Making the Grade: A Closer Look at Teacher Quality

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Pitzer in Ontario: Spring 2012

5/9/12
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Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, thank you to my grandparents and my parents for providing me with the most incredible education. I cannot thank you enough. To my friends and teachers at Westtown School: Thank you for laying the groundwork for the person I am today. This research would not exist without you. Tessa, Susan, and Tom: Thank you for teaching me this semester. The Ontario Program has been the most incredible educational experience I have ever had. The three of you have shaped me into a man with true conviction, and I truly appreciate it. Lucy and Nicole: Thank you for your integral part to this experience. The Ontario Program would not work without you. Ru, Zavi, Najib, Hee Young, Candy, Gio, Beatriz, Ali, Harper, and Sage: Thanks for a great semester. To my advisors, professors, and FAMILY at Pitzer College: Thanks for existing. ICUC Ontario: All of this is for you. Thank you for taking me in and making me feel like a part of the crew.
Autobiographical Statement:

For most of my schooling, I was a student at one of the best public school districts in Pennsylvania. I was lucky enough to attend schools with state-of-the-art facilities and an abundance of extra-curricular activities. Even with all of these amenities, I had a hard time succeeding academically and struggled socially. My outlet was music and art. I spent as much time as I could in the band room, choir room, and art studio. While these subjects made school tolerable for me, I was still lacking teacher support. In sixth grade, I had a math teacher who ridiculed me for my participation in the arts. I was invited to a music competition, and my teacher told me that he was surprised that my parents allowed me to attend with the horrible grades that I earned in his class. He said all of this to me in front of the entire class. When my parents called this teacher to talk to him about the situation and to figure out ways for me to improve in his class, he sarcastically said, “Maybe if I put my material into song, your son would finally understand it.” Because of this, along with a plethora of other issues in public school, my parents began to look for alternative options.

My family was fortunate enough to send me to Westtown School, a comprehensive, Quaker, college-preparatory boarding school. At Westtown, I received individualized attention, and was completely transformed physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Westtown’s education gave me my love for the outdoors. I became part of an incredible community that instilled its’ Quaker ideal of social justice in me. This is what led me to Pitzer, and to the Ontario program.

From Westtown, I know what it is like to have teachers who can make all the difference. I owe everything I have accomplished academically to their support and
guidance. All students should have teachers like I did regardless of whether the school is public or private. Our country has seen a drastic decrease in the quality of its teachers. Now is a crucial moment to be investing in our youth in school, and we will not accomplish much unless we have the best and brightest people our country has to offer in the classroom.

I realize that I have been a very lucky person. The vast majority of people in this world do not have the opportunity that I had to just “up and leave” their education in pursuit of something new. I must always recognize that the way I was educated in high school is extremely unique. I must fully disclose my own lived experience in education to provide a framework of my own position in this research.

Statement of Rationale:

The lived experiences of myself and the families and students at high schools in Ontario are very different. I did not attend public high school. I am not a native of Southern California. That is why this research is community driven. I have worked with Nicole Scheunemann, the community organizer for Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC) in Ontario, and she has confirmed that this research can be useful in informing a community organizing campaign in a continual effort to improve schools in Ontario. Members of the youth organizing group through ICUC have recently been working on campaigns to improve food in schools, and working to create an Educational Progress Team in conjunction with the school district. We hope that this research can also be helpful for other regions in ICUC, and for PICO as well.
To be perfectly clear, while aspects of “teacher quality” are constantly in debate, no one can deny that the caliber of teachers has decreased. The National Council on Teacher Quality, a policy group that works to report on teacher effectiveness, released a report on the overall quality of teachers in California. The group gives a “grade” to the teachers of the state, and in 2011, they gave California a D+. They averaged this grade by giving the state grades in five criteria. Here are the areas and the grades: Delivering well-prepared teachers: D, expanding the pool of teachers: C-, identifying effective teachers: F, retaining effective teachers: C+, exiting ineffective teachers: F. (National Council on Teacher Quality)

In our Social Change Practicum class this semester, we learned about the educational obstacles that are facing the Inland Empire. Many of these statistics evaluate the state of education with factors besides test scores. The statistics show that non-economically advantaged students are about twice as likely to be proficient in English/Language Arts and Mathematics than economically disadvantaged students in the Inland Empire. In 2008-2009, only 24% of San Bernardino County students graduated with eligibility to attend a University of California or California State University school. In 2009, San Bernardino County had a 22% dropout rate, and 54% of those “dropouts” were students of Hispanic heritage. To top all of these statistics off, the Ontario-Montclair school district is the lowest performing elementary school district in San Bernardino County. (San Bernardino County)

One can tell just by looking at these statistics that students in the Inland Empire are struggling. While there is debate about what “teacher quality” is made up of, no one can deny that the role of a teacher is vital to student success. Because of this, it is vital
that we begin to evaluate what are the characteristics of a highly effective teacher are and how we can jump bureaucratic hurdles to bring those characteristics out in teachers. This research intends to illuminate ways to do just that.

Research Questions:

I present three basic questions that analyze teacher quality. My first research question is, “What is ‘teacher quality’ and what are components of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teachers?” This question is important to ask because the definition of ‘teacher quality’ is in debate. This issue is addressed in the literature review. My second research question is, “What are current factors in place that can affect ‘teacher quality?’” I answer this question by identifying my themes. This question is important so that we may begin to breakdown the entities that affect a teacher’s performance. My final question is, “What are the incentives for highly skilled people to enter the teaching profession?” We must begin to identify what draws people to teach, and how we can expand these incentives to ensure that highly qualified people enter the profession.

The Internship:

Inland Congregations United for Change is a community organizing force in the Inland Empire.

