What Does It Mean to be Highly Qualified?

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No Child Left Behind (NCLB) seems to be one of the most talked about and controversial educational reforms in decades. NCLB is an elementary and secondary education act signed into law January 8, 2002 designed to help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their peers. It requires that teachers be considered “highly qualified” in the core academic subjects they teach. A highly qualified teacher according to NCLB is one who has a bachelor’s degree, full state certification and licensure, and has demonstrated competency in the subject area he or she teaches (U. S. Department of Education, 2004). However, it is unclear how these accomplishments make a teacher anything more than minimally qualified (Berry, 2002).

There is little consensus on how to define a teacher as highly qualified (Mullen & Farinas). Even the government acknowledges on their NCLB website that there is a lot of confusion about what the highly qualified teacher provisions include and what they mean for teachers under NCLB (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). However, it is clear that the focus of defining highly qualified teachers by NCLB is based on content knowledge more than teaching practices. “Although NCLB acknowledges that teachers need both subject matter and pedagogical knowledge in order to be considered, ‘highly qualified’, the current leadership of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has chosen to emphasize the former and give little weight to the latter” (Berry, Hoke, & Hirsch, 2004, p. 685).

There are several national standards designed to help access teacher quality that more clearly address the pedagogy of teaching than NCLB. The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) has model standards for beginning teacher licensing. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has professional standards for the accreditation of schools, colleges, and departments of education. And, the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has designed a process to recognize teachers who demonstrate high levels of knowledge, skills, abilities, and commitments reflected in five core propositions. Three standards regarding teacher quality that are shared by all three agencies include the belief that teachers should: understand how children learn and develop; have in-depth knowledge of the subject they teach and be able to convey their knowledge in ways that encourage inquiry; and, monitor students’ learning and reflect on teaching practices, making adjustments to their teaching when needed (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2003). These standards more accurately reflect the complexity of the pedagogy of teaching than those set by NCLB.

Current Study

Since the passing of No Child Left Behind and its emphasis on teachers being highly qualified, the question “What does highly qualified look like?” is of great importance. So far, there is very little research on the characteristics needed to make a teacher effective (Rothman, 2004). Johnson (1994) studied secondary principals’ perceptions of teaching-effectiveness criteria. Preparation for class, classroom control, enthusiasm, ability to motivate students, and oral communication were ranked as the most important skills for effective teachers to possess according to the secondary principals surveyed.
Primary heads’ (principals) perceptions of the most important qualities for effective teachers to possess was studied by Newton & Newton (2001). They found that primary head teachers in England considered ability to motivate children, ability to involve children, classroom control, creating a positive climate, and discipline skills to be the most important skills for effective teachers to possess.

Past research on teacher effectiveness has provided insights into what principals perceive as qualities necessary for teachers to be effective. However, there is no current research related to teachers’ perceptions of what skills are required to make a teacher highly qualified as required by No Child Left Behind. Therefore, the current study is designed to find out what skills elementary and secondary teachers think are necessary for teachers to be considered highly qualified.

Method

Instrument

A survey was mailed to over two hundred elementary and secondary teachers in Illinois to determine what skills they considered necessary for highly qualified teachers to possess. The survey was based on one used by Johnson (1994) to assess secondary principals’ perceptions of teaching-effectiveness criteria. The original instrument used a 9-point Likert scale including 18 items related to teacher effectiveness criteria based on sixty different sources related to teacher effectiveness. A similar survey was also used by Newton & Newton (2001) to study primary school head teachers’ and student teachers’ beliefs in England.

The current study used many of the same survey items as Johnson; however, the names for some items were changed to make them more reflective of today’s teaching terminology. Classroom control was changed to behavior management, creating a positive climate was changed to attitude, competence in area of specialization was changed to content knowledge, and preparation for class was changed to organization. Other items such as clarity and discipline skills were replaced with more current skills related to best practice such as time management skills and use of differentiation. Instructional delivery and collaboration were also added. A 10-point Likert scale was utilized for ease of completion by participants.

Sample

Seventy experienced elementary and secondary public-school teachers returned the one page survey by mail. All of the respondents meet the qualifications of being highly qualified teachers in Illinois.

Research Questions

The study was designed to answer the following questions regarding highly qualified teachers:

1. What qualities do elementary and secondary teachers think a teacher should possess to be considered highly qualified?

2. Are there any significant differences in elementary and secondary teachers’ beliefs regarding the most important characteristics that make a teacher highly qualified?

