

## **UNDERSTANDING EFFICIENCY AND THE TEACHER QUALITY MOVEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORY**

*Henry Tran, MPA, PHR, Ph.D.  
University of South Carolina*

### **Abstract**

It has been argued that the focus on teacher quality represents what is needed to provide an excellent education and the attainment of true efficiency in education (with both cost and quality taken into consideration). Unfortunately, what has been mentioned only paints one side of the picture. This article provides commentary on the teacher quality movement by using institutional theory to help interpret persistent problems facing the field of education. Specifically, K-12 education has become accustomed to reform churn, yet substantive outcomes remain largely the same. Special attention will be given to teacher certification and value-added measurement within the broader context of teacher quality. Barriers to improvement for both areas are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Education reformers often argue that the aim of the current teacher quality movement is to stride toward a more efficient educational system, which balances both resource efficiency and educational improvement. Indeed, the improvement of teacher quality “has been the major focus of educational reforms during the past 50 years” (Akiba, LeTendre & Scribner, 2007, p. 369). The importance of the topic of teacher quality in overall reform efforts can be seen in programs such as the Race to the Top Fund (RTTTF), a federal grant initiative that creates competition among states to vie for monies via compliance with predetermined reform criteria (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2009), compliance with the pre-established criteria results in the accrual of points for each state and the area of teacher and principal effectiveness is weighted the most heavily of the various criteria components that are recommended by RTTTF. That is to say, teacher and principal quality issues comprise the most point values out of all categories in the initiative.

Since Callahan’s (1964) description of the state of education in his text, *The Cult of Efficiency*, the concept of teacher quality has become immensely important and now stands at the forefront of educational debates. One avenue for increasing the quality of teaching is teacher education. Whereas the area of teacher certification was blossoming in the time of Callahan’s writing, today, teacher certification is not only the norm, but is also written into legislative law (e.g., The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). The purpose of teacher credentialing is to set minimum standards, which teachers must meet to “ensure that no students are subject to bad teaching” (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006, p.14). It is a safeguard mechanism that is designed to ensure that teachers are of a certain caliber before being granted certification.

Furthermore, in an era of accountability, modern business-oriented reformers urge accountability for teachers in effectively teaching their students. They also call for rewarding teachers who are effective and removing those who are not. The majority of these advocates promote the usage of student test scores to evaluate the quality of teachers and have recently recommended methods that aim to isolate the teachers’ effect on those scores, particularly through the avenue of value-added assessments. These methods are less costly and thus can be seen as more financially efficient than using qualitative (i.e., improved principal training for more effective observational reviews) evaluation strategies, in conjunction with quantitative measures.

Various results from using student test scores to evaluate teachers have led some to argue that teacher credentials may not be contributing to student learning (as measured by those scores). For example, Kane, Rockoff and Staiger (2008) found that test scores did not differ whether teachers held a certification or not. Consequently, many reformers have called for lowering the barriers of entry into the teaching profession via alternative avenues, such as different routes to certification, in an effort to quickly bring high quality teachers into the profession - those who may otherwise be discouraged to enter because of the “burden” of credentialing requirements (Murname, Singer, Willet, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991).

Some see quality teachers as the “silver bullet” that will fix most, if not all of the problems in education (e.g., achievement gap). Or, in the words of former Washington D.C. Chancellor Michelle Rhee, “teachers are everything” (Nakamura, 2007, para. 69). Indeed, that appears to be the mantra of economists and bottom-line reformers. As Ravitch (2010) explained:

[N]ot only was the teacher the key to closing the achievement gap, but the most effective teacher did not need to have any paper credentials or teacher education. There was no way to predict who would be a good teacher. So there was no reason to limit entry into teaching; anyone should be able to enter the profession and show whether she or he could raise test scores. (p. 184)

From a financial efficiency perspective, if the aforementioned pathways to address teacher quality can truly improve the quality of American education as a whole, then the relative cost savings would be much higher when compared to addressing other concerns that impact student achievement, such as poverty, equitable resource allocations, school and classroom size impacts, parental and peer influences, etc. Contrary to the pure cost cutting efforts that were described by Callahan (1964) in the early twentieth century, it appears that the increased focus on teacher quality represent the very steps that he indicated were needed to be taken in order to provide an excellent education and the obtainment of true efficiency in education (with both cost and quality taken into consideration). Unfortunately, what has been mentioned only paints one side of the picture. There have been many issues associated with the teacher quality movement and through the lens of institutional theory, these issues will be examined in this article.

