

Targeting Teachers

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The mantra of the current school reform movement in the United States is that high-quality teachers produce high-achieving students. As a result, we should hold teachers accountable for student outcomes, offering bonus pay to the most effective teachers and shoving the least effective ones out the door. Of course, in order to implement such a policy, you need a valid and reliable measure of teacher quality, and the reformers have zeroed in on one such measure, which is known as the value-added approach.

According to this method, you calculate the effectiveness of individual teachers by the increase in test scores that students demonstrate after a year in their classroom.

Propelling this trend is a flood of research purporting to show that differences in teacher quality can lead to huge differences in the outcomes of schooling, both for students and for society. For example, in a 2010 study for the National Bureau of Economic Research, Eric Hanushek argues that a teacher judged to be strong by the value-added measure (one standard deviation above the mean) might raise the lifetime earnings of a student by \$20,000. From this perspective, improving the quality of teaching promises to increase individual opportunity for the disadvantaged—which will reduce social inequality—and at the same time to increase human capital, which will promote economic growth and national competitiveness. Sounds great. Of course, this calculation is based on the assumption that test scores measure the economically useful knowledge of the future worker, which is far from obvious. But arguments like these provide a big incentive to generate usable data on who's a good teacher and who's not.

All of this makes the current effort to

develop a simple and statistically sound measure for good teaching quite understandable. But it doesn't make the effort justifiable. The problem with this approach is that teaching is an extraordinarily complex and demanding form of professional practice whose quality is impossible to capture accurately in a simple metric. The push to develop such a metric threatens to reduce good teaching—and good education—to whatever produces higher scores on a standardized test. As a result, the value-added measure of teacher quality may end up promoting both the wrong kind of teaching and the wrong kind of schooling.

In this article, I explore three major questions that arise from this development. Why did the value-added measure of teaching emerge at this point in the history of American education? What are the core characteristics of teaching as a professional practice that make it so hard to perform effectively and so hard to measure accurately? And under these circumstances, what are the likely consequences of using the value-added measure of teaching?

Roots of the Value-Added Measure of Teacher Quality

Until the last thirty years, Americans had been comfortable measuring the effectiveness of their schools by their broad social outcomes. As long as graduates tended to find jobs at a higher level than the jobs their parents had, then schools were seen to be promoting social opportunity. And as long as the economy grew in size and productivity, then schools were seen to be effectively producing human capital and spurring economic prosperity. Under these circumstances, which lasted from the emergence of the common school in the early nineteenth century until the 1980s, there was little reason to seek out hard data about how

much students were actually learning in school.

In the 1980s, however, this began to change with the emergence of a new kind of educational reform movement that focused on raising the standards for student achievement. Starting with the report “A Nation at Risk” in 1983, the idea was to set strict curriculum standards and enforce them with high-stakes tests in order to shore up the American economy with higher achievement. Then came the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which required schools to demonstrate that they were distributing educational and social opportunity more equally.

This radical shift to measuring learning outcomes in schooling came about in the late twentieth century because of two converging changes in the politics of education: growing fiscal constraints and growing educational inequality. For one thing, the rising cost of financing the expansion of schooling was beginning to run into severe fiscal limits. By the end of the twentieth century, state and local governments in the United States were spending about 30 percent of their total budgets on education, at an aggregate cost of about \$400 billion. Exacerbating this cost rise was the rise in educational level of the population. From 1900 to 1975 the average education level of a twenty-four-year-old rose from eight years of elementary school to two years of college. The problem is that the per-student cost of education is markedly higher as one moves up the system, from elementary to secondary to college to graduate school. As a result, schools at all levels came under pressure to demonstrate that they were producing learning outcomes that would justify the cost.

At the same time, a parallel concern emerged about radical differences in educational quality and outcomes for different groups in the population, sharply undercutting the hoary fiction that all high-school or college diplomas were the same. Middle-class parents have long shown an acute awareness of this distinction and have had the means to pursue the best schools for their children. Parents with more limited resources, however, have been stuck with their local schools, which were too often dirty,

dangerous, and dysfunctional.