“Working with congregations, schools and neighborhood institutions in San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC) brings people together to strengthen families and improve communities. Inland Congregations United for Change is an affiliate of the PICO National
Network and of PICO California, the largest grassroots community effort in California.” (ICUC)

This semester was the first time that the Ontario Program has partnered with ICUC. As was to be expected, there was a bit of a learning curve because it was the first year that the Ontario Program officially partnered with ICUC. Sometimes expectations were unclear and I felt like I had no idea what I was doing. However, working with the students at ICUC made me so thankful to be a part of it.

The main part of my internship is working with a group of high school students in the Ontario area who are interested in community organizing. Our group meets every other Wednesday night in the living room at the Ontario house. Although everyone in the room usually feels tired after a long day, the mood is usually light and fun. We all turn our phones off and direct our attention to the meeting. During the meeting, one of the students holds the “chair” position for that evening, and keeps everyone on track. We go around the room and share our “one-to-one” conversation experiences for the week. We are all expected to hold conversations with people and talk to them about community organizing and identifying their self-interests. We also spend time on a “faith reflection” where we read an inspirational quote or a bible verse and discuss it. The rest of the meeting is dedicated to training and planning for future actions.

We have had successful events such as a “Night of Inspiration” which was to provide information and inspiration for parents who are planning for their children to attend college. We have held meetings with school administrators. We have done petition signing to support a tax initiative to support public education. We have done a lot of work, and I am looking forward to the work we will do together in the future.
Methodology and Methods:

For my qualitative research, I employed post-critical ethnography and post-positivism methodologies. I chose a post-critical ethnography methodology because first and foremost, my research must be critical. I hope that this research will assist ICUC in community organizing campaigns and can be used to improve education in the community. I hope this research will inspire the community to appreciate the high-quality teachers they have, get rid of the teachers who are ineffective, and demand that highly effective teachers are hired by the school district. The post-critical ethnography approach is also important because it is important for me to frame my own positionality within this research. As stated earlier, my lived experiences are extremely different from those of my research respondents. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that I fully disclose my positionality so that readers will be able to make judgments of how my lived experience may have affected my research. My research is also “critical” because it is taking on firmly established entities in public education such as teacher education and unions.

I also chose a post-positivism methodology because I appreciate its emphasis on the subjective lived experiences of all involved. I have built close relationships with my research participants, especially the students of ICUC. The ethnographies of my research respondents will provide the backbone to answer the research questions, however, I hope that the reader can take the data from the ethnography to make their own informed opinions about teacher quality. I hope that the reader will be inspired to create change in education in their community.

During the collection of data, I focused primarily on narrative from my respondents. I used the vehicles of a focus group and one-on-one interviews to do this. I
envison that the lived experiences and opinions from my respondents provide insight into the debate on teacher quality.

Literature Review:

Teacher quality is an extremely tumultuous topic that is gaining plenty of attention in academia. There are many factors that scholars believe affect teacher quality such as, tenure (Fuller, 2000; Weingarten 2010), the single-pay system (Hanushek, 2006), and teacher compensation in relation to other high-skilled occupations (Hanushek, 2006). This literature review focuses on the issue of teacher certification and how it relates to overall teacher quality. Several key scholars have emerged within this field, and my review specifically treats the work of four key scholars as they exist in relation to one another.

Eric Hanushek of Stanford University uses “a simple definition of teacher quality: good teachers are ones who get large gains in student achievement for their classes. Bad teachers do just the opposite.” (Hanushek, 2002) Others disagree. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, for example, criticized Hanushek’s definition of teacher quality. While Cochran-Smith praises Hanushek for his complex research on the econometrics of education, she is disappointed in his “simple” and “circular” definition of teacher quality, as evident in this quotation: “Teacher quality is test score gains, and, conversely, test score gains are evidence of teacher quality…” (Cochran-Smith, 2005)

Some middle ground exists within the debate; particularly in the way that teacher certification can impact teacher quality. Emma Smith cited both Hanushek and Cochran-Smith in her 2008 article in the journal Teaching and Teacher Education. Smith says that when scholars discuss teacher quality, there is nothing that “…seems to have excited such
debate as the issue of teacher certification.” (Smith, 2008) In this quotation, Smith illustrates the two main ideological perspectives in this debate:

“…those who favour a move towards a more decentralised teacher licensing system governed by choice and market forces where prospective teachers can enter the profession by a variety of pathways and those who advocate that teacher preparation should include training in teacher methods and pedagogy and should remain largely in the schools of education. (Smith, 2008)

Smith goes on to describe the viewpoints of those who favor a decentralized teacher certification process. People with this viewpoint believe that the current required teacher education coursework that is required to become a teacher is too stringent. They believe that it is unfair to require someone who did not study teacher methods during their undergraduate career is required to take these courses at a graduate level. They also argue that current teacher certification requirements act as a deterrent to potential teachers. These people hold the foundational belief that teachers should be experts in the subjects that they are teaching, and should have exemplary verbal communication skills. Because current teacher certification requirements focus so heavily on teaching methods, teachers have failed to be proficient in the actual subjects that they teach, and therefore cannot be effective in the classroom. According to Smith, people who view the current system of teacher certification believe that current certification standards and tests already ensure that only high-quality teachers enter the classroom. They believe that the tests encompass evaluations in subject proficiency, verbal skills, and teaching ability. They believe that, “…we should not confuse a highly qualified test taker of [subject] tests with a highly qualified teacher.” (Smith, 2008)
In 2001, a Maryland-based group called The Abell Foundation released a report titled *Teacher Certification Reconsidered: Stumbling for Quality* that made extensive recommendations to fundamentally change the teacher certification process. The report asserts that research shows that certified teachers are no more effective than non-certified teachers. The report argues that the current certification process does not evaluate prospective teachers enough on verbal skills, which research finds to be the single most important characteristic of an effective teacher. The report also debunks myths that teachers who complete graduate coursework in education are more effective than teachers who do not:

