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## **How Teachers' Perceive Principal Supervision and Evaluation in Eight Elementary Schools**

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions regarding principals' supervision and evaluation in eight high-performing elementary schools. An online survey was sent to teachers in select elementary schools and findings suggest principals engaged in all seven supervision and evaluation constructs measured, with teachers rating the concept of differentiated supervision and evaluation the lowest. Additionally, there were notable differences in how novice teachers viewed the seven supervision and evaluation constructs when compared with more experienced teachers. Analysis of open-ended items suggested teachers had high levels of trust in their principals based on positive feedback and routine observations, which increased feelings of shared instructional leadership within the schools.

*Keywords:* formative supervision, summative evaluation, principal supervision, differentiated supervision, and evaluation

## Introduction

The role of effective school principals increasing teachers' instructional capacity by routinely visiting classrooms is well documented (Ikemoto, Taliaferro, & Adams, 2012; Ing, 2009; Marzano, 2012; Range, Young, & Hvidston, 2013). The process of visiting teachers' classrooms, providing feedback, and assessing teachers' performance based on multiple measures is collectively referred to as teacher supervision and evaluation (Zepeda, 2013). However, the endgames of supervision and evaluation have conflicting outcomes causing confusion between educators. Supervision is used to collect multiple data points concerning teachers' performance with the goal of improving instructional abilities (Hinchey, 2010). Evaluation is used to assign ratings to teachers' overall performance and is used to determine if teachers' have met minimum benchmarks (Glickman, Gordan, & Ross-Gordan, 2005). Despite these differences, school districts typically treat both processes as the same, resulting in supervision and evaluation practices which are arduous and lack differentiation based on teachers' various needs (Jacob, Vidyarthi, & Carroll, 2012). With little or no differentiation, all teachers are rated satisfactory, excellent teachers are unrecognized, and early career teachers are not provided special supports (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009).

One way to understand how effective principals connect supervision and evaluation, and differentiate the process based on the needs of teachers is to highlight principals' behaviors in high-performing schools. For example, Ikemoto et al. (2012) analysis of high-performing principals metaphorically categorized them as "playmakers" as they supported and held teams of teachers accountable. Adopting a

similar view, whereby principals act as catalysts for instructional excellence and accountability, the purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions in eight high-performing elementary schools concerning their principals' supervisory and evaluative behaviors, and highlight how teachers' perception of principals could strengthen such behaviors.

## Supervision and Evaluation

Supervision and evaluation procedures in most school districts position principals to undertake "a conflicting role of supporter and summative judge" (Peterson, 1995, p. 214). These roles have the potential to cause fear and mistrust amongst teachers, especially when the outcomes of both processes are not explicitly explained to teachers (Range, Scherz, Holt, & Young, 2011). Effective principals understand this dilemma and intertwine formative supervision and summative evaluation into a seamless process, continually focusing on teacher growth. For the purpose of the study, principals' supervisory and evaluative behaviors include establishing high standards for teachers' performance, conducting routine classroom observations, providing quality feedback to teachers, using data collected during the supervisory process to inform teacher evaluation, and differentiating supervision and evaluation for teachers based on developmental levels (Derrington, 2011; Donaldson & Donaldson, 2012; Ikemoto et al. 2012; Range et al., 2011; Zepeda, 2013).

Effective principals match their supervision and evaluation practices to the ability levels of teachers, which includes teachers' strengths, weaknesses, and professional development needs, termed differentiated supervision and evaluation (Gupton, 2010; Zepeda, 2013). As a result, the onus is on

principals to diagnose teachers' needs and apply appropriate supervisory and evaluative responses based on those needs.

Specifically, principals should be cognizant of three teacher differentiation considerations as they apply supervision and evaluation, including teachers' tenure status, teachers' years of teaching experience, and teachers' job assignment.