Institutional theory provides a tool for us to better understand how environmental and cultural norms influence the behavior of public school districts (Scott, 2001). Specifically, it allows us to understand how various stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, districts and states are embedded in “socially-organized environments that generate rules, regulations, norms and definition of the situation that constrain and shape action” (Rowan & Miskel, 1999, p. 359). According to Burch (2007), it enables us to understand why: 1) across the nation, districts behave like one another and adopt similar policies, 2) the disconnect between the design of education reform and the actual practice in the field setting, and 3) how the broad culture where schools are located create practices of stability across districts. While teacher quality is a broad topic, a targeted discussion of two areas, namely teacher certification and value-added assessments, will suffice to show how institutional theory can help us understand the obstacles that reoccur within the field of education.

### ***Teacher Certification***

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) defined a highly qualified teacher as one who a) holds at least a bachelors degree, b) is appropriately licensed by the state and c) demonstrates subject matter competency, as determined by state evaluation standards (California Department of Education, 2010). The state licensure and demonstration of subject matter competency components of this definition are of course related to the area of teacher certification. In general,

Certification or licensing status is a measure of teacher qualification that combines aspects of knowledge about subject matter and about teaching and earning a standard certificate generally means that a teacher has been prepared in a state-approved teacher education program at the undergraduate or graduate level and has completed either a major or a minor in the field(s) to be taught plus anywhere from 18 to 40 education credits, depending on the state and the certificate area, including between 8 to 18 weeks of student teaching. (Linda Darling-Hammond, 2000, p.7)

In essence, the existence of a teaching certificate is supposed to represent a particular professional standard, which is purported to demonstrate an individual's advanced level of competence (Vogel & Smith, 2007).

To receive a teacher's certificate, most individuals are required to complete teacher training. This training is supposedly designed to increase the teaching quality of individuals and thus the individuals' teaching in schools should, in theory, reflect that quality. However, according to scholars like Sykes, Bird and Kennedy (2010), observations from the field suggest "that teaching is at once uniform while producing highly variable results" (p. 465). Specifically, Sykes et al. explained that a large factor for the existence of variability is that teacher preparation programs are not anchored into a system of common codified knowledge that serves as instructional guidance for training (and subsequent teaching).

Despite this, many teacher programs look remarkably similar to one another in a variety of aspects (e.g., program features). To understand this paradox, Sykes et al. 2010), suggest the use of institutional theory. Using the theoretical framework of mimetic isomorphism, similarities across teacher education programs can be interpreted as being caused by norms in the field (e.g., social expectations of how teachers should behave in the classroom) and external regulations (e.g., state and accreditation requirements). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggested that the condition for isomorphism is ripe when there is uncertainty and this can be seen in teacher education. That is, unclear technology in the field of education (i.e., the "best" method for teaching is unknown and not widely agreed upon) has resulted in teacher education programs resembling one another in an effort to maintain a sense of legitimacy.

Another issue with teacher education training that has often been mentioned is the reported disconnect between pre-service teacher education and field practice. In other words, teacher training is decoupled from the practice of teaching. For instance, Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) suggested that practical field experiences eliminate ideas cultivated during teacher training, as teachers adjust to the socialization of school culture. Similarly, Wideon, Smith and Moon (1998) noted that novice teachers feel unprepared by their teacher education training when faced with the reality of school life and turn to their colleagues as role models to guide them in their teaching endeavors. Along that line of argument, Sykes et al. (2010) described the large gap between ideals espoused in preparation programs and the practices commonly found in schools (p. 468).

The "highly qualified teachers" criteria embedded within NCLB may have originated from a noble intent to improve the quality of teachers, but the effects and responses to the requirement have been largely superficial. Cohen (2009) noted two issues that give rise to these problems. The first issue is that "NCLB required qualifications for new teachers that were little different than existing certification requirements- i.e., an academic major and score on entrance

tests for teaching”, secondly, “[s]tates were permitted to set their own scores for passing the test, and many set them quite low” (p. 152). In fact, states were able to set their own criteria for “highly qualified teachers” and within a few years after NCLB was enacted, “most states reported that most teachers were ‘highly qualified’ (p. 153). From an institutional theoretical perspective, the actions can be seen as decoupled from the intent of the legislation. Responses were superficial and meant to appease constituent groups as opposed to truly increasing the quality of teaching. The latest reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has abandoned the requirement of “highly qualified” teachers, although teachers working in Title I funded schools are still required to hold state licensures.