Under these circumstances, value-added measures of education have obvious value in potentially helping us measure the contribution that a school makes to the educational and social outcomes of its students. The value-added approach seeks to take into account the educational achievement of students coming into a school or a classroom in order to measure what added contribution the school or teacher makes to student achievement. By controlling for the selection effect, this technique seeks to focus on the school’s socialization effect.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has plunged \$355 million into the effort to measure teacher effectiveness. Grounded in the value-added approach, this effort is using analysis of videos of teaching in individual classrooms to establish which teacher behaviors are most strongly associated with the highest value-added scores for students. And the Brookings Institution published a study in 2010 that provided support for the value-added approach. But, as Kevin G. Welner points out in the Spring 2011 issue of *Dissent* (“Free-Market Think Tanks and the Marketing of Education Policy”), the evidence for the validity of the Gates value-added measures is weak. In a recently published review, economist Jesse Rothstein from the University of California, Berkeley performed an analysis of Gates data that shows that 40 percent of teachers whose performance placed them in the bottom quartile using the value-added measure scored in the top half by an alternative measure of student achievement. In short, the value-added approach is hardly the gold standard for measuring teacher effectiveness that its supporters claim it is.

Why This Measure Misses the Mark

It’s clear where this new measure of teaching effectiveness came from and why it emerged when it did. But why does it fail to capture the elements of good teaching and why are school reformers so willing to deploy it anyway in formulating school policy?

The answer lies in the structure of the system. The nature of American teaching arose from the school system that was established

before the Civil War, a system whose primary mission was political. Founders wanted these schools to solve the core problem of a liberal democracy: to reconcile the self-interested pursuit of personal advantage demanded by a market economy with the civic commitment to community required by a republic. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, this problem was particularly acute, because the market was expanding rapidly, and the republic was young and fragile. The idea was to create community schools that would instill republican principles in the young while also giving them a shared experience that might ameliorate growing class divisions. To accommodate the huge influx of students, and to provide a setting in which students could be taught as a group and ranked by ability, they established the self-contained classroom, graded by age. And to make sure that the school community was inclusive, they gradually made school attendance compulsory.

From this structure emerge three core characteristics of teaching in the United States: teaching is hard, teaching looks easy, and teachers are an easy target. Let me say a little about each.

Teaching Is Hard

In many ways, teaching is the most difficult of professions. In other professions, professional success lies in the skills and knowledge of the practitioner, and outcomes are relatively predictable. Not so with teaching. Why?

Teachers depend on students for their success. Teachers can only be successful if students choose to learn. This is the core problem facing every teacher every day in every classroom. Surgeons operate on clients who are unconscious; lawyers represent clients who remain mute; but teachers need to find a way to motivate students to learn the curriculum. The teacher's knowledge of the subject and skill at explaining this knowledge amount to nothing if students choose not to learn what they're taught. Student resistance to learning can come from a wide variety of sources. Maybe students don't like the subject or the teacher. Maybe they don't want to be in school at all. Maybe they're distracted by fear of a bully, hunger in the belly, or lust for the

student in the next seat. Maybe they're bored to death. The reasons for not learning are endless, and the teacher's job is to find a way to understand these reasons and work around them, one student at a time.

What makes this even more difficult is that the teacher's task extends beyond just getting students to learn the subject. Teaching is a people-changing profession. Education involves more than acquiring knowledge, since we ask it to take students and turn them into something else—law-abiding citizens, productive workers, ambitious achievers. Changing people's behavior and attitude and character and cultural yearnings is a lot harder than fixing a technical problem within the human body. A surgeon can remove a diseased appendix, a physician can prescribe a pill to cure an infection. But teaching is less like these highly esteemed and technically advanced arenas of medicine and more like the less prestigious and less certain practice of psychotherapy. For therapists, the problem is getting patients to abandon a set of practices that they are unwilling or unable to manage on their own—like countering negative thoughts or calming anxiety. Changing people in these nether realms of medicine is very difficult, but these practitioners do enjoy one advantage: the patient approaches the therapist asking for help in making the change. But this is not the case with teachers, where students enter class under duress.

Students are conscripts in the classroom. Students are in the classroom for a variety of reasons that often have nothing to do with wanting to learn. They are compelled by strong pressures from their parents, the job market, cultural norms, and truant officers. Also, all of their friends are there, so what would they do if they stayed home? Except for the rare case, however, one thing that does not bring them to the classroom is a burning desire to learn the formal curriculum. As a result, unlike the clients of nearly all other professionals, they are not volunteers asking for a professional service but conscripts who have little reason to cooperate with, much less actively pursue, the process of learning that teachers are trying to facilitate.