“Teachers with master’s degrees are not significantly more effective than those without, unless the teacher is at the secondary level and the master’s degree is in the academic discipline being taught…” (Abell Foundation, 2001)

Through this report, The Abell Foundation makes the recommendation to its home state of Maryland to eliminate all current teacher certification requirements, and only require that prospective teachers hold a bachelor’s degree and earn a passing grade on a subject-specific teacher’s exam. The Abell Foundation fundamentally believes that the state should not regulate teacher certification requirements. In Maryland, the state does not allow school principals to make hiring decisions. The Abell Foundation argues that teacher hiring decisions should be left solely to school districts, especially because many school districts are forced to hire un-certified teachers anyway due to teacher vacancies due to the large number of teachers who leave the profession. The authors of this report believe that current teacher certification requirements are out of touch and are
quite poignant in this quotation: “Regulatory policy cannot supplant the need for human judgment.” (Abell Foundation, 2001)

In 2002, Linda Darling-Hammond, a proponent of current teacher certification policy, released a rebuttal of The Abell Foundation’s report titled, Research and Rhetoric on Teacher Certification: A Response to ‘Teacher Certification Reconsidered’. In this report, Darling-Hammond criticized Kate Walsh, Senior Policy Analyst at The Abell Foundation and main author of their report, of only using one peer-reviewed journal in the 44 sources of the report. Darling-Hammond also criticizes the report for asserting that private schools have more effective teachers because they hire low numbers of certified teachers. She also dismisses the foundation’s view that higher verbal skills and subject mastery alone will improve the overall quality of teachers. Darling-Hammond asserts that The Abell Foundation is recommending that only teachers who have gone through the certification process be tested on verbal skills. Darling-Hammond argues that teacher education is critical for teachers in order to stay up to date with the latest teaching methods. She also asserts that the college GPA’s of newly qualified teachers are higher than those of college graduates in other positions. Darling-Hammond also argues that research shows that more teacher education is better because teachers who undergo a 5-year teacher education program are more effective than those who complete a 4-year program. Finally, Darling-Hammond argues that principals are not in the best position to make hiring and firing decisions because they are not in control of teacher supply and demand issues.

Kate Walsh’s rebuttal stated that there are only a few teacher attributes that can be measured, and current teacher certification practices are not measuring them. She argues
that school principals should be the ones to make these judgments. Walsh argues that measuring GPA’s are not a valuable way to measure teachers in comparison to other professions because fields of study are often varying in their rigor. In response to Darling-Hammond’s statement about private schools, Walsh says that no one can deny that private schools are producing better prepared students, and that they employ larger numbers of uncertified teachers. Walsh checked on the research that Darling-Hammond produced about how teachers who complete 5-year programs are more effective than those who complete 4-year programs, and found that the research she was citing did not use student success as the determinant of teacher effectiveness. In conclusion, Walsh defended The Abell Foundation’s view that teachers should be measured on verbal skills, and stated that that recommendation is for all teachers, regardless of background.

As demonstrated by this literature review, there is much debate over the effectiveness and need for teacher certification. Research suggests that the traditional route of teacher certification does not always mean that effective teachers will be entering the classroom. My research respondents comment on this debate, as well as on other issues.

Integrated Memo:

Teacher quality is a complex subject. Everyone has different ideas about what determines the “quality” of a teacher and what characteristics a “good” teacher should possess. Christina Jones, a respondent in my research and a professor in a local teacher education program, described the climate that surrounds teacher quality by asking, “What are good measures of teacher quality?” (Jones) Scholars, teachers, and administrators alike cannot seem to come to consensus on what aspects of life in a school determine the effectiveness
of teachers. Using the data from the lived experiences and opinions of students, former teachers, and administrators, I will present their interpretations of characteristics of what a “good teacher” is, and what a “bad teacher” is. Next, I will present data based on the opinions and lived experiences of respondents who have identified certain factors that have an effect on teacher quality. These factors are: teacher evaluation, teacher certification and education, tenure, and standards and bureaucracies. I will then shift to focusing on two entities that have effects on teachers: teachers’ unions and school administrations. To conclude, I will present data on the importance for “good” teachers, and incentives for people to enter the teaching profession.

Respondent Introductions:

**Miguel Vargas**

Miguel Vargas is a 17 year-old student at a high school in Ontario. He is finishing up his junior year. Miguel is involved in school extra curricular activities such as band and ASB, which is the student government body. He was elected to be ASB Vice President for the next academic year. Miguel describes himself as an AB-540’ student, which refers to the California Dream Act. Miguel is an undocumented student, but is quick to assert that he is not ashamed of his status. Miguel is, without a doubt, a goofy and fun-loving friend, but is also extremely eloquent for his age and is a natural-born leader.

**Carlos Morales**

Although Carlos could not stay for the whole focus group, his contributions to ICUC have been incredible. He is finishing his freshman year at Mt. San Antonio
College. Carlos is often soft-spoken, but you can count on him to show up to every action and put hard work into it.

Luis Hernandez

Luis Hernandez is also a junior at a local high school. Like Miguel, he is involved in band at school. Luis is a jokester, and always makes me laugh. Luis is proud of his accomplishments, as he should be. He is a leader and is willing to fight for what he believes in. Luis surprised me in this focus group because he held a dissenting viewpoint to all of his peers when asked about “bad” teacher experiences. When Luis spoke, I could tell that he had put serious thought into the topics we were discussing.

Lupe Melendez

Lupe is also finishing her junior year in a local high school. She is an extremely sweet person, and I hope that she will continue her involvement with ICUC next year. She has been elected to be ASB President for the next academic year. During the focus group, Lupe was extremely candid about her lived experiences, and I truly appreciate that.

