Principal Voice for Successful Policy Implementation: Lessons Learned from Teacher Tenure

Pamela S. Angelle

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

David J. Lomascolo

Trevecca Nazarene University, Nashville, USA

Abstract	Article Info
This study examined the perceptions of US school principals toward one US state's revamped teacher tenure law and how principals perceived that the law affected their ability to evaluate and retain effective teachers. Principal interviews indicated the law had a positive impact on their ability to evaluate and retain effective teachers despite barriers associated with the teacher evaluation system. Findings were examined through Hess' (1999) political attractiveness of reform framework. Results highlight that future research should examine stakeholder and principal voice in policy initiatives and education agendas. As such, a conceptual model for predicting the success of educational reform initiatives is provided.	

Introduction

As the policy discourse in nations throughout the world has shifted over the past three decades to one which embraces a neoliberal slant, educational systems have felt the consequences of this shift. This shift empowered schools to manage their finances, hiring, firing, and other organizational operations, while local education authorities saw their power lessen (Prendergast, Hill, & Jones, 2017). Neoliberal policy, particularly as applied to education, includes "marketization, commodification, degradation, managerialisation and privatization or preprivatisation of public services" and is associated with "minimal state intervention and minimal public expenditure" in the dissemination of these services (Prendergast, Hill, & Jones, 2017, p 27).

Klees (2017) pointed out that in this era of educational neoliberalism there were two common ideas repeatedly heard; that is, that schools are failing and the responsibility for the failure lay with teachers. As a result, a new model of schooling was needed. As part of this new model, along with government grants, US states began to reassess and rework policies regarding teacher evaluation and teacher tenure.

Tenure in the United States provides due process protections for teachers against unfair dismissal. Tenure is normally granted after a probationary period and annual evaluations from supervisors. Attempts to reform tenure have focused on tying evaluation benchmarks to classroom instruction and student achievement. As Ovando and Ramirez (2007) pointed out, while the leadership role of the principal has been a crucial element for successful implementation of teacher evaluation, "few have attempted to determine school leaders' views regarding instructional leadership

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actions within the performance appraisal of teachers as a basis for improving instruction" (p. 106). Davidson (1998), in an earlier study of Tennessee's reform efforts in the United States, concluded that principals did not perceive the tenure law as beneficial in identifying and retaining quality teachers and believed that the law did little to improve the quality of education in Tennessee. Yet, the Tennessee teacher tenure law received no revisions following the study done by Davidson and was only considered for revisions once federal funding became available.

During the most recent legislative efforts to address tenure and evaluation reform, policy makers failed to consider stakeholder perceptions. In an effort to receive federal funding, Tennessee relied heavily upon achievement data and reports, such as those mentioned from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) (2009, 2011) and the Institute for a Competitive Workforce (2007) that highlighted weaknesses in Tennessee's education system; specifically, identifying and retaining quality teachers while dismissing ineffective ones. While reports such as these hold value, asking for stakeholder support for a specific option or course of action, such as the case of principals and teacher tenure, may help determine political practicality (Alexander, 2013).

Soliciting support of those ultimately responsible for policy implementation, such as principals, may determine how effective policy will be once signed into legislation (Alexander, 2013). Including principal voice on teacher tenure and intended reform agendas, as implementors of policy at the school level, principals may be more likely to carry out policy provisions and be more willing to offer input to policy makers that can help devise a course of action

that could lead to a change in the dynamics of support (Alexander, 2013).

Ovando and Ramirez (2007) argued that research that focuses on the perceptions of school principals regarding "their actions within the performance appraisal of teachers" (p. 106) is necessary, noting that principal perceptions of the new tenure law as it pertains to evaluation may be invaluable when reviewing the effectiveness of new procedures for evaluating effective teaching. As Alexander (2013) pointed out, "no matter how good a policy seems to be in theory, if it does not get implemented, it does not work" (p. 94). Moreover, consideration should be placed on the judgment of professionals, such as principals and district leaders, who understand teaching and learning in schools as it relates to granting and revoking tenure. As Baratz-Snowden (2009) argued, the development of systems that require professional educators, as opposed to "law judges and economists with arcane formulas" (p. 27), to make decisions concerning teacher competence, should be the focus.

McGuinn (2010) suggested research that can provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of teacher tenure policies should be the basis for policy makers' discussion regarding costs and benefits of teacher tenure. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of public school principals toward the Tennessee teacher tenure law and how this legislation has affected school principals' ability to evaluate and retain effective teachers. For purposes of this study, we use the definition of perception as "a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression ("Perception", 2019).

To achieve this purpose, the following research question guided this study: How do Tennessee public school principals perceive that

the teacher tenure law has affected their ability to evaluate and retain effective teachers?

