

What Is Your North Star?

WSM Article

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Teaching is a journey. If you have been teaching for more than 15 years, you have seen the landscape of education change dramatically. What is helping you to navigate it? Are you in control of your navigation or are you floating with the current and being blown around by the prevailing winds? What is your North Star?

How Did We Get Here?

One of the greatest questions we can ask when we are students is “Why?”. *Why* leads us to deeper understanding. It also helps us seek the relevance and purposefulness of an idea or task. When Educator Effectiveness (EE) first appeared, I started asking, “Why are we in education going down this road? What caused us to take this approach?” These questions led me to a deeper understanding of not only why we are here, but also how we got here.

The Journey Here

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 has been the most far-reaching federal education legislation ever passed by Congress. It was passed as a part of Johnson’s “War on Poverty” and made public funds available for public education, while forbidding a national curriculum. “It also emphasized equal access to education and established high standards and accountability”.¹ The most recent reauthorization of ESEA is “No Child Left Behind Act” of 2001.

In 2009, President Obama and Education Secretary Arnie Duncan introduced “Race To The Top” funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The US Department of Education created a contest to spur innovation and reforms with the prize being \$4.35 billion dollars in education grants to states. States could receive “flexibility” from NCLB if they: adopted and implemented college and career-ready standards (Common Core); created a comprehensive system of teacher and principal development, evaluation, and support (Danielson FFT); set new performance targets to improve student achievement and close achievement gaps (SLO); and implemented accountability systems that recognized and rewarded high performing schools and those making significant gains.²

In 2009, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded the MET project. This was a research partnership between 3,000 teacher volunteers and dozens of independent research teams. The project's goal was to build and test measures of effective teaching. This information could then be used to find

¹ Elementary and Secondary Education Act. (2014, October 14). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 04:37, November 18, 2014, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Elementary_and_Secondary_Education_Act&oldid=629622761

² Race to the Top. (2014, November 18). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 04:43, November 18, 2014, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Race_to_the_Top&oldid=634327094

out how evaluation methods could best be used to tell teachers more about the skills that would make them most effective. This would help districts identify and develop great teaching.³ On September 13 of 2011, the Danielson Group, Teachscape, and Educational Testing Service formed a partnership to create the Framework for Teaching Proficiency System. On April 2, 2012, WI Act 166 mandated that all public school districts and 2R charter schools use the new Wisconsin EE System to evaluate all principals and teachers beginning in the 2014-15 school year.

Now That We Are Here...Where Are We?

The brief history above shows some of the twist and turns that we have taken. It seems that everyone has come to the conclusion that NCLB left many children behind. As Diane Ravitch said in her book The Death and Life of the Great American School System, “The standards movement was replaced by the accountability movement”.⁴ Race to the Top has taken a competitive approach to education in order to help “spur innovation”. However, this has created a *win at all cost at all costs* attitude, with reform happening carelessly. “If a reform hasn’t been considered carefully, if it hasn’t been tested in the mind and in practice, it may result in wasted efforts and damaged lives.”⁵

We have also seen the influences of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as it has pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into K12 initiatives that mirror many of the department's policy priorities. Some of these include the championing of Common Core State Standards, and tying teacher evaluations to student test scores.⁶

The Framework for Teaching is actually a wonderful tool created with very good intentions. As Charlotte Danielson recalled,

“It's an outgrowth of work I was part of at ETS on Praxis 3 [in the late 1980s]. Praxis 3 was an observation-assessment of first year teachers for the purpose of a continuing license. In order to do that, ETS had to commission a lot of serious research as to what is good teaching. I got hired to be part of the project because they realized if you wanted to have live observations of teaching, you had to have trained observers. Which is a no-brainer, but I was the only person who had actually developed training programs. I could see that there was a need for [observational evaluation] beyond first-year teachers. We've seen what happens when people get National Board certification--the preparation you do for it, it was valuable professional development. It struck me that the same philosophy could apply if we had clear standards of

³ Measures of Effective Teaching. (2014, March 1). Retrieved November 18, 2014, from <http://www.metproject.org/reports.php>

⁴ Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books.