First, teachers' tenure status and years of teaching experience are two variables that are closely related. Non-tenured teachers, deemed novice teachers, present a unique challenge for principals as they apply supervision and evaluation (Robertson, 2006). Because non-tenured teachers have limited teaching experience, usually less than three years, novice teachers require considerable guidance in how to overcome low level teaching issues, such as the physical layout of classrooms, materials distribution to students, and classroom management (Cuddapah & Burtin, 2012). Zepeda (2013) has written extensively concerning supervising non-tenured and early career teachers, highlighting their unique needs through the theoretical framework of adult learning. She reports non tenured, early career teachers are in survival mode, in which they seek affirmation from supervisors and a majority of their time is spent on managing unfamiliar situations.

Conversely, effective principals also understand the unique needs of experienced teachers, those with typically more than three years of experience (Jacob et al., 2012). Such teachers are concerned less with low-level teaching competencies and focus more on meeting the needs of students, as well as their own professional growth (Zepeda, 2013). However, adult theorists postulate that many teachers regress during later stages of their teaching careers and

exhibit complacency. A variable in this career regression might be teacher supervision and evaluation procedures that do not differentiate to meet experienced teachers unique needs (Weisberg et al., 2009). Experienced teachers require less compliance-driven supervision and desire supervision that builds their capacity in areas of personally identified professional development (Zepeda, 2013).

Finally, a differentiated need not typically highlighted in the literature is principals' supervision and evaluation of content area teachers, usually music, art, physical education, counseling, and special education at the elementary level. The pedagogical skills of these teachers can still be assessed as many of their teaching aptitudes are similar to the proficiencies necessary in regular classrooms. However, as Nolan and Hoover (2008) posited, principals must also possess "content expertise in order to make a fair, informed, comprehensive assessment of teacher performance and competence" (p. 13). As a result, if principals do not have a content specific background or take the time to understand course content within a support area, supervision and evaluation of support teachers is challenging and unfair when assessing good teaching performance.

### **Context of the Study**

The study was conducted in a large, urban Midwest school district which served approximately 24,000 students. In this state, teachers were considered non-tenured until they taught successfully for five consecutive years in the same school district. School districts within the state were given autonomy to adopt teacher supervision and evaluation procedures that met their site-specific needs. The school district selected in this study created its teacher supervision and evaluation procedures by including both

principals' and teachers' feedback on the formative and summative evaluation tools. Non-tenured teachers received one formal and one informal observation by principals each year until they reached their tenure year. Tenured teachers received one informal observation each year and one formal observation by principals every five years. Formal observations consisted of a pre-observation conference, an extended observation, and a post-observation conference. Principals had little autonomy to differentiate supervision for teachers as the same forms (pre-observation conference, post observation conference, and professional development) were used for both non-tenured and tenured teachers. Using student performance data over a three-year period, eight elementary sites

were purposively sampled because they were considered high performing by the school district. These elementary schools were considered high performing because their third- and fourth-grade communication arts and math student assessment scores on both the state assessment and district assessment placed them within the top 10% of all elementary schools ( $N=39$ ) in the district. Table 1 displays general demographic information for the eight elementary schools including total school enrollment, percent of students on free or reduced lunch, total number of certified teachers, and teaching backgrounds of principals. Numbers have been assigned to each school to protect their identities and the identity of the school district.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information for Elementary Schools*

School	Enrollment	Free/Reduced Lunch %	Number of Teachers	Background of Principal
1	534	32.2	30	PE teacher
2	518	17.2	30	Classroom teacher
3	346	27.7	21	Classroom teacher
4	467	23.6	29	Music teacher
5	243	48.6	15	Classroom teacher
6	152	54.5	8	Classroom teacher
7	355	24.8	20	Classroom teacher
8	399	26.8	26	Classroom Teacher

**Method**

The study was descriptive and inferential and used an online instrument to ascertain the attitudes of teachers about their

principals' supervisory and evaluative behaviors. As a result, two research questions guided the study: (1) What are elementary teachers' perceptions about principals' supervisory and evaluative

behaviors?, and (2) What are elementary teachers' views about principals' supervisory and evaluative strengths, and how do teachers suggest principals might improve their supervisory and evaluative practices? The online instrument was e-mailed to all 179 certified teachers in the eight elementary schools in April 2013 and resent to non respondents an additional two times. As a result, 74 teachers responded to the survey prior to the survey being closed in May 2013, a response rate of 41%.