### ***Alternative Certification***

Although alternative certification was introduced as a way to address teacher shortage problems (Lutz & Hutton, 1989), it has gradually become adopted by advocates for a market-based approach to loosen the regulation of entry into the teaching profession (Birkeland & Peske, 2004). The concept of alternative teacher certification pathways has been continuously supported by reformers and the government. For instance, ESSA encourages states to increase the number of alternative routes to teacher preparation through Title II funds. In the eyes of many of these advocates, traditional routes for teacher education have “lost their legitimacy” (Sykes et al., 2010, p. 473). Cohen-Vogel & Smith (2007) highlighted the four assumptions for which the modern day argument for alternative pathways rests. First, it is believed that alternative certification will bring about “nontraditional recruits to enter into teaching and promote alternative programs that seek to bring professionals from other fields into the classroom” (p. 734). Secondly, it is argued that “alternative routes for preparing and licensing teachers are attracting large numbers of highly qualified, talented, and enthusiastic individuals to the teaching profession” (National Center for Education Information, 2003). Thirdly, there is an assumption that alternative certification programs disproportionately train candidates for hard to staff schools, and finally, it is expected that alternate pathways to certification will help address the issue of out-of-field teaching, which is when “teachers teach subjects other than the those in which they were trained [for]” (Cohen-Vogel & Smith, 2007, p. 737).

Since the mid 1980s, there has been a rapid growth of alternative pathways to teacher education (Warren-Little & Bartlett, 2010, p. 337). From an institutional perspective, we can understand the proliferation of pathways into teaching through the lens of isomorphism. For instance, the provision for “high quality” alternative routes to certification (particularly those in addition to higher education institutions) is a specific item criterion in RTTF (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). NCLB “authorizes the federal government to provide funds to states for the development and expansion of nontraditional, ‘alternative’ teacher training programs” (Cohen-Vogel & Smith, 2007, p. 735). In modern times where most public school districts are struggling economically and suffering from huge budget cuts, they are resource dependent on funding such as those provided by RTTF and NCLB. Therefore states often strive to comply with the request of the grant funding institution. As a result, states coercively isomorph with one another. This assertion is supported by Zumwalt and Craig’s (2005) indication that “some sort of approved alternative certification program” (p. 170) can be

identified in nearly all 50 states. Warren-Little and Barlett (2010) go on to describe how an influx in alternative pathways to education have proliferated in other countries around the world as well.

Studies have been conducted that examine the relative potential benefits of alternative certification. For instance, Cohen-Vogel & Smith (2007) found no support for the validity of the four core assumptions of alternative certification mentioned earlier. That is, the researchers did not find that alternative certification programs: 1) “substantially changed the pool from which new teachers are drawn” (p. 732), 2) recruited teachers with improved academic qualifications or training, 3) attracted “a disproportionate number of candidates to teach in urban, poor, minority or difficult-to-staff schools, or 4) are an effective means for solving the problem of out-of-field teaching” (p. 748).

Further work has been done to compare the relative effectiveness of traditionally certified teachers with alternatively certified and non-certified teachers, with mixed results. For example, Decker, Mayer and Glazerman (2004) conducted a randomized evaluation of the Teach for America (TFA) program, and found that TFA teachers were significantly more effective at teaching math than both uncertified and certified teachers. In fact, TFA is a very selective program that recruits from colleges and universities (Cohen-Vogel & Smith, 2007). In addition, according to Decker et al.’s (2004) study, 70% of teachers from the TFA program earned their bachelor’s degree from a highly competitive college or university as compared to 3.7% of novice teachers with traditional teacher credentials. This however, does not automatically suggest that alternative certification programs draw in higher quality students. Indeed, “TFA is unique among [alternative certification] programs in that it is highly selective, draws from a national pool of applicants, assigns teachers nationwide, and recruits individuals with an explicit two year teaching commitment” (Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2008, p. 616). As Kane et al. noted (2008), results from TFA usually do not generalize to other alternative certification programs. Furthermore, “the number of TFA teachers is insufficient to make a large difference in the teaching profession, and most will be gone after two or three years...thus, whatever gains they can achieve cannot be sustained” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 190).