David Garcia

David is finishing his junior year in an Ontario-area high school. He is a soccer player at school. David is candid with his political views and identifies himself as a Communist. He aspires to be a surgeon. He is a smart student with quick wit. David attends a school where the majority of the demographic is white, and it was interesting to see how this dynamic factored into issues surround teacher quality.

Jasmine Melendez
Jasmine Melendez is finishing her freshman year at a local school. She is relatively new to the ICUC crew, and I have been enjoying getting to know her. She has aspirations to get involved in student government at her school. She is the younger sister of Lupe. She gave me the nickname, “Little Hands.” Jasmine enjoyed participating in the focus group and thought it was a good exercise.

Darryl Johnson

Mr. Johnson is an effective leader at his school. Under his leadership, students are completing their A-G requirements (eligibility requirements for California public universities) at a higher rate than in the past. Our ICUC group has been working with him on a number of different issues. He has been nothing but welcoming. Unfortunately, our interview was only about 25 minutes because the school was testing their students. However, I appreciated Mr. Johnson’s advice and truly admire his love for his school and it’s students.

Anna Prince

Ms. Prince was an incredible interviewee. She is extremely descriptive and possesses the knowledge of a highly experienced teacher with almost 45 years of experience. She is a truly empowered woman. Her love of teaching was obvious. She spoke with such conviction and showed me the ways in which being a part of a union is beneficial. I truly appreciated her coming to Claremont to speak with me.

Christina Jones

Christina Jones is a co-director of a teacher education program at a local graduate school. She even does her own research on teacher quality, and it was great to hear her perspective. She was incredibly helpful in breaking down the extremely complicated
topics that surround teacher quality. Her passion for the teaching profession is incredible and I appreciate how welcoming she was to me.

Themes:

“Good” Teachers

I asked my respondents to describe their interpretation of a “good” teacher in order to provide insight into what they believe a teacher should be. Because the definition of ‘teacher quality’ is in dispute, this theme is particularly important.

The question, “Could you tell me about the best teacher you have ever had, and what characteristics made that teacher the “best?” was presented to the focus group. Carlos remembered a teacher during his sophomore year that was especially helpful and compassionate when he would have problems. He remembered when this teacher hired him to grade papers for her when he was a senior, and appreciated the opportunity that she had provided for responsibility. Miguel was appreciative of a teacher during his freshman year that inspired and helped him become involved in activism, by collecting signatures for a petition during a budget crisis. He appreciated this teacher’s ideals of having students take ownership of their own education. Miguel was also thankful for the practical organizational and time-management tactics, and that she tracked his personal progress carefully. Luis enthusiastically described his current Advanced Placement English teacher, who is extremely relatable. Luis describes him as, “really funny,” and said, “He acts like a student. He’s not like a teacher, he’s more of a friend.” (Hernandez) Luis was quick to add that his favorite teacher is popular among the students and he is an
excellent teacher because he “breaks down” subject material for students to understand fully. Lupe described her advisor and was thankful for this teacher’s willingness to be open and receptive to what she had to say, and was helpful when Lupe confided in her about family and personal issues. Jasmine described her 7th grade English teacher, and discussed her building of meaningful relationships with her students.

Mr. Johnson echoed Jasmine’s response of “relationships,” when asked, “What is the make-up of a high-quality, effective teacher?” He emphasized that student-teacher relationships directly affect student-learning outcomes. Mr. Johnson believes that students respond very well to teachers who are consistent in their instruction. He also is in support of instructors who use real world applications to drive their instruction and who provide data to back up the lessons. Mr. Johnson also said that “one of the best teachers” will be willing to extend the school day to work with students that are having trouble understanding their subject matter. (Johnson)

Christina Jones began her response to this question by emphasizing the important point that teachers are human beings who make mistakes, and it is important for us to remember that. She feels that an expectation has been created that says teachers are invincible and are supposed to be perfect. Overall, she said that good teachers are individuals who are creative, flexible, and possess a very specific, “interactive type of intelligence.” Ms. Jones also stressed the need for good teachers to understand themselves and how they perceive themselves. She said that a good teacher takes all of these factors and interweave them to “create a safe learning environment that is collaborative and exciting…” (Jones)
Anna Prince described a good teacher as someone who cares deeply for her students. Ms. Prince could not stress enough that effective teachers must create a clear distinction between teacher and student. She believes that teachers should not attempt to be friends with students, and compares this to parents who attempt to befriend their children, often to unfortunate results. She thinks a culture of respect needs to be created between instructor and pupil. She also discussed the need for teachers to have full competency in their respective subject areas because subject mastery on the part of the instructor is essential to student success, regardless of teaching methods or strategies. Ms. Prince also said that the ability for a teacher not to raise their voice is important. She also indicated the importance of understanding students’ “need structures” and being flexible to teaching in a variety of different ways, because different students learn in different ways. Ms. Prince also said that a good teacher has a highly structured classroom, where he will make contact with every student, and make sure that every student has a voice in the discussion. She also underlined the importance of maintaining close contact with peer teachers, the administration, and parents of students.

All of the respondents were in agreement that the personal relationships that teachers build with students are of utmost importance. Teachers who directly invest in the lives of their students are also considered “good” teachers. The actual character of a teacher and their commitment to the personal lives of the students holds more weight than the actual academic instruction. All of my respondents were in agreement with this. This makes a strong argument for student voice in discourse over teacher quality. Anna Prince raised a point that teachers must be disciplined and must create a clear distinction in roles between teacher and student. The students also echoed this sentiment, but think that this
role should be inside the classroom, and can be “looser” outside of the classroom. Overall, a good teacher is someone who is dedicated to the personal well being of the student and is genuinely interested in building a relationship with her. At the same time, a “good” teacher is disciplined in the classroom and can effectively communicate the content to the students. In our current climate, we use test scores to determine the quality of our teachers. Based on the characteristics that the respondents identified for “good” teachers, we must shift to a system that determines the quality of a teacher based on the subjective lived experiences of the students.