⁵ Senechal, D., & Strauss, V. (2010, August 11). The problem with ‘Race to the Top’ is the race. Retrieved November 17, 2014.

⁶ Klein, A. (2014, November 4). Federal K-12 Policy Evolves as Staff Turns Over. Retrieved November 17, 2014.

practice for regular teachers. That's what caused me to write the framework... I wrote this book and didn't have a clue that anything would ever come of it, I just did it because I thought there was a need. It came out of assessment but I didn't see it as a framework for assessment, I just thought it was good for understanding practice. ASCD published it, and they made it a member book, and so it got sent out to about 90,000 people. I believe that one of the reasons my framework has become so widely accepted is that it gives voice to what all educators know, that teaching is very complex work, it's a thinking person's job and you cannot follow a cookbook"⁷

However, states have taken this tool and added a scoring system to the rubric. When asked about this, Danielson said:

“In general, I don't like numbers of any kind. Teaching is enormously complex work and it is very hard to just reduce it to a number of any kind. However, it's important to capture, in a short-hand manner, the relative skills of different teachers, so I suppose numbers or ratings of some kind - are inevitable. I am not thrilled about saying that a teacher's performance is a level 2 and not a level 3. However, we are in a world of high-stakes evaluation, and so it may be necessary to do so.”⁸

High Stakes Evaluation? Yes, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation MET Study, ETS, Teachscape and Danielson Group have worked hard to try and create an evaluation tool and training process that is reliable and valid. “Together with Teachscape, we can now deliver sound, tested and practical tools for teacher evaluation,” said Linda Tyler, Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, Teacher Licensure and Certification, ETS. “The Proficiency System is instrumental in providing districts the support they need to train and certify observers so that they demonstrate understanding of how to accurately and reliably assess teaching practice. It is a vital component of any fair and equitable approach to teacher evaluation.”⁹ However, are we ready for high stakes evaluation? Danielson said at a panel discussion, “It is going to be high stakes for the systems which means we have to be robust, reliable, valid, professionally defensible and perhaps even legally defensible. I get nervous that this is going to turn into full employment for lawyers.”¹⁰

⁷ Hess, R. (2011, June 23). Straight Up Conversation: Teacher Eval Guru Charlotte Danielson. Retrieved November 18, 2014, from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2011/06/straight_up_conversation_teacher_eval_guru_charlotte_danielson.html

⁸ Dewitt, P. (2011, October 8). Education Week. Retrieved November 18, 2014, from http://mobile.edweek.org/c.jsp?DISPATCHED=true&cid=25983841&item=http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/finding_common_ground/2011/10/a_framework_for_good_teaching_a_conversation_with_charlotte_danielson.html

⁹ Elliott, K. (2011, September 13). Teachscape - Press and News - Teachscape and ETS Join Forces to Develop Online Observer Training and Testing System for Teacher Evaluations. Retrieved November 18, 2014, from <http://www.teachscape.com/about/press-and-news/2011/teachscape-teams-with-charlotte-danielson-and-ets.html>

¹⁰ Charlotte Danielson on Teacher Evaluation. (2012, April 19). Retrieved November 18, 2014, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo8EyEdukbA>

In regards to teacher evaluation and training, Danielson has stated, “Our findings have been somewhat humbling. Even after training, most observers require multiple opportunities to practice using the framework effectively and to calibrate their judgments with others. The real question is what counts as evidence and how can you attribute that evidence to individuals? That is the challenge and I do not believe anyone has figured that out yet. There is a great deal of psycho-metric evidence that indicates that any standardized tests are a poor measure of student learning for this purpose, but in many cases that's all that's available.”¹¹

Don't worry...as Charlotte Danielson also said, “We will not fire our way to Finland.” In fact, using the FFT to reduce teaching to a number is ridiculous. “After the Final Summary Conference, evaluators will submit final scores in Teachscape.”¹² It seems like everyone is more worried about how to score a teacher or principal rather than how to best meet the needs of kids.

