Excavating Theory in Teacher Evaluation: Evaluation Frameworks as Wengerian Boundary Objects

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to begin to excavate the unstated theoretical underpinnings of teacher evaluation systems as they exist in policy and practice and to explicitly consider how these evaluation systems might intersect theoretically with social learning theory. Research suggests that organizational leaders believe growth-based evaluation practices have yet-untapped potential to support teacher learning within teacher communities. However, models of teacher evaluation, as defined in federal and state policy and developed and implemented in practice, rarely make explicit the theoretical and conceptual frameworks upon which they are based. Further, evaluation models do not

explicitly intersect with the conceptual frameworks for such learning, e.g., communities of practice (CoPs) and social learning theory. Rather, the role of teacher evaluation in social learning within and across educational organizations remains under-theorized. We argue for research examining potential connections in theory and practice between two existing conceptual frameworks: 1) social learning theory and 2) teacher evaluation systems (understood as policy, models, and practices).
Keywords: education policy; teacher evaluation; teacher effectiveness; social learning theory; communities of practice

Para excavar la teoría en la evaluación docente: Marcos de evaluación como objetos límite de Wenger

Resumen: El propósito de este trabajo es comenzar a excavar los fundamentos teóricos no declarados de los sistemas de evaluación docentes tal como existen en la política y la práctica, y considerar explícitamente cómo estos sistemas de evaluación podrían cruzarse teóricamente con la teoría del aprendizaje social. La investigación sugiere que los líderes de las organizaciones creen que las prácticas de evaluación basadas en el crecimiento tienen un potencial aún sin explotar para apoyar el aprendizaje de los docentes dentro de las comunidades de docentes. Sin embargo, los modelos de evaluación docente, tal como se definen en las políticas federales y estatales y se desarrollan e implementan en la práctica, rara vez hacen explícitos los marcos teóricos y conceptuales en los que se basan. Además, los modelos de evaluación no se cruzan explícitamente con los marcos conceptuales para dicho aprendizaje, por ejemplo, las comunidades de práctica (CoP) y la teoría del aprendizaje social. Más bien, el papel de la evaluación docente en el aprendizaje social dentro y entre las organizaciones educativas sigue siendo poco teorizado. Argumentamos a favor de la investigación que examina las conexiones potenciales en teoría y práctica entre dos marcos conceptuales existentes: 1) teoría del aprendizaje social y 2) sistemas de evaluación docente (entendidos como políticas, modelos y prácticas).
Palabras clave: política educativa; evaluación docente; efectividad del maestro; teoria de aprendizaje social; comunidades de practica

Para escavar a teoria na avaliação de professores: Estruturas de avaliação como objetos de fronteira wengerianos

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é começar a escavar os fundamentos teóricos não declarados dos sistemas de avaliação de professores, como existem na política e na prática, e considerar explicitamente como esses sistemas de avaliação podem se cruzar teoricamente com a teoria da aprendizagem social. Pesquisas sugerem que os líderes organizacionais acreditam que práticas de avaliação baseadas em crescimento ainda têm um potencial inexplorado para apoiar o aprendizado de professores nas comunidades de professores. No entanto, modelos de avaliação de professores, conforme definidos nas políticas federal e estadual e desenvolvidos e implementados na prática, raramente explicitam os marcos teóricos e conceituais nos quais se baseiam. Além disso, os modelos de avaliação não se cruzam explicitamente com as estruturas conceituais de tal aprendizado, por exemplo, comunidades de prática (CoPs) e teoria da aprendizagem social. Em vez disso, o papel da avaliação de professores na aprendizagem social dentro e entre organizações educacionais permanece sub-teorizado. Argumentamos pela pesquisa que examina possíveis conexões na teoria e na prática entre duas estruturas conceituais existentes: 1) teoria da aprendizagem social e 2) sistemas de avaliação de professores (entendidos como política, modelos e práticas).

Palavras-chave: política educacional; avaliação de professores; eficácia do professor; Teoria da aprendizagem social; comunidades de prática

Introduction

In response to an educational accountability movement focused on educator quality, policy focus has shifted to high-stakes teacher evaluation, often based on students' standardized test scores. Focusing on ensuring teacher competence and providing experiences for professional learning, federal and state policy makers have supported teacher evaluation systems posited to (a) measure teacher effectiveness and (b) support teacher professional learning and growth. Since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), some states have prescribed a standard view of individual teacher quality across public EC-12 schools and educator preparation programs (EPPs) (Brandon & Derrington, 2019; Burns & Badiali, 2015). The purpose of this paper is to begin to excavate the unstated theoretical underpinnings of teacher evaluation systems as they exist in policy and practice and, specifically to consider how these evaluation systems might intersect theoretically with social learning theory.