### **Instrument**

The instrument used in data collection was a survey used in a previous principal supervision and evaluation inquiry (Clark, 1998), and contained three primary sections. The first section included 22 Likert scaled items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*) designed to measure teachers' perceptions about seven constructs regarding their principals' supervisory and evaluative behaviors which included (a) establishes standards for teachers' performance (two items), (b) conducts routine observations (two items), (c) conducts adequate pre-observation conferences (four items), (d) conducts adequate post-observation conferences (six items), (e) assesses total performance evaluations (three items), (f) differentiates supervision and evaluation (two items), and (g) has the ability to supervise and evaluate (three items).

To establish internal reliability on the instrument, Chronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated on all 22 scaled items and found to be 0.98. Additionally, Chronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated on each of the seven constructs which included establishes standards for teachers' performance expectations (0.79), conducts routine classroom observations (0.86), conducts adequate pre-observation

conferences (0.96), conducts adequate post-observation conferences (0.96), assesses total performance evaluations (0.91), differentiates supervision and evaluation (0.76), and has the ability to supervise and evaluate (0.88). The second section of the instrument included two open-ended items which asked teachers to describe their principals' greatest strengths in supervising and evaluating their teaching performance, as well as ways in which principals might improve these practices. The final section of the instrument collected demographic information on the sample and included gender of the teacher, job assignment, total years of teaching experience, and tenure status.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Descriptive means were calculated for the entire sample and then means were broken down by tenure status (two groups), years of teaching experience (three groups), and job assignment (two groups). Inferential statistics included independent samples *t* tests for the variables of tenure status and job assignment, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) for years of teaching experience. For the two-open ended items, respondents' answers were open-coded to yield patterns and themes (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006), and coding was characterized as flexible and expandable as themes emerged. After initial coding of the two opened-ended questions by one researcher, the other researchers coded answers to ensure reliability, and researchers checked codes until agreement was reached.

### **Results**

All 74 respondents were female and had an average of 12.67 years of total teaching

experience. More specifically, when looking at teachers' years of teaching experience, 12 (16.2%) had one to three years experience, 17 (23%) had five to 10 years teaching experience, and 38 (51.4%) had 11 or more years of teaching experience. Regarding job assignment, 50 (67.6%) respondents identified themselves as regular classroom teachers (K-5) while 17 (23%) were classified as support teachers (art teachers, music teachers, physical education teachers, special education teachers, or counselors). Finally, 50 (67.6%) respondents were tenured while 18 (24.3%) respondents were not tenured.

The first research question, "What are elementary teachers' perceptions about principals' supervisory and evaluative behaviors?" yielded descriptive findings that help analyze common traits found among the eight principals studied. First, overall means were created for each of the seven supervision and evaluation constructs. Table 2 displays the means for the seven supervision and evaluation constructs based on responses from the overall sample, for tenure status, for teaching experience, and for job assignment. A significance level of 0.05 was used for independent samples *t* tests and the ANOVA.

