Metaphors and Meaning: Principals' Perceptions of Teacher Evaluation Implementation

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This Southeastern state was awarded one of the first two Race to The Top (RTTT) grants the U. S. Department of Education funded. A key piece of the state's winning application was a legislative mandate to implement an intensive, quantitative, and accountability driven teacher evaluation system beginning with the 2011-2012 school year. The new law required compliance with far more rigorous minimum standards for frequency, type, scoring, and reporting of teacher evaluations. The relatively quick policy overhaul, coupled with higher-stakes accountability, affected principals' instructional leadership and customary school practice. This multi-site exploratory qualitative study examined fourteen K-12 principals' perspectives. The sites included four high schools, five middle schools, and five elementary schools located in rural and suburban areas.

Purpose and Questions

This study explored principals' use of metaphors and added to previous research by applying the concept of metaphor use to describing the implementation of a significantly changed teacher evaluation system in a Southeastern Race to the Top state. The purpose was to better understand principals' perceptions of leadership experience during this implementation. This study focused on answering the following:

1. What metaphors do principals use to conceptualize or make sense of the change during the teacher evaluation implementation?
2. What insight into principals' perception of implementation is evident in the metaphors?

Review of Pertinent Literature

Metaphors: A Way of Thinking

Metaphors are comparisons that show how two unalike things are similar in another important way. A metaphor expresses understanding and our experience of one thing in terms of another such as "time is money" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors help practitioners understand and express experiences and convey meaning as "vehicles of vernacular" (Bredsen, 1985, p. 30) for example, viewing school faculty as a family. Using images to make complicated issues

understandable, metaphors thereby "capture subtle themes normal language can obscure" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 268). Often serving as a persuasive mechanism for policy makers, metaphors are also an effective tool for framing and understanding policy (Candless, 2012). Thus, metaphors are "*a way of thinking* and *a way of seeing* that pervade how we understand our world generally" (Morgan, 1986, p. 12).

Researchers benefit from practitioners' use of metaphors as well. More than literary expressions, metaphors are linguistic structures that assist researchers in understanding educational phenomena. They provide insights into the thought process of principals about change as well as their reflections on practice and school reforms (Dana & Fitts, 1993). Thus, metaphors can assist understanding the current state of a reform and alert researchers to participants' feelings regarding experience with a reform.

Some studies have examined metaphors' impact on the power to influence principals' practices. Using a qualitative method, Bredsen (1985) identified metaphors in the literature and described the images in five school principals' statements, beliefs, values, and daily routines. Three of those metaphors appeared to have significant implications for schools: vision, maintenance, and survival. Particularly important in this study, the metaphor of survival, as Bredesen noted, focuses on immediate needs and acquiring resources in order for schools to continue as organizations. Bredesen also noted that the survival metaphor indicates a stressful organizational environment.

Metaphors can make the complex simple yet still retain the depth of the concepts and information (Larson, Hostiuck, & Johnson, 2011). Thus, metaphors provide a concrete or pictorial description of feelings that the researcher can analyze. Dana and Pitts (1993) found that principals use a variety of metaphors to conceptualize their roles. In an action research study, they described how an elementary principal's thought process was expressed in metaphors when making sense of a change in school practice.

Metaphors have been used to analyze team work as well. Marcellino (2010), working with teams, gained an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each group in her university classes. Metaphoric descriptions alerted the instructor to what was actually happening within each team while working on course requirements.

Sergiovanni (1994) and Beck (1999) explored the use of metaphors to describe community. In exploring metaphors' power, Beck (1999) concluded from the work of Johnson (1993) and Morgan (1986) that changing a metaphor both reflects and contributes to changes in the way people make sense of their experiences.

In addition to creating perception, metaphors also assist in changing the picture of administrative practice. Metaphors can be a "powerful reflective tool to help principals conceptualize their roles and make desired changes toward meaningful school improvement" (Dana & Fitts, 1993, p. 335). Some studies examined metaphors' power to impact principals' practices. Sergiovanni (1994) urged educational administration as a field to develop its own unique and appropriate metaphors in order to avoid remaining "characterless" (p. 214). He reasoned that as long as educators borrow images from other disciplines, such as business, they are subject to the concepts associated with those images. Thus, Sergiovanni advised educators to resist outside influences and to develop mindscapes, models, and metaphors more fitting to educational work. As an example, the metaphor of instructional leader has been most influential in redefining principal leadership today.

Method

This qualitative study analyzed the metaphors principals use to describe their experience initially implementing a new teacher evaluation system. The participants' words became the main unit of analysis (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992) with metaphors used as the coding mechanism. Analysis began with examining the interview data (Creswell, 2003), first to obtain a general sense of the information. Data were analyzed for themes and patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Based on the interview questions, metaphors were grouped or *chunked* (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004) using the lens of principal leadership and teacher evaluation. The process of categorizing the data was repeated to refine the analysis. QDA Miner, a qualitative analysis software program, was also used for analyzing the transcribed data and determining frequency of metaphor mentions.

