

**How Do You Know?**  
**Claims and Evidence in Teacher Education**  
Mari Pearlman  
*Keynote Address at the 12<sup>th</sup> TEAC Annual Meeting*  
*San Diego, California, February 23, 2011*

The following remarks accompanied the Power Point slides in Dr. Pearlman's keynote presentation at the TEAC annual meeting.

**Commentary for Slide 4: CURRENT CONTEXT CLAIMS**

**POLICY**

- Current ed policy is dominated by the view that education and business, especially knowledge-based businesses like software development, are analogous.
- This means that timelines for change and quantifiable improvement are very different from educators' understandings of developmental learning imperatives
- Complex explanations are the enemy of improvement in this context—and they are the breeding ground of excuses.

**NUMBERS**

- We are counting everything these days—and we believe that numbers are inherently more trustworthy than words. Indeed, numbers appear, on the face of it, to be immutable and “TRUE.”
- Available dollars for public education are dramatically down; equally dramatic escalation of costs to pay for what we once believed to be the right things to do (teacher health and retirement benefits, multiple kinds of staffing in schools, (music, art, foreign languages, not to mention expert subject matter coaching etc.) class size reductions
- We want to judge the efficacy of our teaching and learning by the numbers—scores on tests (often tests no one has actually examined to determine what produced the scores) ranking school against school, district against district, state against state, country against country

**THE NARRATIVES**

- Things are dire in US public education—story 1
- The reasons for this are:
  - bad teachers, who must be found and “disappeared”
  - The teacher unions, who protect and hide these malefactors
  - The higher education institutions who do not prepare these teachers

## Commentary for Slide 5: EVIDENCE FOR THESE CLAIMS

There may be useful lessons for education from the for-profit corporate sector, not least the importance of focus, single-minded pursuit of limited objectives and relentless follow up on the effects of actions. I'll come back to that when we get to the EXHORTATION part of this presentation. [see, for example, this Public Impact report, "Measuring Teacher and Leader Performance: Cross-Sector Lessons for Excellent Evaluations"  
[http://www.publicimpact.com/images/stories/performance\\_measurement\\_2010.pdf](http://www.publicimpact.com/images/stories/performance_measurement_2010.pdf)]

Here is what is different:

- Success in business has one super-ordinate indicator: profit. It is quantifiable, no one argues about the units of measurement, and everyone uses the same units.
- No one cares if a company's performance appraisal system is a shambles if it is profitable.
- No one ever cites the performance appraisal system as a critical reason for financial success in the for-profit world. [see the third category of context-narratives]
- Current policy talk may want to "keep it simple, stupid," but in corporate settings this is often an insufficient explanation of what happens.
  - For example, of the 11 companies Jim Collins chose as his exemplars in the much-quoted and touted Good to Great, [and chose on the basis of their outperforming their peers for 15 straight quarters IN PROFITABILITY], only 1 is still currently an industry leader (Nucor, a steel company of all things). Two are no longer in business, and the other 8 have regressed to the mean, or below it.
  - The reasons for this outcome over the past 8 years are complicated—and suddenly bad leaders and managers and strategies is probably not among those reasons, nor is a poor performance appraisal system.
- Education is peculiar as a "line of business"—it is undifferentiated except by the developmental level of the learners, the degrees of freedom of its leaders (superintendents, building principals) are severely constrained by policy and regulation, there is NO AGREEMENT on the superordinate category that indicates success
  - Student learning—how will we measure it? How much is excellent? Good? Bad?
  - What are the standards, really, for learning? What does a high school diploma MEAN? A college degree?

## Commentary for Slide 6: DOLLARS AND SCORES

- It is a fact that there are fewer tax dollars available to fund public education.
- It is a fact that the costs of decisions made decades ago about compensation and benefits now loom as a huge, and perhaps insurmountable, obstacle to education funding.
- It is NOT a fact that the best indicators of student learning are standardized test scores, especially in the absence of a single comparable testing protocol, a standardized curriculum and stable, universal performance standards across all children in the public education system.
- It is NOT a fact that numbers are more trustworthy than words—all we have to do is take a look at the current conversation on Value-Added methodologies as a way to judge teacher effectiveness.
- HOWEVER
  - Much evidence of deep and broad student learning could be gathered and reported systematically at the classroom and school level *if teachers were better prepared to use ongoing assessment as the centerpiece of teaching*
  - Educators have avoided quantification as if it were the enemy of good practice—in fact, it is the most important conduit for wisdom of practice.
  - *It is not the counting, but the knowing what to count and how to explain its importance that matters.*
  - In this regard, education professionals have been woefully behindhand in managing the conversation