**Table 2**  
*Teachers' Perceptions about Principals' Supervisory and Evaluative Behaviors based on Tenure Status, Years of Teaching Experience, and Job Assignment*

	Overall Mean	Tenure Status Mean		Years of Teaching Mean		Job Assignment Mean	
		Tenured (n=50)	Non (n=18)	1 to 3 (n=12)	5 to 10 (n=17)	Classroom (n=50)	Support (n=17)
Principal has ability to supervise and evaluate	3.40	3.37	3.52	3.42	3.39	3.37	3.47
Principal conducts routine observations	3.39	3.35	3.64	3.63	3.44	3.40	3.47
Principal establishes standards for teachers' performance	3.39	3.31	3.61	3.50	3.24	3.31	3.59
Principal conducts adequate pre-observation conferences	3.37	3.31	3.60	3.58	3.35	3.33	3.51
Principal conducts adequate post observation conferences	3.37	3.33	3.53	3.56	3.30	3.33	3.52
Principal assesses total performance evaluations	3.29	3.21	3.56	3.53	3.27	3.26	3.39
Principal differentiates supervision and evaluation*	3.00	2.95	3.24	3.29	2.59	3.05	2.94

Note: Scale ranges from 1=*strongly disagree* to 4=*strongly agree*; Support includes related arts teachers, special education teachers, and counselors; \* indicates a significant difference at the 0.009 level between teachers with 1 to 3 years of experience and teachers with 5 to 10 years of experience

Overall, teachers agreed with all constructs as all had means higher than 2.50. Teachers strongly agreed most that *principals had adequate abilities to effectively supervise and evaluate teachers* ( $M=3.40$ ), however they strongly agreed least that *principals differentiated supervision and evaluation for teachers based on need* ( $M=3.00$ ). When looking at data through the lens of tenure status, tenured teachers strongly agreed most that *principals had adequate abilities to supervise and evaluate teachers* ( $M=3.37$ ), while non-tenured teachers strongly agreed most that *principals conducted routine observations* ( $M=3.64$ ). Both tenured teachers ( $M=2.95$ ) and non-tenured teachers ( $M=3.24$ ) strongly agreed least that *principals differentiated supervision and evaluation for teachers based on need*. Although there were no significant differences between the attitudes of tenured teachers and non-tenured teachers on any of the constructs, non-tenured teachers agreed more than tenured teachers on all seven constructs concerning their principals' supervision and evaluation skills.

When data were broken down by years of teaching experience, teachers with one to three years of teaching experience ( $M=3.63$ ) and teachers with five to 10 years of teaching experience ( $M=3.44$ ) strongly agreed most that *principals conducted routine observations*. Teachers with 11 or more years of experience strongly agreed most that *principals established standards for teachers' performance* ( $M=3.46$ ). All three groups of teachers (one to three,  $M=3.29$ ; five to 10,  $M=2.59$ ; and 11 or more,  $M=3.17$ ) strongly agreed least that *principals differentiated supervision and evaluation*. Finally, an ANOVA revealed a significant difference between how teachers with one to three years of teaching experience viewed *principals' differentiated supervision and evaluation* when compared

to teachers with five to 10 years of experience,  $F(2, 63) = 5.11, p = 0.009$ . Specifically, the less experienced teachers strongly agreed more that *principals differentiated supervision and evaluation*.

Finally, looking at the data through the lens of teachers' job assignment, regular classroom teachers (K-5) strongly agreed most that *principals conducted routine observations* ( $M=3.40$ ). Support teachers strongly agreed most that *principals established standards for teachers' performance* ( $M=3.59$ ). Both regular classroom teachers ( $M=3.05$ ) and support teachers ( $M=2.94$ ) strongly agreed least that *principals differentiated supervision and evaluation*. Finally, support teachers agreed with six of the seven supervision and evaluation constructs more than regular classroom teachers. The only construct in which this was not the case was *principals differentiated supervision and evaluation*, which regular classroom teachers agreed more than support teachers. However, there were no significant differences between regular classroom teachers and support teachers views on any of the supervision and evaluation constructs.

