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ABSTRACT

It is important for teachers to be accountable for what they do professionally, but it is difficult to determine how teachers can show their performance. The question of merit pay for teachers shows the difficulties of demonstrating what the teacher really has accomplished. To appraise teacher accountability using state mandated objectives, ratings and rankings on report cards can show how well students in a class have done and how they have scored on achievement tests, but not how they have done in functional activities and experiences. Holding the individual teacher accountable is difficult at best, and more complicated for teachers in charter schools. A portfolio approach to student evaluation can also provide information about teacher accountability. Certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is one way that teachers can show that they have knowledge of quality standards in teaching students. (SLD)

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An Analysis of Teacher Accountability Plans

Marlow Ediger

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AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHER ACCOUNTABILITY PLANS

Candidates for public office tend to campaign on teacher accountability for student achievement, among other issues in education and in society. Writers in educational journals as well as speakers at state and national education conventions very frequently advocate teacher accountability in their presentations. It is important for teachers, as well as all workers, to be accountable for what is done professionally and at the work place. The question arises, "How might teachers show what has been accomplished in terms of accountability?"

Merit Pay and Teacher Accountability

Merit pay for teachers who do well in teaching should receive extra pay for services performed well, according to selected advocates. Thus, teachers who are judged in performing meritorious service are to receive a bonus in pay. Generally, teachers then are rated by their principals to ascertain if they have achieved and accomplished well in teaching and learning situations. Guidelines such as the following may then be used to assess teachers in terms of how well they are doing in the classroom:

- 1. selects worthwhile objectives for student achievement. State mandated objectives, of course, need to be emphasized in the curriculum along with teacher determined objectives.**
- 2. chooses learning opportunities for students which engage learners in goal attainment.**
- 3. sequences experiences and activities for optimal student progress.**
- 4. evaluates learner progress fairly and accurately.**
- 5. provides feedback to students on how well they are achieving.**

The five enumerated objectives above tend to be broad and open to considerable interpretation. For example, which are worthwhile objectives for students to achieve, to what extent are learners engaged in learning, how and when can appropriate sequence be observed, what is fair and accurate evaluation when essays and projects are developed, and how as well as when should feedback be provided to students?

Openended criteria used to evaluate teacher performance leave considerable leeway for interpretation by the assessor.

Numerous criticisms are directed at the merit system of pay approach in stressing teacher accountability. Among others, these include the following:

- 1. the assessor is in a strong position to interpret subjectively as to who is a good teacher.**
- 2. too much power is given to the assessor in determining teacher performance.**

3. the assessor might appraise teachers in items of highly subjective factors unrelated to teaching quality such as being popular, physically attractive, a strong supporter of the assessor, and/or fear of offending a prominent person in the community such as the teacher being the wife of a city council member.

In the early 1970s, Keokuk, Iowa school system experimented with merit pay only to experience their first strike of teachers, in opposition to the plan. Grievances listed by teachers for merit pay were the following:

1. perceived unfairness of how teachers were rated for salary increases.
2. biases of the assessor toward certain teachers who did not fit the mold.
3. inadequate time spent by the assessor in appraising teachers.

During the middle 1970s, the author in his graduate education courses had a husband and wife who taught in Cedar Rapids, Iowa school system who truly praised merit pay philosophy. However, both had received the very top ratings by the assessor. Perhaps, they did deserve the extra salary: however both stated that there were highly disappointed teachers who had received rather low ratings. The latter felt strongly that they, too, should have received the merit pay raise.

Problems involved in merit pay assessments are numerous and include the following:

1. which is a fair yard-stick to use in assessing quality teaching, so there will not be "weeping and gnashing of teeth?"
2. who should do the assessing so that objectivity is involved in the evaluation process?
3. how can an assessor develop representative evidence of teaching quality in terms of the frequency and duration of each classroom visitation made? (See Ediger, 2000, 159-168).

State Mandated Objectives

Most states in the union are strong on developing objectives for teachers to implement in the classroom. These objectives provide the framework of what students are to achieve as a result of instruction. It is up to the teacher to select learning opportunities for student engagement so that the state mandated objectives may be achieved. Criterion referenced tests developed by the state tend to be aligned with the mandated objectives. With machine scoring of student results from taking these tests, a report card can be developed on the state level to report how well each school is doing, in comparison to other schools or school districts.

The results are averages for each school/school district and does

not tell how well an individual student has done on the test. Averages can be very deceiving in that the highest achiever's scores are averaged with the lowest achievers' test scores. Thus, little is said about the individual learner in terms of how he/she is faring in achievement as measured by the state mandated tests.