The problem is that teachers don't have much ability to impose their will on students

in order to make them learn. They have weak disciplinary tools, they are vastly outnumbered, and they have to deal with their students behind the doors of the self-contained classroom, without the help of colleagues. In the end, all that strict discipline can achieve is to maintain classroom order; inducing learning is another thing entirely. The result is that teachers have to develop a complex mechanism for motivating their students to learn.

Teachers need to develop a teaching persona to manage the relationship with their students. Teaching means finding a way to get students to want to learn the curriculum. And this requires the teacher to develop a highly personalized and professionally essential teaching persona. That persona needs to incorporate a judicious and delicately balanced mix of qualities. You want students to like you, so they look forward to seeing you in class and want to please you. You want them to fear you, so they studiously avoid getting on your bad side and can be stopped dead in their tracks with the dreaded “teacher look.” You want them to find your enthusiasm for learning the subject matter so infectious that they can’t help getting caught up in the process and lured into learning.

Constructing such a persona is a complex task, which takes years of development. It’s part of why the first years of teaching are so difficult, until the persona has fallen in place and becomes second nature. The problem is that there is no standard way of doing this. The persona has to be a combination of what the situation demands—the grade level, subject matter, cultural and personal characteristics of the students—and what the teacher can pull together from the pieces of his or her own character, personality, and interests. It can’t be an obvious disguise, because students have an eye toward the fake and place high value on authenticity, and because it has to be maintained day in and day out over the years of a teaching career. So the persona has to be a mix of who you are as a person and what you need and want to be as a teacher.

When it all comes together, it’s a marvel to behold. In his book *Small Victories*, Samuel Freedman provides a vivid portrait of the teaching persona of a New York high school

English teacher named Jessica Siegel. She wears eye-catching clothing (one student asks, “Miss Siegel, do you water that dress?”) and moves effortlessly between captivating and controlling her students, making wisecracks out of the corner of her mouth (“Gimme a break”). He calls this persona The Tough Cookie. It works for her, but all successful teachers need to find their own persona. Think about it: how can you measure this? Measurement is particularly difficult because the criteria for defining a successful professional performance are up in the air.

Teachers need to carry out their practices under conditions of high uncertainty. There is no definitive code for effective teaching practice to parallel the kinds of codes that exist in other professions. In general, professionals can defend themselves against malpractice by demonstrating that they were following standard professional practice. The patient died but the physician was doing her job appropriately. Teaching has no guide for optimal professional standards. Instead, there are rules about minimum criteria of acceptable behavior: don’t hit kids (in thirty of fifty states) and show up for class.

As I’ve said, one reason for the absence of such a code of professional practice for teachers is that the task of teaching involves the effort to manage a complex process of motivating learning in your students through the construction of a unique teaching persona. Another is the problem of trying to identify what constitutes a definitive measure of teaching success. The things that are easiest to measure are the most trivial: number of right answers on a Friday quiz, a homework assignment, or—I might add—whatever is represented in value-added test scores. These things may show something about what information students retained at that point, but they don’t say anything about the long-term benefits of the class on these students. Did the teacher make students better citizens, more productive workers, lifelong learners, innovative entrepreneurs? These are the outcomes we care about, but how can you measure them? Even if you could find a way to measure such outcomes later in life, how could you trace back the impact that the student’s fourth-grade teacher had on those

outcomes?

This suggests another problem that raises the uncertainty of defining good teaching. As a society, we are not of one mind about what individual and social ends we want schools to produce. If we can't agree on ends, how can we determine if a teacher was effective or not? Effective at what? One goal running through the history of American schooling is to create good citizens. Another is to create productive workers. A third is to provide individuals with social opportunity. These goals lead schools in conflicting directions, and teachers can't accomplish them all with the same methods.

One final form of uncertainty facing teachers is that we can't even agree on who is the teacher's client. In some ways, the client is the student, who is the object of education. But students don't contract with teachers to carry out their role, school boards do, as representatives of the community as a whole, which would make them the client. But then there are the parents, a third constituency for teachers to deal with and try to please. Are teachers the agents of the child, the society that sets up the school system, or the parents who send their children to school? The answer is yes.

Teaching Looks Easy

So teaching is very hard, which makes it extraordinarily difficult to construct a good measure of effective teaching. But at the same time, in the eyes of the public, teaching doesn't look that hard at all. And this makes us easy targets for anyone selling a simple mechanism for distinguishing the good teacher from the bad.

