Principals' Perceptions and Enactment of Tasks Related to Changes to Teacher Evaluation

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Abstract

This study provides a description of how Race to the Top (RTTT) policy is connected to daily work activity for educational leaders using interviews and surveys. Specifically, the survey questions targeted how school leaders are implementing and prioritizing practices that have an impact on teaching and learning. Results of this study found that school leaders' time is constrained by policy requirements and procedures. Key barriers to effectively enacting leadership tasks were reported to include paperwork, and lack of personnel and time. It was found that some of school leaders' beliefs did not match or demonstrated weak correlation with current actions.

Keywords: Principal perceptions; teacher evaluation; Race to the Top (RTTT); task enactment

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Objectives or purposes

Since 2010, the US Department of Education has invited states to apply for additional funding under the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative. The goals of RTTT included (1) developing standards and assessments for students to be career and college ready; (2) implementing data systems that measure student growth and success with the goal of improving instruction; (3) getting and keeping effective teachers and principals through recruitment, retention, and professional development; and (4) turning around struggling schools (US Department of Education, 2010). States applied for RTTT funding by demonstrating the ways in which each of these goals will be met. In the first three years, 19 schools and the District of Columbia were awarded RTTT funding.

A particular focus of RTTT is teacher accountability and evaluation, with the implication that student learning will benefit.

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These enhanced expectations result in changes for the daily work life of school leaders as they support teachers. Jackson & Remer (2014) indicated that principals identified "using data to improve instruction, developing strong teaching capacity across their schools, and evaluating teachers" as the most important aspects of their jobs (2) now. By surveying and interviewing leaders in RTTT states, researchers sought insight into how this policy is connected to daily work activity. Specifically, the look at the ways in which and the extent to which school leaders are implementing and prioritizing practices that have an impact on teaching and learning under RTTT could be illuminating.

Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

This work uses a distributed leadership framework in that the unit of study is not the school leader, which may rely too heavily on personality or immutable characteristics, but the leadership activity, consisting of leadership tasks and functions, task enactment, and the situational context (Neumerski, 2013; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Figure 1 demonstrates the interaction of these elements, and we describe them more fully in the text.

Figure 1. The Interaction of Leadership Activity Elements

Leadership Tasks

Research by others has provided evidence that leaders are able to influence teaching and learning through both direct and indirect strategies. Leaders of high performing schools have more personal involvement with teachers (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), and provide examples of the direct actions that make a difference. Direct work with teachers can include coaching, individual feedback, professional development, modeling, and conferencing and observation (Donaldson, 2009; Ebmeier, 2003; Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2011; Gigante & Firestone, 2007; Ippolito, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi 2008; Matsumura, Garnier, Resnick, 2010; Neumerski, 2013; Youngs & King, 2002). There are some activities by school leaders that predict gains in student learning, including conferencing, discussing assessment, co-teaching, and discussing content (Elish-Piper & L'Allier). Other activities lead to evidence of a long-term gain in teachers' knowledge, including designing activities or lessons, answering content questions, and facilitating professional development (Gigante & Firestone, 2007). A wide-scale study of Miami school leaders noted that despite the important influence of such actions, only 12.7% of a principal's day is spent focusing on those activities (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013).

Principals also contribute to student learning indirectly through actions which influence school and classroom conditions (Hallinger, 2005), including strong organizational management and technical and symbolic leadership (Ebmeier, 2003; Horng & Loeb, 2010). Both direct and indirect leadership is enhanced by attention to support and professional development for school leaders (Biancarosa, Bryk & Dexter 2010; Donaldson, 2009; Knapp, et al., 2010).

Task Enactment

The tasks described above represent the "what" of leadership; from a distributed perspective, the "who" and "how" are also important. Leaders who are open to collaboration and sharing responsibility are best able to facilitate a student learning climate.

