

Teacher Voice and Teacher Leadership

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At the 2011 International Summit on the Teaching Profession, a young teacher in the gallery stood up and announced: “Here we go again. This is a summit on teaching and the teacher’s voice is not at the table.” My first thought was: “What are you talking about? There are 16 countries at this table, each one represented by the top education official AND the national teacher union leader.” Since it was an American teacher who made the comment, I looked at Dennis Van Roekel and Randi Weingarten, the presidents of the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, who were seated next to the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, surely to provide the voice of teachers.

But that isn’t the way teachers see such meetings. I started to wonder what *teacher voice* means and how it should shape the profession. We have more than 3 million teachers in the U.S. If the two union presidents don’t represent them, who does? And since all teachers aren’t alike, how many would we have to bring to the table to satisfy the young man in the audience. In my mind I saw the table quickly overwhelming the room.

Although I still haven’t come to a decision about the statement made by that teacher, I have developed several ideas on teacher voice and how it can be mobilized to inform the profession, especially in areas that really matter. First, there are the basic standards of practice: Who sets them and who oversees them? Second, there is the course that a teacher travels from Day One in a teacher preparation program, moving through induction and novice phases, and arriving at a level of accomplishment that could continue in the classroom or differentiate into other leadership roles: What role do teachers have in those decisions? The third focuses on what I would call a community of professional practice, which could be defined as a school, a district, a state, or an area of teaching that has some impact on the environment in which teaching and learning take place: When should teachers take responsibility for such communities? Since there is nothing more basic to the life of a teacher than these three areas, it is worth looking at how teachers participate in such decisions.

Standards of Practice

In 1987, a representative group of educators, researchers, and policy makers came together in the U.S. to form the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. It was a bold effort designed to raise the quality of the teaching workforce. The National Board was to become the independent, profession-led body that would set and maintain the standards for accomplished practice and oversee the process by which practitioners demonstrated they met those standards.

While a major shift for education, the creation of such a Board simply copied a model that has long existed in other professions. And in keeping with that model, teachers would create the standards, and the process for certifying who met those standards would be peer-reviewed, performance-based, multi-measured, and anonymously submitted. Similarly, the process would be voluntary, which is normal for professions even though it is embedded in the culture of professions that most practitioners choose to pursue the highest definition of accomplished practice.

It took six years for the 63-person Board of Directors to agree on the basic tenets – now captured in the document “What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do” and the Five Core Propositions – and to create a certification process that was psychometrically valid and reliable. The first candidates sat for their Boards in 1993. By 2013 more than 102,000 teachers have achieved Board Certification in 16 different content areas across four developmental levels, totaling 25 unique certifications. True to the original charge, the standards continue to be rigorously maintained and revised by teachers who have proven to be accomplished in those areas. Teachers also figure prominently in the scoring and assessment process. Even the organization’s Board of Directors requires that its members be almost entirely from the education profession with half of them serving as classroom teachers. There are six National Board Certified Teachers on the staff, including the Chief Operating Officer, and others serve in critical roles around the country supporting candidates and shaping local and state policy.

The constant revising of standards is an important job of every profession. As research reveals new knowledge about practice and technology changes core aspects of practice, the National Board’s standards must reflect those changes if the credential is to have any meaning. Each certificate area undergoes exhaustive revision every ten years, but there are also profession-wide changes that must be considered. Several examples of current note are the adoption of Common Core State Standards in 46 of the 50 states, and research coming from the recent MET Study, which shows the value of collecting evidence of student achievement and the use of student surveys in helping teachers become more effective. The profession should have a role in determining how to teach to those standards, what evidence is reliable and meaningful, and the best use of student surveys, especially for children in early grades, and the National Board will use its profession-based process to make those decisions, ultimately adding them to what is expected of accomplished teachers.

While this scenario sounds promising, there is one challenge the National Board – and therefore the profession – has not met: taking Board Certification to scale or even determining what “scale” means in the teaching profession. The National Board has been created by teachers and is maintained by teachers, but somehow the profession has not embraced the need for widespread attainment of Board Certification in the way other professions have. While the Board’s standards are widely admired, and even in the face of growing evidence that students in classes with Board certified teachers achieve at a higher rate than students in other classes, only 3% of U.S. teachers have attained such status. In fact, the only profession-wide expectations for

teachers come from states which issue initial and continuing licenses issued by states. These represent the bare minimum for achievement and have no systematic connection to the standards the profession has set for accomplished practice.