3. How do the beliefs of elementary and secondary teachers in the United States compare with the
secondary principals surveyed by Johnson (1994) and the English primary school heads surveyed by Newton & Newton (2001)?

Results

Elementary and Secondary Teachers’ Responses Regarding Teacher Effectiveness

Summary of Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Elementary Teachers Mean</th>
<th>Secondary Teachers Mean</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>sd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to motivate</td>
<td>9.75 (0.51)</td>
<td>9.62 (0.65)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>9.59 (0.71)</td>
<td>9.46 (1.05)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication</td>
<td>9.46 (0.91)</td>
<td>9.23 (1.01)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>9.41 (0.85)</td>
<td>9.15 (0.90)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional delivery</td>
<td>9.39 (0.73)</td>
<td>8.92 (0.95)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior management</td>
<td>9.30 (1.06)</td>
<td>8.92 (0.95)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>9.30 (0.89)</td>
<td>8.77 (1.01)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening skills</td>
<td>9.27 (1.12)</td>
<td>8.69 (1.11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of best practice</td>
<td>9.16 (1.20)</td>
<td>8.62 (1.19)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content knowledge</td>
<td>9.11 (0.85)</td>
<td>8.54 (1.56)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to differentiate</td>
<td>9.09 (1.25)</td>
<td>8.54 (1.05)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>8.86 (1.14)</td>
<td>8.15 (1.72)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>8.80 (1.21)</td>
<td>8.15 (1.28)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>8.66 (1.61)</td>
<td>8.08 (1.55)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>8.50 (1.39)</td>
<td>7.92 (1.44)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership ability</td>
<td>8.41 (1.44)</td>
<td>7.85 (1.57)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>8.04 (1.39)</td>
<td>7.38 (1.50)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>7.91 (1.63)</td>
<td>6.85 (1.86)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td>7.34 (2.16)</td>
<td>6.77 (2.39)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology skills</td>
<td>7.20 (1.47)</td>
<td>6.46 (1.61)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Mean scores significantly higher by elementary teachers with p < 0.05.

There was a significant difference in the importance elementary teachers put on listening skills, ability to differentiate, leadership ability, appearance, and professional development. However, the ranking of importance of each of these items was similar between high school and elementary school teachers. Therefore, even though elementary school teachers placed a higher value on each of these factors, they appear to be of similar importance according to the rank order of teaching qualities.

The largest difference between elementary and secondary teachers was their rankings of listening skills and ability to differentiate. These differences may be due to differences between elementary and secondary students’ developmental needs and current teaching practices of elementary and secondary school teachers.

Comparison to Related Studies

Secondary principals surveyed by Johnson (1994) found a teacher’s ability to motivate students,
enthusiasm, interpersonal communication skills, preparation for class, and classroom control to be the five most important skills needed for teachers to be effective. Primary head teachers in England surveyed by Newton & Newton (2001) identified ability to motivate children, ability to involve children, classroom control, creating a positive climate, and discipline skills as the five most important skills teachers needed to be effective.

The skills listed as the top five responses for the principals surveyed by Johnson (1994), the head teachers surveyed by Newton & Newton (2001), and the teachers in the current study were compared to identify any similarities regarding beliefs about the most important skills needed for teachers to be effective. Overall, a teacher’s ability to motivate children was rated as the most important skill that qualified teachers should exhibit according to the educators surveyed in all three studies. Enthusiasm was selected as one of the five most important attributes by secondary principals and elementary and secondary teachers. Classroom control or behavior management was chosen as one of the most important characteristics by all groups with only elementary school teachers in America selecting it as sixth in importance. Communication was also chosen as one of the most important characteristics by all groups except English primary head teachers. The importance of having a positive attitude was identified by both elementary and secondary teachers in the United States as being one of the five most important skills needed by highly qualified teachers.

Discussion

A teacher’s content knowledge is important to students’ success. Therefore, No Child Left Behind’s requirement of extensive content knowledge for teachers recognized as highly qualified is appropriate and important. However, there are many other aspects related to the pedagogy of teaching such as a teachers’ ability to motivate students and instructional delivery that are equally if not more important according to teachers who have already met the requirements of being recognized as highly qualified. Therefore, it would seem as though the No Child Left Behind Act needs to include aspects related to the pedagogy of teaching that are much more difficult and subjective to measure than content knowledge if it is truly going to recognize teachers who are highly qualified. “As long as federal guidelines place a premium on defining teacher quality solely by measuring subject matter competence, we will continue to experience a flood of new teachers who may know their subjects, but don’t know much about teaching and learning” (Berry, 2002, p. 3).

References


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