## Commentary for Slide 7: TEACHERS UNIONS / HIGHER ED

- The current favorite explanation for the much lamented state of US public education is “bad” teachers, who have been protected by the archfiendish teacher unions. As a consequence of this hypothesis, many states are pursuing—and some legislating—annual evaluations of teachers that include VAM outputs on test scores, as well as other annual measures of effectiveness. Let us examine the evidence here:
  - Teacher evaluation processes are currently inadequate—and there is no standardization, even within districts in many cases.
  - There is also no human resources function in school districts—unlike corporate environments—that trains and administers such evaluation processes and procedures.
  - Unlike business environments, schools are “flat” organizations—teachers all have essentially the same job. There may be a few administrators who share the evaluation responsibility with the principal in large districts, but by and large there is little or no distribution of the evaluation work.
  - There are 3.1 million teachers in some 100,000 schools in the US. This is the largest single workforce of any kind in the US (WalMart, the WORLD’s largest employer, has 2.1 million employees world wide; the US federal government has 1.7 million employees plus 700,000 postal workers). Annual evaluations of all of these teachers is an enormous undertaking.
  - Is the game worth the candle?
  - Maybe the smart money would be on training all administrators in the power THEY ALREADY HAVE to dismiss teachers who are not doing a good job—everyone knows who they are
  - This would be a tangible act of instructional leadership—to act on the evidence of performance that is substandard and hurts the learners as well as the other teachers.
- What about examining the teaching and learning enterprise from the other end?
  - The elephant on the sofa in this room is poverty in the US, and its devastating effects on the learning prospects for children.
  - These are the children disproportionately populating hard to staff schools, urban and rural.
  - Finland—the often cited top of the charts comparison country had a child poverty rate of 5.4% in 2005; the US rate was 21.9%
  - Poverty matters
  - HOWEVER, it also matters that we have no way of focusing teacher preparation on what really makes a difference right now.
  - “Everything not forbidden is compulsory” (Merlin to King Arthur) is the way we help our new teaching professionals make their way into the profession—WE HAVE FALLEN INTO THE “BROAD, NOT DEEP” APPROACH THAT BEDEVILS OUR CLASSROOM CURRICULA

- Without national standards for student achievement and knowledge, we cannot enforce and evaluate standards for teacher knowledge
- What really works, especially in high poverty settings, is actually known (see citations at the end of this presentation)—but it is not consistently and relentlessly taught and measured for all new professionals
- **IF WE DID NOTHING ELSE IN BEGINNING TEACHER PREPARATION BUT RELENTLESSLY FOCUS ON THIS BASIC BLOCKING AND TACKLING, WE WOULD SEE DIFFERENT RESULTS IN STUDENT LEARNING**

## Commentary for Slide 9: THE PROVOCATION

The “How do you know?” question rather neatly sums up not only the current attack rhetoric from outside teacher preparation institutions, but also the focus of TEAC accreditation, and, increasingly, NCATE accreditation.

I believe we can use these three readings of this question to evaluate where we are now in the process of evidence-based claims for the efficacy of teacher preparation. That’s the PRAISE part of this talk.

But careful consideration of the implications of these readings also indicates that higher education teacher preparation institutions need to step up their game and get much more focused and serious about evidence and its communication. That’s the EXHORTATION part of this talk.

The first reading of the question points directly at evidence, and it has a tacit precursor: WHAT do you know? This is important. What teacher preparation institutions choose to assert about their programs could shape the discourse and quiet some of the more lunatic ideas from outside—like, for example, that there really is no discernible effect of training and preparation in actual teaching practice.

The second reading is a direct challenge to professional judgment. This challenge has not been met by educators at any level very effectively, largely because there is so much internal squabbling about what it is important to talk about that no vocabulary for communicating with the external non-experts has really developed. Contrast this state of affairs with medicine, architecture, and law—not to mention real estate, finance, and banking.

The third reading of the question speaks to the quality of empirical evidence, and it is here that there is much work to do. It is not so much that evidence of what works is unavailable, as it is that teacher preparation as a critical higher education function—a unified function—has not aggregated this research-based outcome data and incorporated it into the preparation of new professionals. And once those new professionals are out in the field, the effects of their preparation on their practice need also to be charted and analyzed.