“Bad” Teachers

Just as is the case with ‘good’ teachers, it is important to understand the characteristics of teachers they consider to be ‘bad.’ We must identify problem areas in teachers so that we can find constructive ways to correct them.

When asked, “Can you tell me about the worst teacher that you have had? What characteristics made them the worst teacher?” Jasmine immediately responded describing her previous Biology teacher who would constantly lose his own focus on the lesson plan, and begin telling the class about his personal life. Jasmine finds teachers who go off-topic to be annoying. Miguel shared his frustrations with an Algebra teacher in middle school who refused to hold students accountable for their work. This particular teacher would grade homework assignments by having students raise their papers in the air. If there were some sort of writing on the papers, the student would receive an “A.” Miguel remembered that this teacher would refuse to review subject material because it was an Honors class, and held the philosophy that students in Honors classes should not
need to review subject matter. He also shared that one of his friend’s teachers at school refused to teach at all. This teacher would just give a hand out with the subject matter on it, and tell students to use their books and fill it out. He says that this teacher had to resort to this method because she could not control the class. Miguel emphasized the importance of teachers having good classroom management skills. Lupe echoed Jasmine’s frustration with teachers that stray off topic. Lupe told the focus group about her current math teacher who goes off-topic by talking about her own children and how they are enrolled in “top universities.” She then proceeds to tell the class how hard it will be for all of them to go to college, and tells them of their chances of getting into schools. Lupe also told the group about a history teacher who she felt did not have college-level education in history. Luis surprised me with his answer to this question. He said:

“For me personally, I’ve never had a bad teacher. My parents always made sure I had...not the top classes, but the decent teachers. If I ever felt like I had a bad teacher, I would try to pay attention more before I complain. I’ve never had a bad teacher. I honestly don’t believe in bad teachers. I believe in bad students. All teachers are similar. They have their own ways of teaching.” (Hernandez)

Luis did remember a teacher that was having personal problems outside of class, and had an emotional breakdown during class. He said that teachers should be able to separate their personal lives from their work. David expressed frustrations with teachers who lose his schoolwork. He also discussed the annoyance he feels when teachers are inflexible in their teaching methods. He also told the group about his current AP History teacher who makes him feel discouraged:
“Many times she’ll have questions for the entire class on the previous night’s readings or specific details or just lessons, and then, I’ll answer the question, and it will be a really smart answer. I’ll answer five times, and she’ll say, “Oh, no one did the reading?” And another kid on the other side of the classroom will answer the question, and she’ll say, “Good job!” And I feel stupid. And that just brings down my self-esteem.” (Garcia)

The respondents identify a lack of professionalism as a main indicator of “bad” teachers. The students become frustrated with teachers who go “off-topic.” The larger issue at hand is teachers who ignore or discourage students as they identified. These teachers should not have the privilege of teaching. Any teacher who discourages students from the prospects of higher education is not fit to be a teacher. The respondents also identified cases of teachers who refused to teach at all. Once again, these people should not be in the classroom. The stakes are too high. It would be hard to believe that teachers would act in ways that the students illustrated they do if an administrator (or any adult, for that matter) was present. This too also presents a strong argument for the need of student voice in teacher evaluation.

Teacher Evaluation

Teacher evaluation is a major theme in this research because it is a hot topic when it comes to teacher quality. As the statistics from the National Council on Teacher Quality show, California receives an ‘F’ grade when it comes to exiting ineffective teachers. There are arguments that say administrators cannot effectively evaluate their
teachers because the unions place stringent requirements on administrators to provide any sort of constructive feedback.

When asked what students would do if they felt the need to provide feedback to a teacher, the focus group was in consensus that they would never evaluate their teachers. Miguel felt that providing constructive criticism to a teacher would not be taken well, and would be fairly pointless because a teacher’s voice holds more weight than a student’s voice. Jasmine said that if she is having trouble with a teacher, she will “keep to herself” and do the work anyway the teacher wants her to, regardless of whether she is learning or not. She voiced her concern and expressed mistrust in school officials. She feels that if she went to her counselor to voice feedback, the counselor would just downplay it because the school officials build relationships with one another. David feels that the demographics at his school would make it hard for him to provide feedback. David attends a school that is primarily composed of white students, and feels that those students have an easier time of building relationships with the teachers. He feels that he is often alone if he has a critical view of a teacher. Because of this, David often feels “intimidated” if he wants to talk to a teacher or counselor. Lupe said, “We don’t have the power because we’re underage. We’re just students.” (Melendez)

Darryl Johnson said that as a principal, he takes time once a week to walk around the school to sit in on classes. He says that he cannot visit all of the classrooms, but he tries to see as many as possible. Mr. Johnson finds that when a teacher is struggling, it is often due to misplacement in the classroom. Once these ineffective teachers are placed at a level that is suitable for them, they flourish. Mr. Johnson’s administration works with teachers who are not being as effective as they should be by providing them with “good
tips” and working with their course leads and department heads. He says that his staff is provided with opportunities for further teacher education and trainings. Mr. Johnson is quick to note that his high school has a goal of improving instruction every year.

Christina Jones explained the complexity of current teacher evaluation practices in this quotation:

“You know, one of the professors here just completed some very interesting research. She asked the principals, “Who are your high-performing teachers?” You know, and she gets those names, and then they look at the test scores, and they see that the teachers that consistently show the largest gains in test scores for their students are not the same people that the principal has named. And so, when you talk about evaluation, you have to say, “Evaluation for what?” And schools haven’t been about children for a very long time. They’ve been about adults. And so, it’s not hard to imagine that a principal would want an employee who is cooperative, obedient, on time…and dresses properly. You know what I mean? There’s those aspects of a good employee, whereas sometimes really the best teachers aren’t always the most…uh… You know, I’m not saying you have to be a jerk to be a good teacher, because really good teaching is a collaborative process, so you do have those good people skills but, it’s “evaluation for what?” (Jones)

Jones notes that any form of teacher evaluation is a new practice. When I asked her about teacher evaluation practices, she said that ten years ago, teachers were evaluated “Almost not at all.” She said that her personal tactic of evaluating teachers is to
walk into their classroom and see if she can understand what they are explaining. If she cannot understand, she concludes that they are teaching incorrectly.