Social learning theory and associated empirical research support the idea of professional learning broadly as participation in the practices of social communities within and across organizations. This means, as Wenger (2000) notes, "[Organizations] must learn to manage themselves as social learning systems" (p. 244). In current teacher evaluation frameworks, support takes the form of a coaching relationship between individual evaluators and their evaluated. Research suggests organizational leaders believe that these growth-based evaluation practices have yet-untapped potential to support teacher learning within teacher communities (Danielson, 2016; Paufler et al., in press-b. However, the role of teacher evaluation in social learning within and across educational organizations remains under-theorized. Models of teacher evaluation, as defined in federal and state policy and developed and implemented in practice, rarely make explicit the theoretical and conceptual frameworks upon which they are based. Further, evaluation models do not explicitly intersect with the conceptual frameworks for such learning (e.g., communities of practice [CoPs], social learning theory). We argue for research examining potential connections in theory and practice between two existing conceptual frameworks: 1) social learning theory and 2) teacher evaluation systems (understood as policy, models, and practices). Because learning within social relationships is embedded within the recent growth-based models of teacher evaluation and support, a better understanding of the role of evaluation systems in social learning across multiple educational settings (EC-12 and higher education) is needed.

Evaluation and Embedded Theory

Teacher evaluation frameworks are theory laden. Prior to accountability through evaluation, support via supervision had a long history in schools in the United States, with early literature defining supervision and its practices emerging in the 1920s and 1930s (Ingle & Lindle, 2019; see also Kyte, 1930, 1931). Over time, educational leaders have sought to define and refine practices in supervision (Ingle & Lindle, 2019). More recently developed teacher evaluation systems are organized around an observation rubric (a framework for quality teaching) and a system of practices and activities for evaluators and teachers (the supervision cycle). States vary in terms of how explicitly they denote the theoretical underpinnings of "quality teaching" embedded within their evaluation models (see Grossman, 2011 for historical understanding of the concept of frameworks for teaching). For example, some systems are based upon but do not explicitly cite Danielson's Framework for Teaching (FFT, 2013; see, for example, the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support

System, 2019). The systems of practices which comprise evaluation in many states draw on historical models of supervision cycles. For example, Goldhammer's (1969) five stages of supervision, which include 1) pre-observation conference, 2) observation, 3) analysis and strategy, 4) supervision conference, and 5) post-conference analysis, are used in many states.

More recently, as policy has shifted toward teacher evaluation tied to accountability, researchers and policy makers have explored the distinction between supervision and evaluation. Current research documents the tensions inherent in combining supervision and evaluation and raises questions about the possibility of learning in social situations focused on evaluation (Burns & Badiali, 2015; Hazi, 2019). Some research suggests that implementation of evaluation policy in practice (i.e., the use of accountability mechanisms with rewards and sanctions for individual teachers) may actually disincentivize teacher development. For example, the heavy emphasis on technical accuracy needed to measure teacher competence can overshadow the efforts of evaluators to develop teachers' professional expertise, for example, by leaving little time to effectively coach and mentor teachers (Paufler et al., in press-a), and/or by detracting from a culture of openness and trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2009, 2019). Policy that seeks to support individual and collective teacher growth requires deeper and more explicit consideration of the conditions required for their learning.

Social Learning Theory

The theoretical work of Senge and Wenger develops conceptions of social learning. Drawing from systems theory, Senge (1994) argues that a learning organization is "constituted by a deep learning cycle," which involves "the development not just of new capacities, but of fundamental shifts of mind, individually and collectively" (p. 18). When this cycle begins to operate, the resulting changes are significant and enduring" (Senge, 1994, p. 18). Based on Senge's conception, organizational learning, in this case among teachers in educational settings, can also be understood as a dynamic process. Like Senge, Wenger understands learning to be rooted in social learning systems, which he calls communities of practice (CoPs). For Wenger (2000), knowing "is a matter of displaying competencies defined in social communities" (p. 226). Wenger (1998) argues that conceptualizing learning as a social activity within CoPs has "broad implications for what it takes to understand and support learning" at the individual, community, and organizational levels (p. 7). In Wenger's (1998) model, individual learning entails engaging in practices of a community, community learning requires refining practice and "ensuring new generations of members," and organizational learning "is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization" (pp. 7-8). CoPs are social structures that require varying degrees of organizational support.

Communities of Practice

What is a community of practice? Wenger's CoP framework includes three concepts of particular relevance to teacher learning: community of practice, learning in community, and boundaries. Wenger (1998) understands shared practice to be "the source of coherence" (p. 72) with the three critical dimensions of mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Mutual engagement is a practice that "exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another" (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). Accordingly, a joint enterprise "is the result of a collective process of negotiation that reflects the full complexity of mutual engagement," which is defined by participants and extends beyond just a stated goal to create mutual accountability (pp. 77-78). Explaining that CoPs are not self-contained but rather develop in context, Wenger (1998) notes that the CoP enterprise is defined by individual members based on their own position in the broader system. Jointly pursuing an enterprise

fosters the development of a shared repertoire of resources for negotiating meaning, which "gives coherence for the medley of activities, relations, and objects involved" in the CoP (Wenger, 1998, p. 82).