Participants and Settings

Both suburban and rural schools were included in the study. Free and reduced lunch percentages ranged from 31% to 85%. Student population ranged from 295 to 1486 students. Eight male and six female principals with 3 to 24 years of administrative experience, were selected for the study. Experienced principals were selected to minimize entanglement of beginning administrators' concerns with those resulting from the new evaluation system.

Instrument and Procedures

After receiving permission from the district superintendent, the researcher contacted principals by e-mail to explain the study's purpose and procedures. Interviews, approximately 60 minutes each, were conducted in each of the respective principal's office. The interview questions were constructed with the study's research questions in mind and were based on current literature. Interviews were audio recorded with permission and then transcribed verbatim.

A possible limitation in using metaphors is a researcher's over interpretation during an interview. However, asking participants to review the data, or member check, might alleviate this concern.

Findings

All principals, without interviewer prompting, used at least one metaphor to describe their experiences, feelings, or beliefs regarding the evaluation implementation process. Metaphors were multiple and included themes related to bodies of water, means of transportation, religion, and medicine. The metaphors revealed that principals need adequate training and information on teacher evaluation implementation to competently teach the concepts and explain the process to teachers. Principals view the *teacher of teachers* or staff development role as an important component of instructional leadership. The implementation process in this study did not allow time to develop sufficient expertise. Consequently, principals felt they were only one-step ahead of teachers and could not answer questions to fulfill the instructional leader role.

Implementation as Survival

Possessing a high level of knowledge to assist teachers in implementing a reform is a hallmark of an instructional leader. Without a detailed process to follow, principals viewed their leadership as one of survival in the initial implementation. They discussed walking a tight-rope and treading or wading in unknown waters. As the following comment illustrates, they acknowledged that the work is difficult and that preparedness is necessary to competently implement the evaluation model:

> We didn't have a lot of time to really assimilate it before we had to implement it. It's dive in and drown, or maybe dive in and dog paddle. It's been very hard work. As you're diving in around this pool of hard work it's not like you are able to those more graceful strokes like the breast stroke. It really has been just get in there and work and dig and dig and dig until you figure out what's going on.

Using a metaphor to describe the teacher evaluation system's implementation, principals reported that their training was brief with insufficient time to learn the evaluation model's nuances. Thus, learning the new model appeared to have become an on-the-job situation. Barely staying a step ahead was awkward for principals accustomed to leading change. The ensuing frustration is reflected in the following comment:

> It feels like you're chasing a tire while you're driving a car. The state keeps adding and updating. We tried to get ahead with self-assessment and learn what to do. Well, then out comes a new version.

Moreover, principals experienced anxiety when previous knowledge of a teacher clashed with evidence collected in the evaluation, as the metaphor in the following observation indicates:

> If you're in a situation where you're really trying to help somebody, at the end of the road you want to think that you did that. So subconsciously, I may rate some people higher than maybe they deserve because I've been working with them hard all this time. I think that is a tightrope that I'm going to walk. I hope there's a net.

Principals' instructional work includes teaching teachers new classroom strategies. However, the volume of changes in the teacher evaluation resulted in principals providing small bites of incremental information to reduce teacher stress as the following comment indicates:

> The anxiety from the teachers' standpoint in the beginning was very, very high. I tried to just start spoon-feeding them, so to speak, little by little after we got school started with what they needed to know at that point in time.

The new teacher evaluation model over-shadowed almost all other school functions during the initial implementation year according to one principal who stated, "We now live, eat, it [teacher evaluation]. It's in my mind all the time; it's what I wake up thinking about." One of the questions asked the following: On a 1-5 scale (with 5 being very effective), where would you place yourself in your ability skills, confidence, and understanding of the new evaluation

system? Echoing the fragile feeling of nearly all respondents, one principal responded rhetorically, "Where would you put treading water?"

Implementation as Uncertainty

Principals need to understand a new system well so that they can, in turn, support teachers in the implementation phase. However, principals lacked understanding of the complete evaluation model because the training was brief. The lack of time to learn a new system was distressing to principals accustomed to leading change. For example, one principal observed, "These extra evaluations were dumped onto you. That's uncomfortable because there was very little training." Thus, principals were caught between the seemingly unmovable rock of policy and the hard place of leading school change.