There are many excuses for why the teaching profession doesn't expect the majority of its practitioners to be accomplished, but each one – even the notion that teachers are civil servants whose salaries are paid by tax dollars – is ultimately not a barrier to teaching having the same expectations found in other professions. Dan Lortie noted as long ago as 1975 that teaching deserves to be a profession, but it does not behave like one. Not much has changed since then except that over the last 25 years the profession has created its standards for accomplished practice – no small feat! What remains is to change the basic culture of the profession so that teaching to these high and worthy standards is what the profession expects from its practitioners.

As teachers express concern over how to get their voice, they need to look at the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards whose standards and certification processes were created by them and represent the bedrock of what their work is. If Board Certification were the norm in education, rather than the exception, that voice would provide teachers with a prominence equal to their counterparts in medicine and law, and teachers would have a more compelling case to make for defining the key terms of their profession.

Career Path

In 1910 Abraham Flexner released his landmark report, *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*, which is widely credited for being the first step in converting a chaotic medical landscape into the coherent profession we have today. The course of study in medical school, including the traditional courses medical students must take as undergraduates, is designed to prepare these students not only to earn their medical degree and their license to practice: it prepares them for internship, residency, and ultimate certification by one of the medical specialty boards which are overseen by practitioners from that area. In medicine, no matter what specialty a physician enters, the majority of his or her colleagues are *Board certified* in that specialty, and because that certification is the province of the profession, the physician's voice is central to how the profession goes forward.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was supposed to fill the same role in education. Not only has the profession failed to take Board Certification to scale, it has not constructed the career path that leads people toward that goal. There is no coherent trajectory from pre-service to accomplished that one could backward map from what the profession has established as its standards of accomplished teaching, even though that would be the logical way to build a profession.

Every professional career path begins with a preparation period and a process for selection into that work. Despite the existence of accrediting agencies and other associations, each of the nearly 1,400 teacher preparation programs in the U.S. pretty much goes its own way. At best,

the result is an uneven approach to who enters the profession and how they are prepared. One only needs to look at Teach for America to understand just how little quality control there is in teacher preparation. Wendy Kopp could not have graduated from Princeton and created something called Doctors for America or Lawyers for America. Those professions know that they must control the pipeline to maintain their standards, and for the most part their pipelines work. Similarly, as the concept of Teach for America goes international, I doubt we ever will see Teach for Finland or Teach for Singapore. Those countries and others among the highest performers have invested heavily in building a quality workforce. Thirty years ago in Finland, for example, there were dozens of teacher preparation programs. To control quality, the number is now eight. That decision and many others have made teaching one of the most selective professions in Finland with only one person in ten being admitted into the preparation programs.

The induction period for teachers is similarly chaotic. There is no mediated entry for new teachers. They are thrown into the deep end of the pool on the first day where they basically are expected to perform at the same level as veterans. The profession remains largely silent on this topic even though it is directly connected to teacher retention and turnover and setting basic patterns that will remain with teachers throughout their career.

Let's consider National Board Certification and how it could be connected to a teacher's career path. There are four portfolio entries in the National Board process that require candidates to video themselves working with students and then to write a paper reflecting on everything associated with the video: school environment, students in the class, goal of the lesson in the video, strategies designed and deployed, what worked, what didn't work, and why. Candidates struggle mightily with these entries. They also talk unanimously of how much they learned by doing them even when they don't achieve Board Certification. It is normal to hear teachers say that going through the process is the best professional development they have ever had.

All of that makes sense except for one thing: the Board process was never supposed to be professional development, at least not at that level. Why should teachers fifteen, ten, or even five years into their career create such portfolios for the first time when they sit for their Boards? If these are the standards set by the profession for accomplished teachers, one would expect that the profession would also be preparing teachers for such an experience.