To answer the question regarding elementary teachers' views about principals' supervisory and evaluative strengths, and how teachers suggest principals might improve their supervisory and evaluative practices, responses to the two open-ended questions were open coded by the researchers. Regarding principals' strengths concerning supervisory and evaluative behaviors, 52 teachers responded to this question. Initial coding resulted in nine broad themes and these were condensed into three specific themes, namely *relationships/trust building, positive feedback, and routine observations*. First, teachers indicated these eight principals



spent considerable time building a relationship with them which created a high level of trust between principals and teachers. This included allowing teachers input into decisions, empathetic listening, and treating teachers as part of a team. Reflecting on building trusting relationships, one respondent stated, “She listens and is very quick to solve problems, she involves teachers in problem solving which helps build trust between teachers and administrators. She is very supportive of how I teach.” Another respondent commented, “I feel the greatest strengths are that my principal treats teachers as part of a team. Each teacher is treated as a professional who is contributing to the education of students.”

Regarding *positive feedback*, teachers indicated that when principals followed up their classroom visits with feedback, the feedback was framed first with positives before suggestions or reflection questions were offered to teachers. For example, one teacher believed her principal took additional time to provide positive feedback after all classroom walkthroughs. Another respondent remarked, “I know exactly where I stand with my principal on teaching. Ideas are always suggested and my strengths are commended.”

The final theme that surfaced was *routine observations*. Teachers indicated these eight principals were in classrooms daily which provided them a clear understanding of teaching and learning issues in their schools. One respondent observed, “With weekly walkthroughs, my principal gets a chance to see what is going on consistently in my room.” Another teacher believed, “My principal is in my classroom multiple times a week, so I feel my principal gets an accurate overall picture of my classroom environment”.

When asked how principals might improve their supervisory and evaluative practices, 39 teachers responded. Two themes emerged and included *no recommendations* and *feedback*. First, overwhelmingly ( $n=21$ ), teachers offered no suggestions regarding how principals could increase their supervisory and evaluative skills. Thirteen teachers believed principals could improve the quality of feedback they provided teachers, both positive and constructive. More specifically, teachers wanted more positive feedback about teaching strategies and desired constructive feedback about areas in which they were weak. For example, one teacher stated, “I would say teachers just need to be given more pats on the back throughout the year individually”. Another respondent stated, “I’ve never had a bad evaluation. Come on! I can’t be that awesome. I’d like to know where I need to improve.”

## Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions about principals' supervision and evaluation in eight high performing elementary schools. The findings can be summarized into three general themes: (1) despite working in a school district with no differentiated teacher supervision and evaluation procedures, teachers' perceived principals engaged in all seven supervision and evaluation constructs including differentiated supervision and evaluation. However, differentiated supervision and evaluation was rated the lowest by all groups of respondents when compared to the other six supervision and evaluation constructs; (2) both non-tenured teachers and teachers with one to three years of experience were more positive about principals supervision and evaluation than more experienced teachers; and (3) teachers with five to 10 years of experience were the

least positive of any of the groups concerning principals' supervisory and evaluative behaviors.

Synthesizing specific findings, overall, teachers believed principals had adequate skills to effectively supervise and evaluate teachers. This confidence, along with principals' ability to form personal, meaningful relationships with teachers and treat them as professionals, creates a climate and culture that allows teachers to trust principals as supervisors of instruction. As a result, these principals understand trust is a precursor to effective teacher supervision (Zepeda, 2013). Teachers indicated principals routinely visited classrooms as part of their supervision responsibilities, a behavior Ikemoto et al. (2012) argued distinguished effective principals from ineffective principals and while encouraging teacher development. Teachers believed that because principals were in their classrooms weekly, principals understood the instructional climate of schools and positioned themselves to make instructional recommendations based on observable data (Ing, 2009). After classroom walkthroughs, teachers perceived positive feedback dispensed by principals as crucial for building morale and led to teachers' feelings of professionalism and shared leadership. However, teachers indicated they desired not only positive feedback, but also constructive criticism about their teaching so they could improve their performance.