On the other hand, studies like the one conducted by Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin and Heilig (2005) concluded that certified teachers consistently raised student achievement scores higher than uncertified teachers, and that traditionally certified teachers are generally more effective than alternatively certified teachers and TFA recruits. Still other researchers present a neutral stance relative to the effectiveness of alternative certification by finding that they neither help nor hurt student test scores. For example, Corcoran and Jennings (2009) did not find a differentiation between teachers’ preparation routes in relation to student achievement.

Despite the mixed findings regarding the effectiveness of alternative certification (or perhaps because of it), many politicians, economists, researchers and business-oriented reformists continue to argue for less (and on occasions, the total removal) of restrictions into the teaching profession. In that vein, journalists like Malcolm Gladwell of the *New Yorker* recommend that “teaching should be open to anyone with a pulse and a college degree” (Gladwell, 2008, para. 53). From an efficiency perspective, these advocates are recommending for quicker and less costly avenues for individuals to enter the teaching profession, with an accompanying argument that lowering the barriers for entry into the profession will also improve the quality of teachers in the field. Proponents of this perspective seem to have either

ignored or given up on the idea of improving the current traditional system of teacher education.

Embedded in many arguments for alternative routes to education is an assumption that all traditional teacher education programs have failed and that alternative certification is the solution. This is simply not true, in fact “research shows clearly that there is more variation within traditional preparation programs or ‘short-cut’ alternative ones than there is between them” (Berry, Daughtrey & Weider, 2010b, p. 2). Some alternative programs are more effective than traditional teacher education programs, but the reverse is also true. To add to that complexity, “certification varies dramatically across states” and “[s]imply identifying whether or not a teacher is certified will mean very different things depending on the state” (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006, p. 15). Without a coherent system of practice to guide teacher preparation as recommended by Sykes et al. (2010), or an educational infrastructure that includes “the curriculum to be taught and learned and teacher education oriented to that curriculum” (Cohen, 2009, p. 154), we will continue to see wide variability in teachers’ skill sets irrespective of the path they chose to become teachers.

### ***Value Added Measurements***

Beyond teacher credentials, teacher quality has also been traditionally defined as a teacher’s education level and experience. In fact, these criteria are often the sole determinants of public teacher salaries for most districts. Unfortunately, teachers’ levels of education and experience have largely been found to be unrelated to student achievement, as defined by standardized test scores. For instance, Hanushek (2003) reviewed numerous research findings across multiple studies and found that education was not (or weakly) related to student achievement, and experience has little influence after the early years.

While some work has found that subject specific degrees in the areas of math and science have been found to influence student achievement (Clotfelter, Ladd & Vidgor, 2007; Goldhaber 2006), districts often do not distinguish advanced degrees by disciplines for the purpose of offering additional compensation. Because employee compensation comprises 80 to 85% of an average public school district’s budget (Odden & Picus, 2014; Rebore, 2015), reformers argue that this is a highly inefficient use of funds given that what is being paid for is not strongly related to student achievement outcomes. Moreover, when it comes to evaluating teachers, past practice has resulted in almost all teachers being rated as highly effective, despite the tremendous variation between teacher performances (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern & Keeling, 2009). This likely occurs because the process is treated as a symbolic compliance response to statutory mandates. Consequently, the status quo of defining teacher quality leaves much to be desired and many have called for a more “objective” way to address this issue.

In an effort to “better” quantify teacher quality, tests that were designed to measure student performance are now being used to evaluate teachers (Ravitch, 2010). Using data collected from such tests, approaches known as value-added measurements (VAM) aim to adjust for student and school characteristics prior to examining longitudinal student achievement gain scores (Baker et al., 2010). In the modern field of education, VAMs have become the “centerpiece of a national movement to evaluate, promote, compensate and dismiss teachers based in part on their students’ test results” (Corcoran, 2010, p. 1). Efforts to

monetarily reward “effective” teachers (also known as performance pay) and remove “ineffective teachers” with the use of VAMs have garnered much political appeal, capturing the interest of many influential advocates including President Barack Obama and the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan (Cohen, 2009).

Indeed, schools coercively and mimetically isomorph with one another due to external forces such as the encouragement of the use of test scores to evaluate teachers in RTTTF and visibility of the adoption of value-added assessments in numerous states. In fact, despite a lack of evidence suggesting that:

...teachers will be more motivated to improve student learning if teachers are evaluated or monetarily rewarded for student test score gains...[s]ome states are now considering plans that would give as much as 50% weight in teacher evaluation and compensation decisions to scores on existing tests of basic skills in math and reading” (Baker et al., 2010, p. 1-2).