According to another interview, the lack of initial training led to uncertainty: "We're all still getting our feet wet. Until we get a year of implementation finished, we are wading in unknown waters." Moreover, the state clarified or added details as the implementation process unfolded. Thus principals were relegated to a reactionary positions rather than a visionary function. As one principal noted, "It's not seeing the forest for the trees. I ask myself, 'What do I need to accomplish today versus understanding the bigger picture?"

While principals were still learning, a fear emerged that rather than continuing the current model, the learning curve might carry-over into year two with more changes required. This concern is reflected in the following comment: "I hope and pray that we don't reinvent the wheel." Voicing a similar concern, another principal noted that the model itself changed after implementation creating an additional layer of stress: "We need to clarify procedures. I feel we were thrown into this almost blindly." Capturing the implementation's on-the-job nature, another principal used the following metaphor: "We are having to work those things out on the fly."

Using transportation metaphors, one principal emphasized that the model was not fully developed prior to implementation by saying: "I don't want to buy a car that's almost or partially finished. A pilot to iron out concerns would have helped with stress."

Several principals emphasized that everyone needed to settle in with the current models details but feared constant change was more likely. For example, one commented, "We need the opportunity to catch our breath after this year and really look at the system. Keep the train on track. Let us get to a station break or stopping point or a pause before we change things again."

Implementation as Familiarity

While most principals characterized the initial implementation in terms of survival and uncertainty, some principal responses indicated an adjustment or adaptation to the change. Some of those responses included metaphors characterizing team work and a more positive future. For example, noting that both principal and teachers were learning, one principal commented, "I told my teachers, 'If you hold my hand, I'll hold yours. We're going to get through this learning curve and understand how this process works.'" Discussing the school administrative team's role in learning the evaluation system's new and challenging components, another principal described the team's work with staff: "We try to be the cheerleaders and pump them up as much as we can."

A few principals reported decreased anxiety over time and believed that the new evaluation process might not be as foreign as first feared. For example, one principal commented, "When you do something initially that's the hardest. It's like going to the doctor and getting that shot. It's not quite as bad as you think it's going to be." Spinning the adage that familiarity breeds contempt, another principal noted, "At the beginning it was more emotionally charged because teachers were scared. But now, although there are still issues, they're not so scared. The familiarity of it breeds maybe a little more contentment."

Even though implementation difficulties persisted, principals persevered and continued to learn as described by a principal who noted, "Although the rules kept changing, after a while we found our sea legs with the evaluation model."

Discussion and Implications

Metaphors might be viewed as a type of instant messaging, conveying an image in abbreviated statements. In this study of implementing a new teacher evaluation system principals used metaphors to conceptualize or make sense of the change. The use of images or metaphors provided insight into perceptions of the implementation and its effect on school leadership practices. Specifically, these metaphors revealed apprehensions and concerns.

Many metaphors used in this study describe a stressful environment (for example, "dive in and drown") indicating that principals felt they were merely surviving implementation. Principals' perceived lack of mastery of the new evaluation process negatively impacted their ability to lead teachers in the implementation. Through analysis of metaphorical expressions, it was clear that principals believed they were barely keeping up with the implementation as indicated when comparing the implementation process to "chasing a tire while driving a car." Understanding principals' needs and concerns is a step toward eliminating barriers and, thus, more likely a successful implementation will follow.

Principals, fearful of appearing inadequate to the task, might be reluctant to reveal leadership anxieties, frustrations, and uncertainties caused during a stressful change. However, by carefully listening to the metaphorical language they use, a researcher might detect feelings and concerns not expressed directly. Supervisors, coaches, and others who work with principals will benefit from analyzing metaphors as well because principals might not ask directly for needed support during the implementation of high-stakes policies such as teacher evaluation. Thus, those who work with principals during an implementation, through understanding the meaning in metaphors, will be able to provide emotional support and consequently reduce principal anxiety, frustration, and fear of the unknown.

This study's metaphor analysis also leads to examining the role of instructional leadership when implementing a new teacher evaluation system. Principals require significant levels of understanding and knowledge prior to leading teachers through the process. Principals will benefit from sufficient training over a period of time prior to implementing the new system. Supporting principals with clear answers to questions before the implementation also might alleviate the expressed lack of competency as indicated by metaphors used in this study. Additionally, policy makers should craft procedures with sufficient detail so that uncertainties and vagaries are minimized in the implementation process.

Studying metaphors in qualitative research offers an opportunity to make sense of a phenomenon by analyzing descriptive language and digging deeper into principals' perceptions and concerns. The metaphors in this study provided insight into the principals'

thoughts on change and reflections on practice. The study also supports previous research illustrating how metaphors help educators understand the impact of a reform (Dana & Fitts, 1993). Lastly, the result of this study's analysis of metaphors illustrates the necessity of preparing and supporting principals in the initial implementation of a reform such as a new teacher evaluation system.

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