Several recent studies have linked shared instructional leadership to achievement (Gigante & Firestone, 2007; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). This type of task enactment may be achieved by sharing instructional leadership (Neumerski, 2013), developing and advocating for teacher leaders (Knapp, et al., 2010; Mangin, 2007).

The culture and climate developed by school leaders also make a difference for teacher efficacy – both individual and collective – which contribute to instructional effectiveness (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Aspects of school culture linked to learning include fostering a climate of instructional collaboration (Supovitz, Sirinides & May, 2010), creating structures that promote teacher learning (Youngs & King, 2002), and investing available resources in learning (Knapp, et al., 2010). Principals who are committed to enacting tasks that will lead to improvements demonstrate that commitment by dedicating time and resources, explicitly prioritizing tasks, and sharing responsibility.

Situational Context

Although teacher evaluation has always been among school leaders' responsibilities, RTTT has made this work simultaneously and paradoxically more important and less flexible. States have prescribed evaluation systems, frequency, and consequences in more stringent terms. Teachers' performance is now evaluated against standards that define a competency model of effective teaching, going far beyond the traditional satisfactory/unsatisfactory metric (Trusheit, 2011). To meet federal guidelines, states have also incorporated student learning measures into teacher evaluation, often by using a value-added approach to attempt to separate teacher performance from confounding factors (Goe, Bell & Little, 2008; Hanushek and Raymond, 2005).

In addition to more frequent observations and more comprehensive systems, RTTT teacher evaluation reform puts other demands on school leaders' time. The focus on teacher accountability and the reform have drawn attention to labor issues (McGuin, 2012). Implementation of new policies has the benefit of developing a common language and increasing dialogue, but these processes necessitate a large time commitment (Heneman, et al., 2006). Given the predominant place RTTT has taken in the policy landscape and educational conversation, there is a surprising paucity of research on it.

In this project, we asked principals who are in RTTT states to reflect on their leadership tasks and task enactment given the situational context presented by RTTT. Specifically, we seek insight into the ways in which the guidelines and constraints of the teacher evaluation policies under RTTT have aligned their tasks and time with practices associated with student and teacher learning.

Methods, Techniques, or Modes of Inquiry

Participants

Participants were school leaders (typically principals) who were named "Principal of the Year" or received state or national recognition for their leadership in the past 5 years. Without an objective way to identify effective leaders, the varied criteria used by these external organizations were trusted. The goal in this purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) was to avoid the confounding factors of struggling leaders, and 142 potential participants received the link to the online survey, which had been validated through a pilot study (McCotter & Wright, 2015).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Participants

Variable	N	Percent	Mean	SD
Gender				
Male	26	68.4		
Female	12	31.6		
Age				
30-39	3	7.9		
40-49	20	52.6		
50-59	6	15.8		
60+	9	23.7		
Years in Leadership			14.9	4.8
1-5	1	2.8		
6-10	5	14		
11-15	16	44.5		
16-20	11	30.7		
21-25	3	8.4		
Race				
American Indian	1	2.8		
Hispanic	1	2.8		
Caucasian	34	87.2		
School District Setting				
Large Urban	8	20.5		
Small Urban	5	12.8		
Suburban	11	30.6		
Rural	12	30.8		

SPSS Descriptive Statistics analysis was used to report demographic data on the participants of the study (See Table 1). Of the 142 participants, 38 responded to the survey and 34 answered the survey to completion; the data for the participants who answered all pertinent questions were utilized in the analysis. For the second stage of the study, up to 20 volunteers from the survey will be interviewed, with the goal of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of their work as school leaders both before and since RTTT's implementation.

The information in Table 1 indicates there were more male participants ($n = 26$) than female participants ($n = 12$). The most common age of participants fell in the 40-49 years old range, and on average, participants had 14.9 years (SD = 4.8) of experience in leadership positions. It is important to note that the sample contained only two participants who identified as a race other than Caucasian. In terms of location of school related to local population, there is evidence of some diversity among the settings from which our participants came.