## Commentary for Slide 10: WHERE WE ARE

The TEAC accreditation process, in particular, is distinguished from other approaches to accreditation by its focus on the connections of claims to evidence, and the insistence that programs must create an evidence-based case for the value of what they do, and the ways in which they do it. The TEAC process works this way:

1. Programs must think in terms of what they wish to assert—a set of claims—about the processes and outcomes of the program. And they must find words for those assertions—a critically important and difficult requirement.
2. Then, faculty and staff must connect those claims to the evidence that would convince an outsider—the accreditation team—that the claims are valid.
3. Both the claims and the evidence are evaluated in the accreditation process—the claims for their clarity and relevance, and the evidence for its “fit” with the claim.
4. Typically, this evidence must be credible, relevant, and sufficient to convince the accreditors.

So, this is a very good start to the answer to all three of the interpretations of the “How do you know?” query, if it is directed at a single program. And it is immensely valuable to the individual program or institution.

Frank Murray and Jim Cibulka, and the entire CAEP enterprise have asserted—made a claim—that a diversity of approaches to teacher preparation is not only to be tolerated, but nurtured, because it leads to better outcomes.

This claim needs to be grounded in relevant, credible, and sufficient evidence of **OUTCOMES FOR LEARNERS**.

If teacher preparation is to survive the current attacks on its usefulness, however, the evidence-based analytical approach to “proof of effectiveness” needs to be exponentially enhanced, both in speed and in depth.

## Commentary for Slide 11: WHERE WE NEED TO GO QUICKLY

Three important indicators in the past 12 months:

- First, CAEP EXISTS!
- Second, the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel report on “Transforming Teacher Education through Clinical Practice.”
  - This is important partly because it seems so obvious to anyone in the profession—and also so “already done.” Here are the highlights of the report:
    - More Rigorous Accountability
    - Strengthening Candidate Selection and Placement
    - Revamping Curricula, Incentives, and Staffing
    - Supporting Partnerships
    - Expanding the Knowledge Base to Identify What Works and Support Continuous Improvement
  - If this is to make any difference at all (unlike the first or second time it came around), then the evidence-based examination of program effectiveness needs to be stepped up in the BIG way
- Third, the National Commission on Teacher Quality plan to evaluate teacher preparation programs.
  - The unfolding of this little edu-drama is instructive, in that the institutions, however valid their objections, look defensive and somewhat petulant in their responses. See, for the example, the post from AACTE [<http://aacte.org/index.php?/Media-Center/Member-News/us-news-a-world-report-and-nctq-will-rank-teacher-preparation-programs.html>]
  - The response from Jim Cibulka and Frank Murray on this topic is more measured and very sensible—but I believe that a sense of urgency about the timeline is critically important under current circumstances
  - That programs will be evaluated, and by outsiders, *is* inevitable. So, the smart money would be on taking control of the rhetoric and the process.
  - Suppose, for example, that teacher preparation institutions themselves—perhaps through the combined aegis of AACTE, NCATE, and TEAC funded an external evaluation themselves, instead of waiting to be acted upon???

## Commentary for Slide 13: THREE POST HOLES

Here are three possible focal efforts:

First, as is now undoubtedly obvious, I think that CAEP is the golden opportunity to redefine the “voice” of teacher preparation, becoming much more insistent and forward-thinking about education policy. I think public relations of a sophisticated new sort should be a first priority for the new organization.

And what this public relations push needs to do is to define a few (say, three) critical issues and relentlessly push on those—challenging all those “experts” out there who seem to know so much about teaching and learning, citing the research on what works, and naming the interactions of poverty and class with teaching and learning—it is not all about what teachers can do in the classroom, and that simple-minded avoidance of reality needs to be exposed.

Finally, teacher preparation needs to one thing successful businesses do: it needs to choose and focus. I have provided a list of articles and reports and books, all of which point out in varying degrees of detail what we know about effective classroom teaching. It can be summed up like this: Madeline Hunter was largely right, effective teaching is not particularly glamorous or flashy but it is relentless in its high expectations, clear goals, constant assessment of and by students, and belief that all children can learn. We have not sufficiently imbued every single prospective teacher with this clear sense of claims and evidence-focused teaching—this, at least, we must do.

- As I said earlier in this talk, What really works, especially in high poverty settings, is actually known (see citations at the end of this presentation)—but it is not consistently and relentlessly taught and measured for all new professionals
- **IF WE DID NOTHING ELSE IN BEGINNING TEACHER PREPARATION BUT RELENTLESSLY FOCUS ON THIS BASIC BLOCKING AND TACKLING, WE WOULD SEE DIFFERENT RESULTS IN STUDENT LEARNING**