Anna Prince holds a different view of teacher evaluation. She told me about a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District who committed suicide because he was “publicly humiliated” because he was singled out in the newspaper for his students having low test scores on state standardized tests. She believes that the politicians create standardized tests that are not at all useful for the schools so they can have something to say about education. She said that she has no problem with teacher evaluation, but is disgusted that the results of standardized tests are published in the newspaper.

The perspective on teacher evaluation among the adult respondents is very interesting. Although Mr. Johnson does his best, he does not always have enough time to check in on all the teachers at his school. Ms. Jones illustrated that the current method of using test scores does not even correlate with the subjective interpretation of what a “good” teacher is. Ms. Prince finds that the current methods of teacher evaluation are merely political tools. It is clear to see that current teacher evaluation practices are not working. While we are perpetuating teacher evaluation practices that are not working, we are actively ignoring the opinions of our students. They illustrated that they are not comfortable giving back feedback to teachers. Once again, a strong argument can be raised that student voice should have a place in the evaluation of our teachers. As Ms. Jones discussed, current teacher evaluation practices are new. They can still be changed.
Teacher Certification and Education

As my literature review analyzes, the relevance of teacher certification and education is being questioned. I had the privilege of being able to ask Christina Jones questions about this. She is the co-director of a teacher education program and had quite insightful answers.

Christina Jones said point blank, “Teacher certification is not a good measure of teacher quality.” (Jones) She noted that all teacher certification programs are different and are of different qualities, but one cannot find a piece of research that says which components of teacher education programs produce highly-effective teachers. She said, “Having a teaching credential means you went through a teacher education program. It means you passed a content exam, and it means your fingerprints have been cleared by the FBI.” (Jones) Jones finds it problematic that pedagogy and subject content have been separate, with an unbalanced focus of pedagogy. She feels that content knowledge must be interwoven with the pedagogical knowledge in teacher education programs. She said, “I mean, knowing learning theory and being a good teacher have no connection to one another.” (Jones)

Ms. Jones raises concerns that we are not making sure that teachers are not making sure that the teachers in our schools have fully achieved mastery in the subject areas that they teach in. She believes that pedagogical content knowledge is a necessary part of any teacher education program. Pedagogical content knowledge is a specific type of learning where a teacher can understand the different ways students can think about certain subject matter. For example, if a student is making mistakes in a math class, his teacher, who possesses pedagogical content knowledge, can understand the thought process
behind the student’s mistakes and knows of strategies in which to correct him. She believes that a good teacher education program will focus on pedagogical content knowledge, while still incorporating a close connection between academic and clinical components of teaching. She was quick to mention in her interview that teaching methods and strategies are still very important, and should remain a large part of teacher education programs. She described her own program:

“Sometimes kids need direct instruction. Sometimes kids just really need to play with something and figure it out for themselves. Sometimes kids need to work in groups. And so, we try to really try to help our students understand that number one, they can have a huge impact on student learning. Number two, these are all the different ways that we know of today that can help that. Number three, as you’re practicing it and trying it, we’re gonna help you, we’re gonna help you think about it, we’re gonna help you grow.” (Jones)

She continued to reiterate the need for pedagogical content knowledge by describing one of her students who created a lesson plan that was extremely sophisticated in it’s use of teaching methods, but was irrelevant because the student teacher overlooked a simple calculation. Situations like this frustrate Jones. She holds the position that teaching strategies without content are pointless.

Mr. Johnson said that every teacher at his school was fully certified.

For the rest of the research findings, responses from the focus group will not be present. Due to time constraints, I was not able to ask questions on the following themes.

Based on this data, the roles of current teacher certification and education processes must be reviewed. Teacher education must become more holistic and train
teachers to be effective in the specific subject that they teach in. There is too much of an emphasis on pedagogy. Pedagogy is extremely important, but we must shift our teacher education programs to be more balanced. The same could be said for teacher certification practices. We need to truly investigate whether teacher certification has a place in effective education. If we were to scale back teacher certification requirements, we would see more highly skilled and diverse teachers in the field.

**Unions**

Teachers Unions are under fire. They are starting to be seen as detrimental to student success and are often at the center of debate when it comes to ‘teacher quality.’ Unions are a huge influence on the overall lived experiences of teachers. Anna Prince was an asset to have as an interviewee because she provided intriguing arguments to support unions.

Darryl Johnson was enthusiastic about the role of the teachers’ union at his high school. He finds the union to be a support for his campus. If Mr. Johnson has an issue with a teacher, he must first call the union. He says that the rules in the contract are very explicit, and he is willing to abide by them. He says that the union tells him what he can and can’t do, and described the union as “outstanding.”

Christina Jones holds an opposite view of the role of teachers’ unions in public education. She uses examples of coalminers and truck drivers as people who traditionally unionize, and says that their reason for unionizing is for protection, because someone decided that they were disposable and could easily be replaced. She cites the Coleman report of 1966 as a reason for teacher unionization. This report said that teacher quality
did not matter and that student success is based on socio-economic status. The report has since been discredited in the academic world. Ms. Johnson considers teaching to be a high-skilled job, and would like it to be treated as such:

“Doctors aren’t unionized. Financial analysts aren’t unionized. If you do a good job, you know…you’re hard to replace, let me put it that way. I shouldn’t say that if you don’t do a good job you’re fired. You’re hard to replace. You know a bunch of stuff that not many other people know.” (Jones)

Jones feels that teachers’ unions work for teachers, and not for students. She emphasizes that teachers have needed protection and security, so the creation of teachers’ unions are totally merited, but now they are detrimental to student wellbeing. She believes that the best interests for the union can “bump up” against what is best for the students.