When being a doctoral student, the author did an experimental study in comparing student achievement with versus without student teacher assistance in the classroom. The Iowa Test of Basic Skills was used in the pretest and the post test for both the experimental group with student teacher assistance as compared to the control group without student teacher assistance. Students in the experimental group did better at the .05 level as compared to the control group in one academic area. The caution in the doctoral dissertation was that "according to The Iowa Test of Basic Skills.....," and not a dogmatic assertion that one group will always do better, such as experimental group A with the innovative approach as compared to the control group with the traditional method. Also, feedback is not provided to individual taking the test as to what was missed and then might be remedied through instruction.

Cautions which need addressing by writers and developers of state mandated tests are the following:

1. adequate validity needs to be inherent so that students have ample opportunities to relate what has been learned in the classroom with what is contained in mandated multiple choice test items.
2. adequate pilot studies have been made to determine the quality of each test item. Poorly written, vague test items need to be eliminated.
3. adequate reliability so that consistency of test results is in evidence, such as in split half, test/retest, and/or alternative forms.
4. adequate opportunities for students to apply what has been learned and to engage in problem solving activities.
5. adequate chances for students to think critically and creatively in test taking situations (Ediger, 2000, 233-240).

Much improvement then needs to be made in test writing and editing. Better and improved test items in assessing student achievement need to be in the offing.

To appraise teacher accountability in using state mandated objectives, ratings and rankings on report cards will indicate how well students in a class have done and achieved in test results, not in functional activities and experiences. The teacher is accountable, however, in assisting students to achieve well on state mandated tests.

State Bankruptcy Laws

Several states have bankruptcy laws in which a school may be shut

down or taken over by the state if educational achievement of students is deemed to be low. Averages of student achievement are involved in making the decision by the state. There will be, of course, individuals who still achieved well in the designated failing schools. The thinking here is that teachers in failing schools are not putting forth adequate effort to make for good teaching or incompetency is involved. Very little is mentioned about a failing school being in a low socio-economic area where poor student achievement may well be in evidence. Test score results are used to determine which schools are failing to educate students properly.

Weaknesses in using state bankruptcy laws in education by a state are the following:

1. tests used may not be valid in covering what has been taught.
2. tests have been developed hurriedly to meet deadlines within that state without sufficient pilot studies being made.
3. low achieving schools may be located in poverty areas where students tend to progress much more slowly as compared to higher socio-economic levels.
4. state takeovers of schools may leave much to be desired in terms of adequately assessing each school to determine deficiencies.
5. machine scoring might not have been accurate (Education Week, September 6, 2000).

Individual Teacher Accountability

There have been a few cases whereby an individual teacher was dismissed from his/her position, by the school board upon recommendation of the school administration, due to continual, low student test scores. In an interesting article entitled, "Standardized Tests Play Prominent Role in Campaigns At all Levels," the following appeared in print on political campaigns prior to election date:

Test every student.. Publish the results in school "report cards." Use the scores to decide how much teachers earn, or even which schools stay open...

"Test scores are political tools, not an educational one," said Robert Schaeffer of Fair Test," A Cambridge, Massachusetts group that monitors testing. "They used to be tough on crime. Now it's 'we're going to be tough on education,' and that means testing." (Kirksville, Missouri, October 31, 2000).

Testing students to ascertain how much has been learned is the order of the day. That brings readers back to the topic of individual teachers being dismissed due to constant, low student test scores, with the following questions which need resolving:

1. how much influence does an individual teacher have on student achievement, as compared to others in society?

2. should parents be held accountable for student achievement?
3. what is the role of society in educating children in poverty areas, in particular?
4. which measurement instrument should determine the validity of a teacher being dismissed, when student achievement is low?
5. which methods of inservice education should be required of teachers to upgrade and maintain teaching skills?

Charter Schools

Many states are attempting charter schools as a response to "improve the public schools." A charter school is actually a part of the public schools and receives its funding from the local public school funds. Charter schools represent an attempt at being creative in developing teaching plans without the red tape of rules and regulations which apply to public schools. Thus, charter schools are free to experiment and try out new ideas in teaching students. There are pros and cons to the charter school concept in teaching students. Questions which may be raised of charter schools are the following?

1. how will charter school teachers be held accountable that differs from that of public school teachers?
2. why should charter schools be held to different standards as compared to public schools, such as the former having less undesirable red tape to follow?
3. will charter schools permit handicapped students to enroll or will they accept more of the higher achievers?
4. will charter school students be tested and their results available on report card form?
5. how much money will charter schools withdraw from public school funds?
6. who will be responsible for governing charter schools and who are they accountable to?
7. how will it be known if charter school students do better than public school students in achievement if the former has the higher achievers initially?
8. which regulations should apply to charter schools so that they have a representative sampling of minority students?
9. how will the curriculum differ between the charter school and the public schools if the former are to achieve more optimally?
10. will charter school students be more motivated to learn as compared to public school students?

