Chapter 26

A Call for Mixed Methods in Evaluating Teacher Preparation Programs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes current and future approaches to evaluating teacher preparation programs. Available assessments and common preparation pathways are reviewed. Obstacles to conducting evaluation for the purposes of continuous improvement are described. Recommendations are provided for using quantitative and qualitative methods to identify features of teacher preparation programs that have the strongest impact on graduates’ performance and retention, such that teacher preparation programs may act on this knowledge for the purpose of continuous improvement. Next steps for teacher preparation programs include improving assessment capacity, identifying mediators and moderators of graduate outcomes, utilizing experimental methods when possible, and continuing qualitative work to inform program improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher preparation programs (TPPs) serve an important role in training tomorrow’s teachers to be effective in the classroom. Recent and ongoing revisions to standards for evaluating TPPs have drawn increased attention to comparisons of graduate outcomes across TPPs. TPPs can increasingly be compared in terms of their graduates’ contributions to K-12 student learning, observed practices, and retention within the field. Unfortunately, there are many obstacles to conducting such comparisons in a manner that is both fair and informs continuous improvement efforts. The current chapter aims to describe these obstacles and opportunities to overcome them. First, the authors provide an overview of available evidence for evaluation with respect to TPP graduates and pre-service teaching candidates. Second, features of selection, coursework, and clinical experiences that vary across preparation pathways are described. Third, the authors explain how mixed methodology can be used to capitalize on evaluation efforts in order to
A Call for Mixed Methods in Evaluating Teacher Preparation Programs

identify features of TPPs that have the strongest impact on graduates’ performance and retention, such that TPPs may act on this knowledge for the purpose of continuous improvement. Recommendations for TPPs include improving assessment capacity, identifying mediators and moderators of graduate outcomes, utilizing experimental methods when possible, and continuing qualitative work to inform program improvement.

BACKGROUND

Researchers have known for some time that effective teachers are important contributors to students’ learning (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Ever since, there has been an increasing focus on teacher evaluation for the purposes of accountability and quality improvement. States and school districts want to know which teachers they should recruit, hire, support, retain, reward, and release, and how to approach these processes. This has led to rapid change in policies on teacher evaluation. In 2009, only four states required student learning outcomes to be included as evidence of teacher effectiveness, but by 2013, only ten states did not require evidence of student learning in some form (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014).

Identifying which teachers are the most effective in producing positive academic, behavioral, and social outcomes for our students is extremely difficult. When states and school districts try to use value-added models to assess the impact that in-service teachers have on their students’ achievement, concerns have been raised regarding the reliability and validity of the models, the availability of achievement tests across subjects and grade levels, and the lack of information about teachers’ practices required for teacher feedback and support (Glazerman et al., 2010; McCaffrey, Lockwood, Koretz, Louis, & Hamilton, 2004; MET Project, 2012). Student surveys have been used to evaluate teacher-student interactions that are associated with student outcomes (Fauth, Decristan, Rieser, Klieme, & Büttner, 2014), yet surveys require skills for reading, sustained attention, memory, and abstract thought which are less well developed in young children (Woolley, Bowen, & Bowen, 2005). Observational methods can be useful for assessing in-service teacher effectiveness, yet these measures too are subject to concerns about reliability and validity, as well as issues of cost and feasibility in implementation. There is a growing consensus that teacher evaluation requires multiple assessment approaches. In fact, assessments of teacher effectiveness are more predictive of student achievement when used in combination than when used independently (Kane, Taylor, Tyler, & Wooten, 2011; Rockoff & Speroni, 2011).

The challenges for evaluating in-service teachers today are great, and only multiply as federal and state regulations are proposed to connect K-12 student outcomes not just to their teachers, but to the institutions where their teachers were trained. In 2013, ten states required exactly that (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). The landscape of TPPs is complex given myriad pathways to licensure. Assessing pre-service candidates’ impact on student outcomes is not straight-forward when candidates spend varying periods of time supporting students and are rarely the only adult interacting with students during the pre-service preparation period. There is increasing pressure on TPPs to be accountable for the teaching quality of their graduates but evaluation is not easy.

In this chapter, a mixed methods approach for evaluating TPPs is outlined. States and school districts want to know who to recruit, hire, support, retain, reward, and release; TPPs also want to know who to recruit, admit, support, retain, and recommend for licensure. Quantitative analysis of in-service teacher
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