Anna Prince believes that teachers’ unions fight for the rights of teachers, which in turn directly benefits students. Prince joined the union as soon as she became a teacher. She said enthusiastically, “The union looked out for your rights, the union gave you information.” (Prince) When Prince joined the union, she joined the political action committee and campaigned against her school board who she said had no respect for women or teachers. That committee’s work was able to take back the majority of the school board to be “pro-teacher.” She described herself as a union member who is not “blind.” If Prince does not agree with what the union is doing, she will not pay her union dues. She remembered a time when her union sent her a letter saying that instead of a raise for the teachers that year, they would be earning a 2 ½% bonus. She found this to be idiotic and described the union leadership as having no “money sense.” This inspired her
to run for union president, and she won. During her tenure as president, she was able to ensure that there would be no teacher meetings on Friday afternoons, among other things. She said that this was directly beneficial to students because teachers had more time to prepare for their classes. She is proud of the fact that she will be remembered during her time as president for always making student education her top priority. She stressed the importance of young people recognizing that unions “shaped the nation.” She described unions as “pushy,” but was unapologetic because that is their job. She remembers strikes where the teachers were fighting for limits on class size because children cannot learn in classrooms that are over-packed. Prince firmly believes that without unions, teachers would have no freedom of speech. She noted that the California Teachers’ Union works at the state level with legislators to create laws. She defended unions when it comes to the removal of teachers who are ineffective. She said that unions do not defend bad teachers, but that they stand up for the due process of teachers. Prince says that being part of a union is demanding and time consuming, which means that young people are perfect people to join unions. Prince said that teachers are protected from abuse by principals because principals are intimidated to go against the power of the union.

It is clear that unions are not currently working for the direct benefit of students. Teachers Unions work for teacher benefits which do not always necessarily mean what is best for students. Teachers Unions have become a giant special interests groups, and this has taken the focus away from students to politics. It is important to state that unions are necessary. Teachers need to be protected because our current culture does not view teaching as a high-skill job. We must work to shift the national discourse to be more appreciative of teachers. At the same time, we must reform our unions to ensure that
democratic process is being met and that they primarily focus on students. Our ultimate goal should be to elevate the teaching profession so that the existence of a union is no longer necessary.

**Tenure**

The role of tenure for public school teachers is also controversial. Tenure began in universities to protect professors so they may have academic freedom. There have been questions raised if tenure has the potential to be abused. ‘Bad’ teachers may use tenure to become lazy because of the unprecedented job security it provides. Tenure is a major theme that can affect teacher quality.

Darryl Johnson described the tenure process at his school as “simple.” The typical teacher at his school will obtain tenure by their third year. The teacher undergoes three evaluations each year for their first two years of teaching. If the teacher has received good feedback on all six evaluations, she will have obtained tenure on the first day of the third year.

Christina Jones is skeptical of tenure. She explains that the tenure system was created in order to protect professors so they can have academic freedom. She is not sure if the tenure process is relevant for public school teachers because teachers enter the profession knowing that they will have to follow state curriculums and that their overall education methods and materials will be regulated. Just as she noted with unions, we are responsible for the tenure system because we have created a culture where teachers have needed protection.
Tenure must be reevaluated. It is extremely easy to obtain tenure, and not every teacher deserves it. It does not make sense that achieving tenure at Pitzer College is a peer and student reviewed process after many years of experience while tenure for public school teachers is granted after two years. Once again, students should have a say in the tenure process. Do schools truly want to grant virtually indestructible job security without making sure that the teacher is someone that is truly valued by the students of the school?

Administration

One may argue that school administrations could be blamed for the persistence of ineffective teachers to remain in schools. This same person could argue that administrations could have the possibility to fire ineffective teachers, but they don’t feel like documenting the shortcomings of the teacher.

Johnson told us that he as a principal only has a window of opportunity of two years to terminate a teacher who is ineffective.

Christina Jones said she has seen good administrators in well-run schools fire ineffective teachers, even if they have obtained tenure. She stressed the importance of documenting the characteristics of ineffective teachers. As a professor who grants students teaching credentials, sometimes she has to deny a student their credential because she thinks they would not be suited to teach. A student may threaten to sue her program, but she keeps close documentation of why she cannot grant that student a credential. She argues that administrators must do the same.

Anna Prince holds the same view as Ms. Jones. She acknowledges the fact that due process is tedious and long, but argues that there are not that many bad teachers, so it
should not be an issue. In her experience, the teachers that could be considered “bad” are so flagrantly horrible that the administrator should have no problem documenting their ineffectiveness.

Administrators should be given more autonomy in the way they run schools. We should also trust administrators to make the decisions that are best for the students. It is ridiculous that Mr. Johnson has to call a third-party union to ask permission to deal with an ineffective teacher. This makes the functioning of a school a bureaucratic mess.

**Standards and Bureaucracies**

There are many laws and agencies in place that put restrictions and expectations on schools, and subsequently, teachers. Departments of education at all levels, school boards, and laws all have a role in the way teachers do their job. This is why it is a major theme in this research.

