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COMMENTARY

A Response to the Daunting Challenge of Teacher Evaluation

AUTHOR

Alan J. Daly | University of California, San Diego

PUBLISHED: December 9, 2010

In his posting "The Daunting Challenge of Teacher Evaluation," David Plank rightly suggests that the challenge of teacher evaluation is indeed daunting and an important topic in many public and private conversations related to educational reform. One of the most discussed and debated arguments related to this conversation has to do with how states/districts measure the amount of value a teacher adds to the achievement of a student, and ultimately how teachers may be sorted, selected, and rewarded based on those measures. This idea is hotly contested and includes vigorous debate around issues of testing, measurement, and what is considered 'important' in terms of student learning, not to mention the potential high stakes decisions that may be made as a result of these assessments. At its best, this discussion around teacher evaluation has reinvigorated a national dialogue around practice and research; at its worst it has polarized and entrenched stakeholder groups. How is it that we can avoid the calcification of opinion and continue an open dialogue around this important issue? One way, as David Plank suggests, is to openly discuss alternative evaluation and be thoughtful about how we consider 'value'. It is in that spirit of continuing and opening this discussion that I offer the following.

One major assumption underlying the idea of 'value-added' is that student achievement results from the interaction between teacher knowledge, training and experience; the ability to effectively teach content; and previous student performance. This interaction of factors, it is also assumed, can be captured in a measure. In this sense, a teacher's ability to 'add-value' is a very individual undertaking determined almost exclusively by the human capital (training, knowledge, and skills) of the individual teacher and the demographics of the student. This assumption seems to ignore recent research, which suggests that while human capital is important in the achievement equation, also important is the influence of the social capital in a system.

In illustrating the potential influence of social capital, consider the following general example of two new teachers with similar instructional skill sets. The first new teacher enters a grade level or department in which trust is low and teachers do not share effective practices, innovative ideas, or instructional resources related to teaching or learning at that level. The second enters a grade/department in which teachers actively collaborate, exchange ideas, develop common assessments and reflect on practice. In short, they operate as a professional learning community. At the end of the year, in the current value-added conception, these two teachers are evaluated similarly according to the growth their students made and are considered 'comparable' without any attention to the social milieu that surrounds their professional practice.

In a sense, the first teacher is 'disadvantaged' in terms of not being able to learn or benefit from grade or department colleagues, and as such may be less equipped to support effective instruction that ultimately affects student outcomes. Whereas, in the second scenario, a similarly skilled teacher who has benefited from rich exchanges with colleagues may appear to add more

'value' based on increased access to resources and access to effective instructional practices. The idea that social capital, as suggested in this example and borne out in recent research, is related to achievement is especially important given the potential high stakes nature and push toward value-added measures.

The evaluation of teachers is a critical element in the educational endeavor. Better understanding the role that evaluation can play in the improvement of practice is important work that needs to be continued with vigor and fiscal and intellectual resources. However, in that work we must also consider the role that social relations may play in supporting or constraining the adding of value by a teacher. The idea of attending to the relational infrastructure suggests supplementing, not supplanting, how we think about teacher evaluation and what we mean by adding value. Both human and social capitals are important in the reform equation, but to date social capital has played a secondary role to its more well known and publicized human capital cousin.

Suggested citation

Daly, A. (2010, December). *A response to the daunting challenge of teacher evaluation* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/response-daunting-challenge-teacher-evaluation

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Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

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