For the second stage of the study, volunteers from the survey were interviewed, with the goal of gaining a more comprehensive

understanding of their work as school leaders both before and since RTTT's implementation. These participants volunteered by providing their email addresses in one item of the original online survey

Instruments

Every participant filled out an online survey focused on the activities in which principals engage on a regular basis. We also asked participants to compare the recent frequency of engagement to past years. The questions focused on tasks that are associated with improved teaching and learning according to the research literature and the ways in which tasks are enacted (e.g., by using practices associated with collaboration and shared instructional leadership). The survey also included basic questions about demographics, leadership background, and school context.

Quantitative data from the online survey were analyzed using SPSS to provide an overview of participants' perceptions. In this paper, we focus on the descriptive statistics that give a snapshot of the ways in which principals compare their practices during RTTT to before RTTT, in addition to their beliefs about practices that impact instruction compared to what they actually do on a day-to-day basis. Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed using codes derived from themes in the literature, including management, instructional leadership, and policy.

During the next stage of the research process, interview questions were aligned with the literature and designed to get more in-depth information about school leadership practices. Interview participants were identified based on volunteering through the survey in the first stage, with the goals of (a) interviewing at least one participant from each RTTT state and (b) interviewing participants who are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, and years of experience.

Results

Quantitative

Preliminary analysis of the survey results showed that the Situational Context (policies and mandatory teacher evaluation systems from Race to the Top) had a greater influence on the Leadership Activity of school leaders than did their understanding of Leadership Tasks that make an impact on

Table 2

Paired Samples Correlations between Principals' Beliefs and Behaviors

Themes Measured	N Total	Correlation
Providing Instruction (1) ***	34	-.268
Walk Through Observations (3) ***	34	.214
Classroom Observations (6) ***	34	.309 .

***Numbers reference appendix, which details survey questions as paired by measured themes.

teaching and learning. Their time was perceived to be constrained by policy requirements and procedures.

Key barriers to effectively enacting leadership tasks included paperwork, lack of personnel, and time as indicated by responses. SPSS Correlation was utilized to analyze any instances of relatedness of school leaders' beliefs about the important tasks associated with their work as opposed to the task enactment related to that work. As was hypothesized, it was found that many beliefs that school leaders held did not match or strongly match with their actions that they were currently taking (See Table 2). More specifically, it was found that despite leaders feeling it is important to work with teachers to improve (measured on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating lower importance), in the past two years they did not spend more time working with teachers, $r_2 = -.268$, $n = 34$, $p > .05$.

Moreover, it was discovered that administrators believed that it was important to be in classrooms completing walk-through observations (measured on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating higher importance), yet in the past two years this belief and action only had a weak correlation, $r_2 = .214$, $n = 34$, $p > .05$. School leaders' belief that observing in classrooms is important (measured on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating lesser importance) and their amount time spent in classrooms observing over the past two years neared significance, however, these variables were not correlated strongly $r_2 = .309$, $n = 34$, $p > .05$.

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 outline important descriptive data to demonstrate items that were utilized in comparison of beliefs vs. task enactment. Specifically, Table 3.1 lists survey items and the frequencies of the responses on the provided Likert-style scale related to principals' beliefs around the important tasks of a teacher evaluation system.

Table 3.1
Frequency and Percentages on Measures of Principals' Beliefs about Importance Professional Behaviors

Importance Variable	N Total	Frequency	Percent
Work with Teachers (1)*	37		
Completely		31	79.5
Mostly		6	15.4
Somewhat		2	5.1
Not at All		0	0
Classroom Walkthroughs (3)*	37		
Completely		22	56.5
Mostly		11	28.2
Somewhat		4	10.3
Not at All		0	0
Observing Classrooms (2)*	37		
Completely		29	78.4
Mostly		6	15.4
Somewhat		2	5.1
Not at All		0	0
Personalized Professional Development (10)*	37		
Completely		29	78.4
Mostly		7	17.9
Somewhat		1	2.6
Not at All		0	0
Instructional Coaching (9)*	37		
Completely		29	78.4
Mostly		7	17.9
Somewhat		1	2.6
Not at All		0	0

*Numbers reference the appendix, which details survey questions as paired by measured themes

Table 3.2 lists survey items and the frequencies of the responses on the provided Likert-style scale (or a binary yes-no forced

response) related to principals' task enactment in their newly implemented teacher evaluation systems over the past two years.