Christina Jones thinks that the state regulated curricula that are provided in schools today is not that great. She explained the power that textbook companies and their publishers have on schools. The states employ textbook companies, and the districts choose from a range of books and materials that are state-approved. She lamented over the amount of things that must be regulated in schools, and how the entire public education system becomes an incredibly complex entity that is hard to make changes to at all. Jones believes that our education system automatically caters to rich children, which is why our education needs a standardization system as a necessary evil. She says that all of this boils down to “compliance versus performance:”
“A compliance mentality is, there are the 20 standards, and you’re OK as long as we can see that you’re doing the 20 standards. That has nothing to do with the outcome. The performance mentality is, “Well I don’t know what you’re doing, but all of your kids are going to college, their tests are really high, so have…fun.” (Prince)

Jones holds a firm belief that the current government standards cannot tell us who effective teachers are because all of our policymakers are too removed from the context of the classroom.

Anna Prince was quick to express her anger towards standardized testing:

“You take the people that are very concerned about the children they work with, you give them too many things, you give them an overload of politically generated things that they have to do, standards they have to reach, ways they have to reach it…For instance, standardized testing is a joke. They force teachers to give these tests, and they treat teachers like we have never given a test before. Those tests generate outside the experience in the classroom that generate those test questions. If you really delve into something in the classroom, you may or may not be able to cover the things that are on that test. They don’t want to tell you to have a comprehensive thing in the classroom. They want to tell you what to teach, how to teach it, tell you what quarter to teach it. There is massive testing going on.” (Prince)

Prince is irate that 21 days out of a 180-day school year are dedicated to testing. That is just over 4 school weeks a year. She believes that the politicians create testing policy in order to “go after” education because it is a field that is largely made up of
women. She believes that teachers who “teach to the test” are acting out of their fear of being humiliated or singled out by the school’s administration.

Government officials and standards are too removed from schools to be able to micromanage them. We have too many government bodies that control how schools function, and their expectations are often conflicting. We need to truly assess the role of testing in our schools. Do we truly get a sense of the way students are learning by having them take a standardized test? We need to holistically reevaluate the expectations we place on schools and teachers.

**Incentives to Teach**

It is important to identify the factors that draw people to the teaching profession. We must find ways to expand upon these reasons.

Mr. Johnson describes the current state of teaching as a career:

“I used to tell everybody, “You should go into teaching.” You know, people I thought would be great teachers and educators. There are students that I see all the time and I say, “You need to come back here and teach here.” I don’t do that anymore. I’m afraid to because I’m gonna give them a job that’s just so unreliable” (Johnson)

Johnson does, however, say that teaching is the best job “in the United States of America. He firmly believes that the education system will get better because it is the most important job that our country does. He says that all of the policymakers who have power right now owe that to the education system. He says that one day they will stop making “not-so-bright” decisions, and do what is best for our country’s children.
Christina Jones believes that the salary of a teacher is a good incentive to enter the profession. Starting teachers can have a starting salary as high as $46,000. She says that there are plenty of opportunities for promotion. District office officials make anywhere from $80-100,000. Superintendents have a salary around $200,000. In addition to summer vacation, teachers get to work in a collaborative learning environment.

Conclusion:

My first research question is, “What is ‘teacher quality’ and what are good components of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teachers?” Through my research, I found that real ‘teacher quality’ is the degree to which a teacher can connect to students on a personal level and how effectively they can impart knowledge onto them. I came to this definition by analyzing what my respondents described as a ‘good’ teacher as. All of my respondents said that first and foremost, a ‘good’ teacher will be able to connect to their students on a personal level. Other responses included teachers that are good influences outside of the classroom and teachers with good classroom management skills. The focus group identified teachers who are ‘bad’ to be teachers that frequently go off-topic and teachers who discourage and ignore students. All of these responses are important because they give us a measure to think critically about the teachers in the community with ideals from members of the community.

My second research question is, “What are current factors in place that can affect ‘teacher quality?’ I answered this question by identifying my themes. To reiterate, these themes are, teacher evaluation, teacher certification and education, ‘good’ teachers, ‘bad’
teachers, standards and bureaucracies, unions, tenure, and administrations, and incentives.

My third research question is, “What are the incentives for highly skilled people to enter the profession?” My respondents that have careers in education said that the compensation is decent and the summer vacation is nice. Most importantly, teachers have the opportunity to serve in an intellectually stimulating community working with kids. We must continue to search for more ways to make the teaching profession more attractive to our nation’s best and brightest so that they can directly invest in our future via our students.

Recommendations:

There are many changes that I would like to make to the overall public school education system such as creating more pathways for people to enter the teaching profession, reforming teachers unions, and reevaluating the tenure system. These issues are extremely important. They deserve further inquiry, and I look forward to doing just that. As stated before, the ultimate goal is to produce work that is useful to the community organizing efforts of ICUC. I have been so blessed to have the privilege of working with this group, and I hope that this research can be helpful. With this in mind, I have two major recommendations for possible actions.

My first recommendation is to invite teachers to become involved in community organizing efforts. The teachers, counselors, and administrators that I have met during my time at ICUC are extremely passionate about their students. I think that the voice of teachers in our organizing efforts would provide insight and knowledge that we have not had access to in the past. These teachers could help the group navigate bureaucratic
hurdles when it comes to performing actions at the school. Teachers would have a better idea of whom we should target to create change to improve teacher quality. Not to mention, ICUC’s reputation with the local high school has been less than favorable among the teachers. If we began to involve teachers, we could find allies to be even more effective.

My second recommendation is to begin a campaign to involve students in the process of evaluating teachers. What if public school students could fill out course evaluations at the end of the school year? Students are equipped to effectively evaluate their own teachers. Prospective teachers should be required to meet and interact with students from that school before they are hired. Administrators should be actively seeking out the opinions of students about their teachers. Students should feel safe to provide constructive criticism of teachers. The students and adults that I used as respondents all said that teachers’ relateability to students is of utmost importance. Who is most qualified to decide if teachers are relatable to students? The answer is obviously the students themselves. Christina Jones said that schools have not been about students for a long time. This is a surefire way for students to take ownership and have a say about the teachers that teach them.
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