have seen many excellent reading teachers who have few such credentials touting their quality. Sometimes, I have even seen novice teachers who are remarkably talented at teaching reading skills. In my experience, the credentials and years of experience are simply insufficient for defining teacher quality.

Hallmarks of High-Quality Reading Teachers

When I walk into a classroom and observe instruction, there are certain hallmarks that I have found correlate very well with the effectiveness and success of those teachers in teaching students to read. And, of course, there are other hallmarks and characteristics that I have encountered that almost always correspond to low student achievement. Furthermore, I find that when I talk to school administrators and other experts in my field, my impressions of teacher quality are quite similar to theirs. That is to say, we know high-quality reading teachers when we see them.

I also should point out that there are some teachers who are wonderful at teaching certain things, but they are not great reading teachers. I am not much of an expert on instruction in other domains, and I rarely look for expertise in those domains when I observe a lesson.

I'm a reading expert, so I can speak more intelligently about high-quality reading instruction than, say, a music lesson or a math lesson. Some hallmarks of quality teaching are undoubtedly universal, but the reader should still keep in mind that when I talk about teacher quality, I'm really trying to emphasize their quality as reading and literacy teachers.

I've tried to capture some of the hallmarks of high-quality reading teachers – some are quite easy and obvious, but others are a bit harder to pin down and define. The list of eight characteristics of high-quality reading teachers below is a work-in-progress. I certainly would appreciate [feedback](#) and thoughts on this very important issue.

FIRST, high-quality teachers are very purposeful about what they teach. High-quality teachers can tell you what they are teaching, and why they are teaching it. They have clear instructional goals. They don't just fill the day with activities, they focus their instruction like a laser on specific learning goals that they have for their students, and they monitor their students' progress toward those goals. Their instructional goals are always clearly aligned with standards and assessments so students are well prepared and confident as they take tests and advance to the next grade.

SECOND, High-quality reading teachers use powerful instructional strategies. High-quality teachers can tell you with confidence that the teaching strategies they are using are research-based and have been shown to be effective. And if you are familiar with the research literature, you know they are right -- they're not just confident, they're confident because they really are informed. You never see these teachers asking students to read a chapter and answer the questions at the end. You never see them using worksheets or creating “busy-work” for their students. These teachers know those are not powerful instructional strategies for achieving their learning goals. In short, high-quality teachers are creative and dynamic and well-informed in finding instructional strategies that work for each of their students.

THIRD, high-quality teachers do not waste time. I can not tell you how many hours of the week are wasted in most classrooms on silly, pointless routines. I am also sad to say, I have walked in on hundreds of idle classrooms over the years, and it is always embarrassing for me and for the teacher. The teacher is usually at her desk. The kids are entertaining themselves. The teacher usually panics a little when I walk in, and for some reason always says the same thing: "They've already finished their work -- I'm just giving them a break." High-quality teachers do not do this. High-quality teachers are prepared with activities to get the kids engaged the second they walk in the classroom -- before the bell has even rung. High-quality teachers do not waste time on transitions from one activity to another. They don't waste time on house-keeping (calling role, getting in line, dealing with tardy children, etc.). They definitely do not waste time in the days and weeks leading up to holidays. High-quality teachers do not "throttle back" after the state-mandated exams are given, and "coast" toward summer vacation. I know one high-quality principal who disabled the classroom intercoms on her campus because she did not want any interruptions taking up even a minute of valuable class time. Allington and Cunningham in their book, ["Schools that Work: Where All Children Can Read and Write"](#) described time in terms of months, weeks, days, hours, and minutes. High-quality teachers know that they can not afford to waste minutes, because those minutes add up so very quickly. If there are 181 days of school, high-quality teachers take advantage of every minute of every day to teach their students.

FOURTH, high-quality reading teachers keep their students actively engaged. This is actually pretty redundant to the qualities listed above, but I know if I don't actually mention student engagement explicitly, I'll get a bunch of angry letters. When I walk in a classroom and see students asleep, or playing games, or just sitting and staring, then I know I am not dealing with a high-quality reading teacher. When I walk in and see chaos, with students up and moving around and talking to each other, then I MIGHT not be dealing with a high-quality reading teacher. Or I might be. Chaos is not necessarily a bad sign. High-quality teachers can often work on the edge of chaos, with students collaborating on projects, reading together, or practicing skills together. It can be noisy, but effective. The bottom line, though, is that high-quality teachers make sure that students are actively engaged in purposeful literacy-building activities throughout the day.