There are many issues with using VAMs in such a manner. Although it is not the place of this paper to identify all the problems associated with VAMs (See Corcoran, 2010 & Baker et al., 2010 for a more detailed review), we will highlight some of the issues for demonstrative purposes.

Corcoran (2010) cautioned us to make the distinction between “the theoretical concept of value-added and the methods used to calculate it for an actual set of teachers” (p. 4). He also explained that while the theoretical concept of value-added is based on isolating the teachers’ impact on student achievement, in reality this is very difficult to do. Baker et al. (2010) argued that even after taking the teacher out of the equation, there are still a variety of factors that can greatly impact student-learning gains (many of which are difficult to control for or are simply uncontrolled in the statistical models used in VAMs). Such factors include: “the influences of other teachers - both previous teachers and, in secondary schools, current teachers of other subjects – as well as tutors or instructional specialists[,]...school conditions such as the quality of curriculum materials, specialist or tutoring supports, class size” and whether or not schools have adopted “pull-out, team teaching, or block scheduling practices” (p. 3). All of these issues make the process of isolating individual teacher impacts more complicated.

Another related issue with VAMs is related to whether the measures can consistently perform the function that they are intended to perform. If a value-added assessment is to be used for high stakes personnel decisions such as teacher employment termination, then it must be determined to be sufficiently valid and reliable. If not, not only will such decisions be unfair, but school districts risk losing lawsuit(s) against teachers who are fired, should the issue be brought up in court (Baker, 2010).

Guidance from research suggests that concerns of stability for the VAM are warranted. For example, citing research from Hill (2009), Cohen (2009) explained the problem of “inconsistency among different tests of what is thought to be the same academic material” (p. 202). Cohen goes on to say that differences in tests may result in differences in teacher ratings and if these tests differ among states, then one teacher may be classified as effective in one state while being ineffective in another. He indicated that this “could be politically and perhaps legally difficult for states to sustain their teacher rating schemes in the face of such irrationality” (p. 202). Economist Goldhaber and Hansen (2008) compared thousands of teachers from North Carolina and found that only 44 percent of top quintile reading teachers

and 42 percent of top quintile math teachers were still in the top quintile after they receive tenure status, suggesting instability in the VAM. In fact, other researchers seem to find similar results, where “[m]ost teachers who ranked in the top quintile one year were not the ‘best’ teachers the next year, and most teachers who ranked in the lowest quintile one year got better results the next year” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 186).

Corcoran (2010) mentioned that the confidence intervals are wide for the VAM, which suggests that the measure is imprecise. However, he indicated that the fluctuations and the range of uncertainty may be reduced with additional years of data. In one particularly telling study, economist Rothstein (2010) explored fifth grade teachers in relation to students’ test scores in the fourth and third grades, and found a relation between fifth grade teachers and fourth grade achievement. Rothstein interpreted his finding as being a result of academic tracking of students, that is to say that students are tracked into classes based on their prior academic achievement. This represents a non-random assignment of students to classrooms and biases in relation to value-added measurements. The fact that students are non-randomly assigned to teachers and schools “and the wide variation in students’ experiences at home and at school means that teachers cannot be accurately judged against one another by their students’ test scores, even when efforts are made to control for student characteristics in statistical models” (Baker et al., 2010, p. 3). As a result, it is likely that VAMs will misclassify teachers as either effective or ineffective (Cohen, 2009) and this misclassification may often be beyond the control of the teachers themselves.

While stability concerns directly affect the validity of the VAM (because reliability is a precondition for validity), other validity issues remain that are associated with value-added. For instance, Corcoran (2010) indicated that many assessments might not accurately represent the standards for which they are designed to measure. Citing studies that have analyzed “state test contents in New York, Massachusetts and Texas”, Corcoran indicated the findings suggested “that over many years of test administration, some parts of the state test curriculum are never tested” (p. 16). He indicated that by knowing this, some teachers target their class lectures to the items that do regularly appear (i.e., they teach to the test) to the exclusion of those that do not, but because all teachers do not spend the same amount of time doing this, variability in value-added scores for the teachers may be the consequence.