What does excellent assessment look like in your classroom? Can one number or letter accurately express the complexities of human development and learning? Can one number represent the complexities of teaching? Good assessment in your classroom is LESS about your judgment of students and MORE about you asking questions. Evaluators, like great teachers, should spend less time working on how to score educators and more time learning on how to coach educators through a reflective, goal setting process.

As Alfie Kohn put it, “Any aspect of learning (or life) that appears in numerical form seems reassuringly scientific; if the numbers are getting larger over time, we must be making progress. Concepts such as intrinsic motivation and intellectual exploration are difficult for some minds to grasp, whereas test scores, like sales figures or votes, can be calculated and tracked and used to define success and failure. Broadly speaking, it is easier to measure efficiency than effectiveness, easier to rate how well we're doing something than to ask whether what we're doing makes sense. Not everyone realizes that the process of coming to understand ideas in a classroom is not always linear or quantifiable - or, in fact, that measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning.”¹³

What have we learned from all of this?

- Setting a standard bar and telling all kids to jump over it (or else...) is not effective.
- Using competition to achieve results leads to winners and losers. It can also create people so focused on the extrinsic reward that they will lie, cheat, and cut corners to achieve the outcome.
- Validating teacher effectiveness based on standardized tests is a joke. As Alfie Kohn states, “Standardized Tests measure what matters least!”.

¹¹ Dewitt, P. (2011, October 8). Education Week. Retrieved November 18, 2014, from http://mobile.edweek.org/c.jsp?DISPATCHED=true&cid=25983841&item=http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/finding_common_ground/2011/10/a_framework_for_good_teaching_a_conversation_with_charlotte_danielson.html

¹² *Teacher Evaluation Process Manual* (Vol. Version 4). (2014). Madison: Wisconsin Department of Instruction.

¹³ Kohn, A. (2000). *The case against standardized testing: Raising the scores, ruining the schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Numbers, like grades, are best used to rank, sort and compare. Human learning and teaching is complex work and deserves more than a number. “Not everything important is measurable and not everything measurable is important.” -Albert Einstein

What is Your North Star?

Even with all of the crazy twists and turns, you still have to keep both hands on the wheel. As Sir Ken Robinson says “...education doesn’t go on in the committee rooms of our legislative buildings. It happens in classrooms and schools, and the people who do it are the teachers and the students.”¹⁴ You can make things happen. Close your eyes and imagine a different possibility. “In the measurement world, you set a goal and strive for it. In the universe of possibility, you set the context and let life unfold.”¹⁵

In my universe of possibility, I would use the FFT for teaching but get rid of the scoring system next to it. Instead, teachers could use the FFT to reflect and set new goals. Mentors in a teacher’s area of expertise could help guide and mentor educators in their planning and preparation. Teachers could meet with PLC’s to share ideas and communicate about the art of teaching. They could help each other write well-crafted outcomes that will not solely focus on raising standardized test scores, but rather achieve an outcome set for and with students. You know what? That sounds a LOT like CMP!

My North Star has been CMP. It continues to guide me no matter the climate or terrain. It is a sound, fundamental, planning process. It frees me from the worries about terms such as “evaluation and accountability”. It is the mirror I hold up to my teaching. It requires that I select the very best literature for my students, analyze it carefully, create well crafted outcomes, utilize rich, varied strategies, and embed assessments not for the sole purpose of gather data for a report, but to empower the learners and facilitate better instruction. What is your North Star?

¹⁴ Robinson, K. (2013, April 9). Transcript of "How to escape education's death valley" Retrieved November 18, 2014.

¹⁵ Zander, R., & Zander, B. (2000). *The art of possibility*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.