Table 3.2
Frequency and Percentages of Principals' Reported Professional Behaviors

Variable	N Total	Frequency	Percent
Work with Teachers (1)*	34		
Yes		24	70.6
No		10	29.4
Increased** Classroom Walkthroughs (3)*	34		
Yes		18	52.9
No		16	47.1
Increased** Observing Classrooms (2)*	34		
Yes		17	50.0
Mostly		17	50.0
Increased** Professional Development (10)*	34		
Yes		18	52.9
Mostly		16	47.1
Time Spent on Instructional Coaching (hrs/week) (9)*	34		
7-10		2	5.9
4-6		13	38.2
0-3		16	47.1
0		3	8.8

*Numbers reference the appendix, which details survey questions as paired by measured themes
** Increase is relative to the last two years.

Next, SPSS correlation was used to determine relatedness among certain matched items across the beliefs domain and the task enactment domain (See Table 4). One such pairing of items was the self-reported opinions on the importance of administrators to be appropriately trained in new teacher evaluation systems (on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating lower importance) and how much training administrators received regarding teacher evaluation systems (on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating less training). These variables were predicted to correlate in a positive manner. This analysis supported the hypothesis, the more the principal believed that training was important, the more training the principal reported receiving $r_2 = .408$, $n = 34$, $p < .05$ (See Table 4). Moreover, to find out if the belief that the most recent changes to their teacher evaluation systems improve teacher instruction (on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating lesser beliefs that their teacher evaluation system improves teacher instruction) and if teacher instruction has improved since the implementation of new teacher evaluation systems (on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating less teacher improvement) a

correlational analysis was conducted. It was hypothesized that the more teacher instruction improved, the more administrators would believe the teacher evaluation system improved teacher's instruction. This hypothesis was supported $r_2 = .630$, $n = 34$, $p < .001$ (See Table 4).

Additionally, to find out if the belief that the most recent changes to teacher evaluation systems improved student learning (on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating lesser beliefs that teacher evaluation systems improve teacher instruction) and if principals reported actual improvement since the implementation of new teacher evaluation systems (on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating improvement in student achievement), a correlational analysis was conducted. It was hypothesized that the more student learning improved, the more administrators believed that teacher evaluation systems improved student learning. This hypothesis was supported $r_2 = .737$, $n = 34$, $p < .001$ (See Table 4). This was the strongest correlation reported within this paper.

Table 4
Paired Samples Correlations between Principals' Beliefs and Behaviors

Themes Measured	N Total	Correlation	Sig.
Administrators/Evaluators Trained in teacher evaluation (4)***	34	.408	.017*
Improved Teacher Instruction due to teacher evaluation (5) ***	34	.630	.00***
Increases in student learning due to teacher evaluation (6) ***	34	.737	.000**

* p < .05; **p < .01, ***Numbers reference appendix, which details survey questions as paired by measured themes.

Participants seemed to value the types of work that they believe leads to improving teaching and learning, including coaching, time in classrooms, and 1:1 interaction with teachers. The majority, however, found their priorities and distribution of time moving away from those activities over the past few years rather than toward them (See Tables 3.1 and 3.2). Administrators believed that coaching is important (measured on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating lesser importance),

however, over 50% reported that they were able to coach 3 or fewer hours during the week (See Table 3.2).