Furthermore, Corcoran explained that not everyone is measured by VAMs. This is demonstrated by the fact only a “minority of teachers teach tested subjects, but not all students are tested, and not all tested students contribute to value-added measures” (p. 19). For instance, a history teacher may not have a value added score because the students were not tested in history, students who are absent may be exempted from the test, and students who are mobile may only have one year’s test score and thus their collected data cannot be used to assess the teacher. This, of course, provides a perverse incentive for teachers to focus their work with only the students that “count”. Finally, it has been argued that by creating a high stakes competitive environment with VAMs, teachers may be discouraged to collaborate and share resources with one another (Baker et al., 2010). All of these issues in sum represent a decoupling process, where the actions performed are decoupled from the stated objectives and goals of the VAM process (which ultimately is to increase the quality of education for the students, through the means of teacher accountability).

In summary, “value-added approaches to judging the quality of teaching are an effort to short-circuit the underlying problem of teaching quality in U.S schools” (Cohen, 2009, p. 204). They represent another so called “efficient” strategy in an attempt to cure the ills of education with a faster and relatively cheaper method of addressing the problems. This is in comparison to the time and resources required for more meaningful changes, such as the development of a common educational infrastructure, curricula, “examinations tied to the curricula, teacher education that is grounded in learning to teach the curricula that students are to learn, and a teaching force whose members succeeded in those curricula and exams as students” (p. 204-205). When it is believed that teachers are able to consistently increase scores and close the achievement gap of those students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004), there is a tendency to ignore the more “costly” and time consuming issues associated with poverty and we fail to provide social programs and other potent support measures (Cohen, 2009).

Although, on the surface, the issue of educational equality seems to be the focus of the VAM effort, in actuality, the rush to implement such a high stakes strategy ignores the warnings provided by research on the matter. In turn, it may be suggested that this response is largely symbolic. Districts and states may then adopt VAMs not because they “work” per say (or even that schools believe they work), but merely because it provides a certain amount of legitimacy in the eyes of the public, funding institutions, businessmen, parents, government figures, etc. By doing this, the goals of the VAM initiative are displaced because states, districts and politicians seek to demonstrate their apparent responsiveness to improve education, all the while not making any substantively meaningful change in that regard.

## CONCLUSION

Institutional theory posits that districts operate based on “broad cultural scripts [that] guide...organizational behavior. Organizations adopt the practices that they do to look like organizations and signal their legitimacy” (Burch, 2007, p. 84). These behaviors become not only part of the accustomed norm of school business, but become expectations of the public and community. Given that public school districts are resource constrained, they must comply with state and federal regulations in order to obtain funding. By complying with the rules and regulations set forth by the government, districts begin to take a similar form. To the extent that this compliance represents a commitment to positive substantive change, there is the potential for districts to be in a better position. However, often, responses are largely symbolic, influenced and shaped by the system in which education institutions find themselves working within.

Rowan and Miskel (1999) argued that institutional theory reminds us that the specific failures of schools and/or districts cannot be entirely attributed to the local level, but rather attention must also be given to the larger environmental context in which education institutions operate within. Failing to do this will at best provide us with only a slice of the entire problem and, at worse, blame schools and districts for issues beyond their control.

While this paper focused on the topic of using institutional theory to help us better understand teacher certifications and value-added measurements, it can be equally helpful in enabling us to better understand other aspects of the teacher quality movement as well. For instance, when it comes to teacher evaluations, poorly designed processes can function as barriers to effective assessment or improvement of teacher quality, rendering them as a ritualistic activity (Ramirez, Clouse & Davis, 2014). Instead of serving their true purpose,

evaluations are often conducted out of compliance with laws – a displacement of its intended goal. Consequently, teacher evaluations may lack meaning for participants, instead representing an annual audit by administrators who come into the classroom with a checklist of behaviors in hand (Sun, Youngs, Yang, Chu & Zhao, 2011). However, for the sake of satisfying the regulations and requirements, the task may be considered accomplished.

The push for more productive use of education dollars (that is being more cost-effective by spending less to improve student outcomes) is a worthy endeavor. However, reform strategies will not work regardless of their potential impact if they are not implemented with fidelity, lack buy-in from the faculty and districts, and are not performed with their intended goal(s) in mind. Regardless of whether or not these endeavors reduce costs, the real issue is whether or not they can improve outcomes as well. Perhaps more costly initiatives such as addressing the economic and social issues of a community will be more cost-effective, if the repeated expenditures on current education initiatives produce the substantive results that are desired.