Imagine a different scenario in which undergraduates hoping to become teachers use videos and reflective papers from National Board Certified Teachers as part of their pre-service course work. These young people would have the chance to see multiple models of accomplished practice – something dramatically lacking from teacher preparation programs and yet essential to a teacher's ability to achieve such a level. One also could imagine that their instructors would find ways to have these pre-service teachers create their own videos and papers, appropriate for their level of development, perhaps with the expectation that part of their exit requirement would be the submission of a video and paper measured against standards related to the National Board but calibrated for someone who was about to become a teacher rather than someone who had

reached an accomplished level. Now take that scenario one step further and make it part of what all new teachers pursue during the induction phase of their career, with expectations for achievement increasing each year. What all this adds up to is teacher preparation and induction informed in a central way by the voice of accomplished teachers. Every young teacher would have spent 6-8 years studying models of accomplished teachers and scaffolding their own journey toward such a level. Of course, one thing that would change is that there would no longer be the cultural jolt teachers experience when they now go through National Board Certification, but that would be a change for the better!

The National Board is now actively working to make these videos and reflective papers available through a licensing process to teacher preparation programs. Beyond the raw resource – which is called ATLAS (Accomplished Teaching Learning and Schools) – much must be learned by university faculty in terms of how to use the resource effectively. The National Board is getting its first look at the use of ATLAS in a three-year project funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Innovation in Instruction (i3) program. Working closely with Linda Darling-Hammond and the Stanford-based Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium (edTPA), along with AACTE, the two teacher unions and evaluator AIR, ATLAS will be introduced into teacher prep and induction programs in three areas of the country.

While ATLAS was originally designed to support teacher preparation and early career development, pilot programs in the states of Washington and Maine are now using the resource to train principals to be better observers and evaluators of teachers. The National Board has received other inquiries, too, regarding professional development for teachers faced with implementing the new Common Core State Standards and other specific content areas such as early literacy and STEM. Should the resource prove valuable in these different venues, teacher preparation and the career trajectory of teachers, as well as other key elements of their work including evaluation, will be shaped by the “voice” of teachers through their videos, reflective papers, and the standards that teachers have created.

Communities of Professional Practice

Much has been said about professional learning communities, and they are truly valuable, especially in the way they build collegiality and coherence into a profession that is defined mostly by isolation. The profession can also benefit from creating communities of professional practice whose focus would be less on the individual and more on the profession itself, especially in terms of creating the policies that ultimately govern practice. While I think all teachers should be part of professional learning communities, a subset of the workforce probably has an interest in being part of communities of professional practice to make sure that the teacher voice informs all aspects of the profession.

Let me give one example. In Wyoming, a large but sparsely populated state, a National Board Certified teacher noticed that a lot of decisions about how teachers work were being made by

people who, while well meaning, were not qualified to make such decisions because they weren't teachers and had never been teachers. He decided to convene a retreat for 50 other Board Certified teachers, during which time they met with many "experts" from education and government to hear their concerns and to share the perspective of the teachers. They then gathered their thoughts in a White Paper about what education policy should be in terms of such hot-button issues as measuring student achievement, evaluating teachers, and the career path of teachers. That paper has been shared with the political and policy community of Wyoming.

It is too early to tell what the impact of the White Paper will be. It's even possible that there will be no impact at all given that these teachers had never attempted such a thing before. What matters is that these teachers realized if they were going to be silent about expectations for their profession, someone else was going to move into that space. They needed to get into the game, and as it is with all "players" they will get better over time.

The Wyoming experience reminds me of two other examples reported in the *New York Times* over the last 10 months. The first was a story about how 16 medical specialty boards came together to discuss a number of tests which they no longer felt were justified in treating patients. The article pointed out that a few years earlier there was interest in the U.S. Congress about doing away with certain tests, but the profession ignored the recommendations believing that only the profession was qualified to make such decisions. The second story is more recent and came out of the annual meeting of the American Bar Association where the assembly decided that serious changes needed to be made to legal education and a number of other key parts of that profession. Both groups were motivated by the same thing: making sure that the profession was as good as it could be based on the wisdom and experience of those who practice it. In each case it was the *voice* of doctors and lawyers making the important decisions about the professions of medicine and law.

Governments do not create professions. Neither do businesses nor foundations. By definition, professions are created by those in the profession. If teaching is going to claim its rightful state as a true profession, then teachers and other practitioners in education must make sure their voice is guiding the work. That voice can be direct, such as in communities of professional practice, or it can exert itself indirectly through standards that inform how people are prepared to enter it, and the steps each person takes toward becoming accomplished. Both will put teachers in a position to define the key terms of their work and will create the habits of mind that need to become the profession's norm. Teachers must realize, however, that no one will do this for them. They either do it for themselves or agree to comply with the vision others have for them.

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