Qualitative

Interview data from two individuals provide the brief results reported at this time. Using preliminary coding procedures in analyzing the two transcripts, a couple powerful themes emerge that supported the quantitative results seen above. First off, the participants both reported feeling torn between the ideas of compliance vs. coaching, meaning that so much time was spent on compliance with the new policies or fighting the sense that compliance with the new system was "bad" for teachers and students that they found it difficult to provide the coaching for teachers that they believe is necessary to improve instruction and therefore student learning. One interviewee stated the following. "It feels punitive to people. Trying to fight against that compliance piece in our professional learning, trying to show that really this is about giving definition to what good teaching looks like and what good learning looks like….". The other respondent stated, "….. there are issues of compliance that absolutely demand time, but if I don't take the time to do what it takes to be an instructional leader, then I am, I don't know, I'm guilty of malpractice, I guess." This respondent's quote alludes to another theme that emerged from the qualitative data which was that of constrained time. Both participants spoke of time as a commodity, one that they yearned to increase, especially when it came to utilizing coaching strategies with teachers.

Conclusion

The results of this research suggested that school leaders' time is constrained by policy requirements and procedures, instead of influenced more by practices they report as important (like instructional coaching). Key barriers to effectively enacting leadership tasks were reported to include paperwork, lack of personnel, and time. Correlational analysis was utilized to fully analyze instances of relatedness of school leaders' beliefs about the important tasks associated with their work as opposed to the task enactment related to that work. As was hypothesized, it was found that some beliefs that school leaders held did not match at all or only demonstrated a weak correlation with actions that they were currently taking. It seemed that the less formal a type of instructional leadership was (i.e. coaching, walkthrough observations), an inverse or weaker correlation was seen between leaders' beliefs and their task enactment. More in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data will give further insight into the role that RTTT has played in the daily work of school leaders, and comparisons will be drawn in future research as the context shifts in post-ESSA implementation settings. However, the research presented in this paper allows for insight into the instructional leadership beliefs and practices of award winning principals, demonstrating the conflicts that school administrators experience when they struggle to match their professional behavior to their beliefs about good practices.

Scientific or Scholarly Significance

School leaders are key to the improvement process in schools, particularly given their roles as instructional leaders working with both teachers and students. Many leaders value these functions and understand the ways in which they can impact learning and development in their schools. The context created by federal and state policies around school leadership determines and prioritizes the ways in which school leaders spend their time. This study contributes to our understanding of what tasks leaders are focusing on and the ways in which they fit into the literature on instructional leadership.

Limitations

The findings of this study are limited by several factors, affecting the reliability and validity of this study. One of these factors includes the demographics of the respondents.

All but one respondent classified themselves as white, indicating that the findings of this study are not representative of multiple ethnicities, cultures or races. Further, the response rate was only 27%. Only two respondents gave follow-up interviews with the researchers, indicating that the qualitative information gained from this study is limited in scope and transferability. Another consideration is that no information exists within the results about how or if these responses correlate with school size and type, as well as no information on how what other leadership responsibilities the participants had due to there being no survey items related to these issues.

Finally, this study relies on the self-report of principals. While self-report measures always create a limitation of findings, principals present unique issues. One study found that principals present with a positivity bias when evaluating their own school's performance. In fact, 74.7% of Texas principals believed that the school is above average, creating a positivity bias of 34:1 (Meier et al., 2015). Of course, this finding is limited in itself in how it applies to this study, as this study required principals to self-report on their own performance rather than the performance of the school as well as to report on more objective topics. Further, several studies have found that teachers (not principals per se) are more likely to have accurate self-report on specific behaviors that occur frequently and during a brief period (Koziol & Burns, 1986). Many of the activities measured in this study can be categorized thusly. Overall, it seems that while there is no data on principals' accurate self-report of how they spend their administrative time, there are indicators that there is some risk for inaccurate reporting, but so great a risk that the findings of this study are invalid.

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