Finally, additional regulations and rules are unlikely to help the situation if districts and states respond superficially. To truly and meaningfully address the problems in education, a concerted effort is required on all fronts. As opposed to focusing on changing specific work practices, true change and real educational reform requires dismantling the normative taken-for-granted-assumptions of education and considering alternative institutional arrangements based on a deep reflection of how the social context influences schools and their outcomes (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). Until that happens, the packaging of reform efforts such as the teacher quality movement may be different, but what lies underneath will remain the same.

## REFERENCES

Akiba, M., Gerald K. L. & Scribner, J.P. (2007). Teacher quality, opportunity gap, and national achievement in 46 countries. *Educational Researcher*, 36 (7), 369-387.

Baker, E.E., Barton, P.E., Darling-Hammond, L., Haertel, E., Ladd, H.F. , Linn, R.L., Ravitch, R., Rothstein, R., Shavelson, R.J., & Shepard, L.A. (2010). *Problems with the use of student test scores to evaluate Teachers*. Economic Policy Institute. EPI Briefing #278.

Berry, B., Daughtrey, A., & Wieder, A. (2010). *Preparing to lead an effective classroom: The role of teacher training and professional development programs*. Center for Teaching Quality. January, 2010.

Berry, B., Daughtrey, A., & Wieder, A. (2010b). *Teacher effectiveness: The conditions that matter most and a look to the future*. Center for Teaching Quality. March, 2010.

Birkeland, S.E., & Peske, H. G. (2004). *Literature review of research on alternative certification*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Burch, P. (2007). Educational policy and practice from the perspective of institutional theory: Crafting a wider lens. *Educational Researcher*, 36(2), 84–95.

California Department of Education (2010). Improving teacher and principal quality. Retrieved March 1, 2011 from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/nclb/sr/tq/index.asp>

Clotfelter, C.T., Ladd, H.F., & Vigdor, J.L. (2007). *How and why do teacher credentials matter for student achievement*. CALDER Working Paper 2. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

Cohen, D. & Moffet. S.L. (2009). *The ordeal of equality. Did federal regulation fix the schools?* Harvard University press. Cambridge, Ma. London, England.

Corcoran, S.P. (2010). *Can teachers be evaluated by their students' test scores? Should they be? The use of value-added measures of teacher effectiveness in policy and practice.* Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

Corcoran, S.P. & Jennings, H.L. (2009). Review of "An evaluation of teachers trained through different routes to certification: Final report." Boulder, CO and Tempe, AZ: Education and Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved March 3, 2011 from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094043/pdf/20094044.pdf>

Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *The Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8 (1).

Darling-Hammond, L., Holtzman, D.J., Gatlin, S.G. & Heilig, J.V. (2005). Does teacher preparation matter? Evidence about teacher certification, teacher for America and teacher effectiveness. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 13 (42).

Decker, P.T., Mayer, D.P., & Glazerman, S. (2004). *The effects of teach for America on students: Findings from a national evaluation.* Mathematica policy research report 8792-8750, New York.

DiMaggio, P. & Powell, W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. In Handel, M.J., (Editor) (2006). *The Sociology of organizations: Classics, contemporary, and critical readings.* Sage Publications: thousand Oaks, Ca.

Hanushek, E.A., & Rivkin, S.G. (2004). *How to improve the supply of high-quality teachers.* Brookings Papers on Education Policy. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Hanushek, E.A. & Rivkin, S. G. (2006). Teacher quality. In Hanushek, E.A. & Welch, F. (Editors) (2006). *Handbook of the Economics of Education* (2).

Hanushek, E.A. (2003). The failure of input-based schooling policies. *Economic Journal*, 113 (485), 64-98.

Hill, H. (2009). Evaluating value-added models: A validity argument approach. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 4, 700-709.

Gladwell, M. (2008). Most likely to succeed: How do we hire when we can't tell who's right for the job? *New Yorker*, December 15, 2008.

Goldhaber, D. & Hansen, M. (2008). *Assessing the potential of using value-added estimates of teacher job performance for making tenure decisions.* Washington, D.C.: Calder, Urban Institute, 5-6.