Learning in community. Describing the negotiation of meaning as a temporal process, Wenger (1998) argues that learning in community is a characteristic of practice that takes time to develop. He suggests that CoPs are "shared histories of learning" (p. 86) that combine participation and reification over time. Further, "mutual relationships, a carefully understood enterprise, and a well-honed repertoire are all investments" in which "participants have a stake...because it becomes part of who they are" (Wenger, 1998, p. 97). Accordingly, "practice is an investment in learning" around which a community "will tend to organize itself so that its investment can be brought to bear" (Wenger, 1998, p. 97). In this case, participation in educational processes (e.g., potentially, evaluation) are "effective in fostering learning not just because they are better pedagogical ideas, but more fundamentally because they are 'epistemologically correct'...[meaning] there is a match between knowing and learning, between the nature of competence and the process by which it is acquired, shared, and extended" (pp. 101-102).

Applied to teacher learning and professional development, social learning theory defines a teacher community of practice as "a group of teachers who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and share and build knowledge with a group identity" (as quoted in Vangrieken et al., 2017, p. 49). Teacher communities (TCs) may be organized as top-down or bottom-up depending on major stakeholders. Supovitz and Christman (2005) argue that to have an impact on teachers, a CoP "has to be directed at teachers' experiences, instructional practice as well as teachers' evaluation [and]...should offer varied learning options for teachers to choose from so that ownership is fostered" (as cited in Vangrieken et al., 2017, p. 50)[1]. Official support of TCs is vital. Both "top down" influence and "from the side" support can be beneficial, although, top-down TCs are "less in line with the main idea of the community construct focused on the needs and experiences of TC members" (Vangrieken et al., 2017, p. 53). To be beneficial, "the influence of policy makers needs to be perceived as support--enabling the TC's activity and fostering participants' initiative--rather than control (p. 53) or "teachers will not contribute to, or believe in, the collective learning" (Vangrieken et al., 2017, p. 59). This suggests that close attention to the perceptions of multiple stakeholders is important to understand the impacts and implications of evaluation policy and practice in specific contexts.

Boundary relations. CoPs share both internal and external shared histories and explicit membership markers. Thus, Wenger (1998) suggests that "discontinuities [develop] between those who have been participating and those who have not" (p. 103). While participation and reification can contribute to discontinuities across boundaries, they can also create continuities such that, for example, products of reification (e.g., artifacts) can cross boundaries and enter the practices of other CoPs (Wenger, 1998). These connections occur in two forms: boundary objects and brokering. As defined by Wenger (1998), boundary objects are "artifacts, documents, terms, concepts, and other forms of reification around which communities or practice organize their interconnections" (p. 105). Boundary objects do not necessarily involve participation; they can enable coordination without actually creating a connection between the perspectives and meanings of different CoPs (Wenger, 1998, p. 107). In contrast, brokering refers to the "connections provided by people who can introduce elements of one practice into another" (p. 105). With regards to learning, brokering "also

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[1]Although CoPs differ from professional learning communities in their theoretical and conceptual origins, they are often indistinguishable in practice, specifically in their "aims, strategies, and concepts with respect to professional learning," and thus, in practice the terms are used interchangeably (Vangrieken et al., 2017, p. 50).

requires the ability to link practices by facilitating transactions between them, and to cause learning by introducing into a practice elements of another," which is reliant upon experiences as a member of and through negotiation in multiple CoPs (Wenger, 1998, p. 109). To broker successfully requires "processes of translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives…[while maintaining] enough legitimacy to influence the development of a practice, mobilize attention, and address conflicting interests" (Wenger, 1998, p. 109). While complex, brokering and the use of boundary objects enables a CoP to relate to the outside such that brokers not only make new connections and enable coordination among communities, they also create possibilities for new meaning (Wenger, 1998).

Theorizing Evaluation with Respect to Social Learning

Presumably, states' post-NCLB efforts to standardize teacher evaluation across K-12 and educator preparation aim to establish a common understanding of quality teaching. In this sense, evaluation models can be theorized as the boundary objects around which CoPs, in this case teachers, "can organize their interconnections" (Wenger, 1998, p. 105). Similarly, the concept of "brokering" can be applied to the work of policy makers and educational leaders to describe their attempts to develop systems of evaluation and support across the profession. To date, evaluation policies and practices focus on individual professional practice rather than structures for social learning. Theorizing evaluation with respect to research that maps structures and processes for social learning will enhance the ability of educational organizations to support teachers and their evaluators as individuals and members of CoPs. Research is needed that examines and critiques the ability and desirability of current teacher evaluation policies, models, and practices to function as boundary objects around which CoPs can or should build practitioner identities and common understandings of practice. Research that advances theory through the conceptualization of the relationship between evaluation and social learning should critically examine the potential for teacher evaluation models to coordinate meanings, identities, and practices.

To offer a concrete example, we are conducting research that employs social learning theory to better understand what happens when states impose evaluation and support systems with a common definition of teacher quality across multiple settings. This work focuses on social learning in clinical (i.e., student teaching) and in-service (EC-12 school) settings at the individual, team/group, and organizational levels to provide a systems view of the impact of evaluation policy on professional preparation and development. Using a systems approach, empirical findings from this and other related research could enhance the ability of preparation programs or EC-12 schools to serve as learning organizations. Developing empirically supported, theoretical models of the role of evaluation in social learning could support recommendations regarding the kinds of policies and practices that are needed to support learning within and across educational organizations.

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