One reason teaching looks easy is that it seems to be an extension of child-rearing. You don't need professional training to be a parent, which means that being a teacher doesn't seem like a big thing. Students coming into teacher education programs are often already imbued with this spirit. I care for the kids, so I'll be a good teacher.

Another reason it looks easy is that teaching is extremely familiar. Every prospective teacher—every adult—has done a twelve-year apprenticeship of observation in

the elementary and secondary classroom. We have watched teachers, up close and personal, during our formative years, and nothing about the practice of teaching seems obscure or complicated. You keep order, give out and collect assignments, talk, test, and take the summer off. No big deal. Missing from this observation, of course, is all the thinking and planning that goes into the process that students experience in the classroom, much less the laborious construction of the teaching persona.

A third thing that makes teaching look easy is that the knowledge and skills teachers convey are the knowledge and skills that all competent adults have. This isn't the kind of complex and obscure knowledge you find in medical texts or law books; it's ordinary knowledge that doesn't seem to require an advanced degree of skill for the practitioner. Of course, missing from this kind of understanding of teaching is an acknowledgment of the kind of skill required to teach these subjects and motivate students to learn these subjects, which is not obvious at all. But the impression of ordinariness is hard for teaching to shake.

A factor that adds to this problem is that, unlike other professionals, teachers give away their expertise. One test of a successful teacher is that the student no longer needs her. Good teachers make themselves dispensable. In contrast, other professions don't give away their expertise; they rent it by the hour. You have to keep going back to the doctor, lawyer, accountant, and even pharmacist. In these arenas, you're rarely on your own. But teachers are supposed to launch you into adult life and then disappear into the background. As a result, it is easy for adults to forget how hard it was for them to acquire the skills and knowledge they now have and therefore easy to discount the critical role that teachers played in getting them to their current state.

Teachers Are an Easy Target

It's tough being in a profession that is extraordinarily difficult to practice effectively and that other people consider a walk on the beach. As a group, teachers are too visible to be inscrutable and too numerous to be elite.

They don't have the distance, obscurity, and selectivity of the high-status professions. As a result, no one is willing to bow to their authority or yield to their expertise. Teachers, school administrators, and education professors have all had the experience of sitting next to someone on an airplane or at a dinner party who proceeds to tell them what the problem with schools is and also what the cure is. Everyone is an expert on education except the educator.

One consequence of this is that teachers become an easy target for school reformers. This follows from the nature of teaching as a practice, as I've been describing here, and also from the nature of school reform as a practice. The history of school reform in the United States is a history of efforts to change the education of Other People's Children. The schools that reformers' own children attend tend to be seen as pretty good; the problem is with the schooling of Others. It's those kids who need more structure, higher standards, more incentives, and more coercion in order to bring their learning up to a useful level. They are the ones who are dragging down our cities and holding back our economic growth. And public school teachers are the keepers of Other People's Children. Since we don't think those children are getting the kind of schooling they need, then teachers must be a major part of the problem. As a result, these teachers, too, are seen as needing more structure, higher standards, more incentives, and more coercion in order to bring their teaching up to a socially useful level.

We tell ourselves that we're paying more than we can afford for schools that don't work, so we have to intervene. The value-added measure of teacher performance is ideally suited to this task. It's needed because, in the eyes of reformers, teachers are not sufficiently

professional, competent, or reliable to be granted the autonomy of a real profession. And what will be the consequences?

As in medicine, the first rule of school reform should be, "Do no harm." But the value-added intervention violates this rule, driven by the arrogance of reformers who are convinced that teaching is a simple process of delivering content and that learning is just a matter of exerting the effort to acquire this content. That approach is likely to increase test scores, simply by pressuring teachers to teach to the test. But my concern is that in the process it's also likely to interfere with teachers' ability to lure students into learning. This requires them to develop and nurture an effective teaching persona, so they can in turn develop and nurture in students the motivation to learn and to continue learning over a lifetime.

As usual, the results of this reform are likely to be skewed by social class. Schools for the disadvantaged are going to be under great pressure to teach to the test and raise scores on core skills, while schools for the advantaged will be free to pursue a much richer curriculum. If your children, unlike "Others," are not "At Risk," then the schools they attend will not need to be obsessed with drilling to meet minimum standards. Teachers in these schools will be able to lead their classes in exploring a variety of subjects, experiences, and issues that will be excluded from the classrooms further down the social scale. In the effort to raise standards and close the achievement gap, we will be creating just another form of educational distinction to divide the top from the bottom.

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