FIFTH, high-quality reading teachers create a learning environment that is literature rich and inviting. I get a very good feeling when I walk into a classroom that is filled with books arranged in an inviting manner, featuring comfortable places to sit or lounge and learning activity centers. This is hard to describe in words, so I've got a few pictures to illustrate what I'm talking about.

When you walk in one of these classrooms, everything about the room



says that this is a place where reading and literature is valued. There are comfortable places to sit, books are very invitingly displayed. The class is organized around group and shared reading. There are clear reading-related learning goals on the walls. There are books, books, and more books. There is clear evidence that ALL of the books are used and read by the students, and that uninteresting and undesirable books are culled from the collection. Student writing is displayed on the wall with very clear learning expectations. It is not just there for artwork -- there is a clear reason why the student work is being displayed on the wall. These are classroom environments that tell me that I'm probably dealing with a high-quality reading teacher.

SIXTH, high-quality reading teachers use data to inform instruction. They are constantly quizzing their students, probing their knowledge, testing their skills, and -- here is the important part -- they use the information they gather from all that quizzing to plan instruction. They plan their lessons days in advance, not weeks or months (or years). They keep a portfolio demonstrating clear evidence of each student's strengths and needs, and they use that to guide instruction. They follow what my colleague Deborah Jinkens called a "teaching-learning cycle" -- focusing instruction on learning needs, assessing growth, focusing instruction on new learning needs, assessing growth, focusing instruction on new learning needs, assessing growth, and so on. In these classrooms, there is a blend of teaching and testing going on all the time. Occasionally, high-quality teachers will interrupt instruction to give a formal, more objective exam, but most of the time, the assessment and progress-monitoring is fairly informal. The formal exam usually just confirms what the teacher already knows about her students.

SEVENTH, high-quality reading teachers connect with their students and their families on a personal level. They are masters of classroom-management, so the students feel comfortable with clear and consistent rules and boundaries. They respect and love all of their students, and their students feel the same way about them. High-quality teachers take the time to really get to know their students and their families. They call parents just to touch base, and share what is happening in the classroom. They meet with parents in

local coffee shops, restaurants, parks, and, if invited, in their homes. When parents come to the school, the teacher makes the parent feel welcome and honored. Some high-quality teachers have admitted to me that they resent that they have to do these things -- they feel like the parents should be working a little harder to be more involved in their child's education. However, high-quality teachers put their resentment aside and do these things anyway because they know how important it is for their students.

EIGHTH, high-quality teachers are relentlessly positive and encouraging. Frankly, it's sickening. They always find a way to make learning fun and enjoyable. They never seem to have a bad day. And they do not put unreasonable pressure on their students for achievement. Certainly high-quality teachers feel the pressure of high-stakes testing and the community's expectations for high reading achievement, but they do not put much of that pressure on their students. They have relentlessly high expectations for their students' achievement, but they always project an attitude of fun and excitement about learning. They are always searching for that compromise between fun and effective -- they try to keep the lessons and activities entertaining and interesting, but they never lose sight of the learning goals.

I wish it were the case that "highly qualified" teachers consistently exhibited these characteristics of "high quality" reading teachers, but unfortunately, I find that "quality" and "qualifications" are only loosely related (at best) when it comes to reading instruction. Perhaps qualifications are more important for teaching math or art or music -- I don't know. But I know that the qualifications that have been created for reading and literacy instruction have little to do with the "quality" characteristics I look for in teachers.

To help all students learn to read proficiently, we must look beyond mere qualifications to actual classroom instructional quality. The hallmarks I describe above are probably not exhaustive, but they're a start, and I would personally argue that it is a better start than focusing merely on certifications or degrees awarded.

For more germane information, please see [P is for Professional Development](#), and [I is for Instruction](#).

References

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