Charter schools will need to define their mission more thoroughly, in time. If their students are to be tested as are public school students, then the curriculum may not differ much from that of the public schools. The tail so often wags the dog; thus what is tested on tends to be taught

(Ediger, 2000, 155-161).

The Portfolio

Portfolios represent a collection of purposeful work of a student. Daily work then of a student becomes a part of the portfolio. The learner himself/herself is strongly involved in making these choices. What goes into a portfolio is decided locally, not by external test writers removed from the local classroom. The teacher serves as a guide and motivator of learner achievement. What a student does not understand within a lesson is diagnosed and remediated as soon as possible. The assessment is ongoing, not once a year as is true of state mandated testing. Which items, among others, may go into a quality portfolio?

1. written products of the involved student.
2. cassette recordings of oral communication skills.
3. a video-tape of committee endeavors.
4. art work as it relates to the ongoing lesson.
5. related diagrams, graphs, and tables.

Portfolio contents may be examined and assessed by parents during a parent/teacher conference. Other interested, responsible persons may also view the portfolio contents to ascertain accountability. The student as a major contributor in making selections for the portfolio may continually assess his/her own progress. Reflection upon what has been learned and what is left to learn is important in teaching and learning situations.

Portfolio philosophy emphasizes that students are involved in assessment in an ongoing way. Constructivism is stressed by portfolio philosophy in that it is contextual and not isolated from classroom activities and experiences. It is internal, not external to the classroom setting. Constructivism emphasizes offering immediate assistance to learners, as needed. It does not depend upon a single numeral such as a percentile to describe student achievement. Rather, constructivism is holistic in that the learner's processes and products of learning are viewed in context and not divided into component parts. Thus, holism is involved in assessing the entire spectrum of student learning, not by an isolated set of test items developed by an outsider to the local classroom situation. Thus, the local teacher may observe and assess continually. Assistance may then be provided to the student to provide for continual progress in learning.

The portfolio approach contains much content in order to provide an overview of a student's achievement. Assessors of a portfolio might well spend a considerable amount of time on one of these products, let alone 20 to 25 students' portfolios in a classroom. Interrater agreement on assessment results of each portfolio may be a problem since agreement on its quality can be difficult. If there is a lack of agreement

then reliability is lacking in the assessment process. Quality rubrics may be developed to minimize reliability problems. Then too, machine scoring of portfolios is definitely not possible. Time and effort are needed to assess each portfolio thoroughly. It would cost a considerable amount of money to hire external examiners to assess each portfolio. Comparing a rating when using rubrics in portfolio assessment is much more difficult to comprehend from the voluminous materials therein, as compared to a percentile from a student's test results in paper/pencil testing (See Ediger, 20-29).

National Board, Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)

The NBPTS is a voluntary organization which has selected standards for teachers to meet in order to be certified by this organization. NBPTS has become a highly reputable organization. What is required of teachers is demanding and requires demonstrated knowledge of quality standards in teaching students. There are different subject matter area certifications, depending upon which academic/curriculum area is being taught by the teacher. Also, what is wanted by the teacher to be certified in, needs to be designated as high school, middle school, elementary, or primary grades. The teacher in meeting NBPTS requirements, among other items, needs to submit on video-tape a sample of various teaching episodes. Education Week (October 25, 2000) contained the following article on the front page:

"Teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards are better teachers on a variety of measures than those who tried to meet the standards but fell short, a study released last week concludes.

The study which examines 13 aspects of teaching practice, provides the first research evidence that the day-to-day performance of nationally certified teachers is superior to that of colleagues without the the credential, board officials said..

To date, 39 states and nearly 200 school districts have spent millions of dollars to create incentives for teachers to attempt such a certification and rewards for those who achieve it..."

Questions which arise pertaining to NBPTS certification are the following:

1. it costs \$2300 to be accepted and begin the certification requirements; some states pay this fee. Even if a state pays the total cost for a teacher to be certified, will the local school district accept the certification on their salary schedule?

2. many teachers will not wish to take the gamble of doing all the work, pay the costs for enrollment, and then failing the eventual certification. How can these teachers be rewarded, if doing an excellent

job of teaching, but not having the finances or do not wish to take the risk for NBPTS' certification?

3. will more research studies continue to show that NBPTS' certification does make a difference in encouraging quality teaching?

There are numerous plans offered to force/encourage improved instruction. Each needs to be continually assessed and modified/changed to notice if curriculum improvement does come about with the diverse forms of accountability of teachers.

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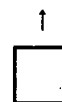
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