Non-tenured teachers and teachers with one to three years of teaching experience were the most positive about principals' supervision and evaluation when compared to teachers with more experience. The researchers speculate non-tenured and novice teachers' positive views after their supervision hinge on two points. First, because principals engaged in a more direct

approach when supervising non-tenured teachers and novice teachers (Glickman et al., 2005; Peterson, 1995; Nolan & Hoover, 2007; Zepeda, 2013), they possibly received more direct feedback about their performance. Second, because non-tenured and novice teachers struggle with technical teaching problems, principals can provide immediate feedback that helps and, as a result, non-tenured and novice teachers are more positive about the supervisory experience.

Results concerning the view of teachers with five to 10 years of experience are less clear as these teachers were the least positive about the seven supervision and evaluation constructs, and were significantly less positive about principals' ability to differentiate supervision and evaluation than early career teachers. These findings contradict others who describe this career stage of teaching as one in which teachers are mature, enthusiastic, and have high job satisfaction (Huberman, 1993; Zepeda, 2013). Attempting to describe why teachers with five to 10 years of experience were the most negative about principals' supervision and evaluation warrants further research. However, recent research indicates if experienced, effective teachers are provided no incentives because of school district policy restrictions, they tend to devalue teacher supervision and evaluation procedures (Jacob et al., 2012; Weisberg et al., 2009). Perhaps more importantly, in order to improve educational leadership training programs, researchers and practitioners should continue to work together to bridge the gap between theory and practice by identifying how teachers with five to 10 years of experience might be better supported with differentiated supervision and evaluation, allowing for more personalized professional development. Further research in this area

could help utilize the strengths of these veteran teachers and promote a greater component of shared leadership among staff members.

Regarding job assignment, support teachers rated six of the seven supervision and evaluation constructs higher than regular classroom teachers, indicating support teachers were more positive about principals' exhibiting these behaviors. Although these positive findings do not allow for conclusions of causality, two of the eight principals had backgrounds as content teachers. This might have assisted support teachers in expressing positive feeling about supervision and evaluation procedures in their schools, even within their content specific area.

In sum, the results of this study provide three conclusions. First, principals' instructional leadership is important for a positive instructional climate. Despite working in a school district with no differentiated supervision and evaluation processes, teachers in these eight schools were positive about all seven constructs concerning principals' supervision and evaluation, and believed principals' leadership led to feelings of trust and autonomy. Teachers reported principals were routinely in classrooms and viewed principals as instructional leaders.

Second, differentiated supervision and evaluation is difficult for principals as they attempt to provide assistance to all types of teachers. Even in these eight high performing schools, teachers perceived principals differentiated less than any other construct measured. Differentiated supervision and evaluation requires principals to have diagnostic skills when assessing the developmental level of teachers and match administrative supports

to needs. Because differentiated supervision is not a *one size fits all* approach, it can be time consuming as principals collaboratively search out ways to remediate struggling teachers and enrich teachers meeting expectations. Compounding the difficulties in implementing differentiated supervision are school district evaluation procedures that treat all teachers the same. In such a context, principals have little autonomy to differentiate supervision and evaluation for teachers and are forced to navigate required paperwork requirements to meet policy demands. As a result, principals require professional development as a formal district process as they attempt to provide differentiated supervision for teachers. Thirdly, as teachers gain experience, their views of supervision and evaluation might become unfavorable, especially when compared to novice teachers. Principals must continue to challenge and support experienced teachers and attempt to keep their enthusiasm and desire for continuous improvement high. To do this, principals might provide frequent, public, positive feedback concerning effective teachers' performance and assist effective teachers in securing additional resources to further strengthen their instruction. Other examples include asking experienced, effective teachers to take a more active role in instructional leadership initiatives such as revising classroom walkthrough forms or helping with instructional analysis after classroom walkthrough data have been summarized. Finally, principals might allow experienced teachers to develop personalized professional development plans based on interests and worry less about requiring them to attend professional development not tailored to their innate desires. Thus, this study seeks to inform policies and practices for school districts looking to provide meaningful, ongoing professional development for their

employees. As teachers progress through various professional stages, school districts can better support the continual development of teachers by offering more

developmentally appropriate supervision and evaluation that seeks to strengthen the organization as a whole.

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