Goldhaber, D. (2006). *Teacher pay reforms. The political implications of recent research.* Center for American Progress. Retrieved on May 6, 2011 from [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2006/12/pdf/teacher\\_pay\\_report.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2006/12/pdf/teacher_pay_report.pdf)

Kane, T.J., Rockoff, J.E. & Staiger, D.O. (2008). What does certification tell us about teacher effectiveness. *Economics of Education Review* 27, 615-631.

Little, J.W. & Barlet, L. (2010). The teacher workforce and problems of educational equity. *Review of Research in Education*, 34, 285-328.

Lutz, F. W., & Hutton, J.B. (1989). Alternative teacher certification: Its policy implications for classroom practice. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11(3), 237-254.

Odden, A.R., & Picus, L.O. (2014). *School Finance. A policy perspective.* 5<sup>th</sup> Ed. NY: New York. McGraw-Hill.

Murname, R.J., Singer, J.D., Willet, J.B., Kemple, J.J. & Olsen, R.J. (1991). *Who will teach? Policies that matter*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Nakamura, D. (2007) Fenty to oust Janey today. *Washington Post*, June 12, 2007. Retrieved October 6, 2016 from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/discussion/2007/06/12/DI2007061201445.html>

National Center for Education Information. (2003). *Alternative routes to teacher certification*. Washington, DC: Author.

Ramirez, A., Clouse Wendi & Davis, K.W. (2014). Teacher evaluation in Colorado: How policy frustrates practice. *Management in Education*, 28(2), 44-51.

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

Rebore, R.W. (2015). *Human resources administration in education*. 10th Edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.

Rothstein, J. (2010). Teacher quality in educational production: Tracking, decay, and student achievement. *Quarterly journal of economics*, 125(1), 175-214.

Rowan, B., & Miskel, C. G. (1999). Institutional theory and the study of educational organizations. In J. Murphy & K. S. Louis (Eds.). *Handbook of research in Educational Administration*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 359-382.

Scott, W.R. (2001). *Institutions and organizations*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sun, M., Youngs, P., Yang, H., Chu, H., & Zhao, Q. (2011). Association of district principal evaluation with learning-centered leadership practice: Evidence from Michigan and Beijing. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 24(3), 189-213.

Sykes, G., Bird, T., & Kennedy, M. (2010). Teacher education: Its problems and some prospects. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(5), 464-476.

U. S. Department of Education. (2009). Race to the Top Executive Summary. Retrieved November 11, 2010 from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf>

Vogel, L. & Smith, T. (2007). Qualifications and assignments of alternatively certified teachers: Testing core assumptions. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44 (3), 732-753.

Wideen, M., Mayer-Smith, J., & Moon, B. (1998). A critical analysis of the research on learning to teach: Making the case for an ecological perspective on inquiry. *Review of Educational Research*, 68, 130-178.

Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., & Keeling, D. (2009). *The Widget Effect. Our national failure to acknowledge act on differences in teacher effectiveness*. The New Teacher Project. Retrieved from [http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TheWidgetEffect\\_2nd\\_ed.pdf](http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TheWidgetEffect_2nd_ed.pdf)

Zeichner, K.M., & Tabachnick, B.R. (1981). Are the effects of university teacher education "washed out" by school experience? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 32, 1-25.

Zumwalt, K., & Craig, E. (2005). Teachers' characteristics: Research on the indicators of quality. In M. Cochran-Smith & K.M. Zeichner (Eds.), *Studying teacher education: Report of the AERA panel on Research and Teacher Education*, 157-260. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Henry Tran, MPA, PHR, SHRM-CP, PhD** is an Assistant Professor at the University of South Carolina's Department of Educational Leadership and Policies. He studies issues related to education human resources (HR) and finance and has published numerous articles on the topics. In addition, he holds two national HR certifications, serves as the associate editor for the *Journal of School Public Relations*, and sits on the board of advisors for *The National Education Finance Conference*.

## PREFERRED CITATION

Tran, H. (2016). Understanding efficiency and the teacher quality movement through the lens of institutional theory. *Journal of Ethical Educational Leadership*, 3(7), 1-14. Retrieved from: <http://www.cojeel.org>.

# *JEEL*

*[www.cojeel.org](http://www.cojeel.org)*

**The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of  
*JEEL*'s Editorial staff.**

***JEEL* is a free, open-access online journal.**

**Copyright ©2016 (ISSN 2377-4975)**

**Permission is hereby granted to copy any article provided that the Journal of Ethical  
Educational Leadership is credited and copies are not sold.**