Review of Literature

Tennessee Teacher Tenure Reform

In addition to modifications to the statewide evaluation system for teachers, Tennessee refurbished its tenure legislation to connect to specific evaluation criteria and subsequent evaluation scores for teachers. The Tennessee legislation, entitled First to the Top Act, revised due process procedures for tenured teachers to require that dismissal hearings were attended by impartial hearing officers selected by the school's governance board, as opposed to presented directly by the governance board (First to the Top Act, 2010). The following year, new legislation (hereafter referred to as the 2011 tenure law) retained the provisions for teacher dismissal and was intended to make dismissal hearings for tenured and non-tenured teachers standardized (Wesson, 2012). McGuinn (2010) argued that tenure statutes should incorporate teacher effectiveness data from evaluation scores. Under the 2011 tenure law, teachers may lose tenure as a result of low evaluation scores, which are also considered appropriate cause for dismissal. More importantly, the new law redefined teacher "inefficiency," thus providing a means for dismissing teachers who earned tenure prior to 2011 (Mead, 2012; Office of Research and Education Accountability [OREA], 2008; State Collaborative On Reforming Education [SCORE, 2012]; Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-5-401 2011). While teachers who earned tenure prior to 2011 cannot be dismissed for low evaluation scores, they can be dismissed for inefficiency (Wesson, 2012), consistent with literature regarding evaluation and tenure revocation (Baker et al., 2010; Baratz-

Snowden, 2009; Coleman et al., 2005; Dixon, 2011; Eady & Zapeda, 2007; Kersten & Israel, 2005; McGuinn, 2010; National Council on Teacher Quality [NCTQ], 2009, 2011; Oliva et al., 2009; Range et al., 2011; SCORE, 2009; Shakman et al., 2012; Weisberg et al., 2010; Wilson, 2012).

In an analysis of policy in Tennessee in the wake of educational reform, Finch (2012) discussed the controversial nature of educational reform and the attention Tennessee's new policies have generated. Finch argued that Tennessee faced considerable pressures to reform education after receiving several failing rankings (NCTQ, 2009) and suggested that policy innovation is fueled by the availability of new revenue; hence, Tennessee entered a national grant competition. As a state that has shown promise as a national leader in education reform, literature has indicated that Tennessee may be on the proper pathway in connecting tenure decisions to evidence of teacher effectiveness, leading to a positive impact on student achievement (Finch, 2012; NCTQ, 2011; SCORE, 2012, Wesson, 2012).

Perceptions of Evaluation and Tenure

As part of the Tennessee tenure law provisions, a five year probationary period for teachers is required as well as evaluation scores that are directly tied to tenure decisions. A report by SCORE (2012) noted Tennessee's revised evaluation system is "improving both the quality of instruction in the classroom as well as the establishment of accountability for student results," (p. 4). Mobley (2002) conducted a quantitative study that investigated principal perceptions of Tennessee's evaluation system. The study examined principals' willingness to embrace changes associated with a revised and more complex system of teacher evaluation. Findings from the

study suggested that the state model did not provide an accurate portrait of teaching behavior, nor did they feel that they could identify effective teachers by using the performance standards in the state model. Mobley also noted that although the Tennessee State Department of Education mandated a highly complex model for teacher evaluation in 1997, no significant follow up studies existed that helped determine the extent to which principals were implementing the new system of evaluation as it was intended. The same rings true for this study on principal perceptions of teacher tenure: although Tennessee mandated a new, complex model for teacher evaluation connected to tenure in 2011, no significant follow up studies (qualitative or quantitative) existed that provide insight into whether or not Tennessee public school principals perceived the new system as beneficial in the evaluation and retention of effective teachers. Now that the Tennessee teacher evaluation system is tied directly to tenure decisions, in spite of literature that has highlighted negative sentiment regarding teacher evaluation and tenure policies, this study is particularly relevant (Davidson, 1998; Donaldson, 2011; Eady & Zepeda, 2007; Kersten, 2006, Kersten & Israel, 2005; Range et al., 2011, 2012).

The Need for Perception Data in Policy Research

Given the debate that has surrounded education reform, teacher tenure could be viewed as a highly controversial and highly visible policy – a policy that, according to Torres, Zellner, and Erlandson. (2008), is unlikely to be successful. As Kersten (2006) argued, "a better understanding of how various stakeholders view teacher tenure may provide valuable insights toward finding some common ground between boards of education and teacher organizations" (p. 240). Moreover, Kersten and others noted that future research

designed to understand the perceptions of educational stakeholders is necessary to open productive dialogue on tenure (Kersten & Israel, 2005; Range et al., 2012). Range et al. (2012) examined principal perceptions about teacher competency issues in a survey sample of 286 principals and recommended that future research should focus on principal perceptions regarding supports needed to manage incompetent teachers and how their perceptions of incompetency may be influenced by teacher tenure. Other studies, such as one conducted by Blankenship (2013) in a quantitative policy analysis on tenure law revisions across the US, have argued that an examination of the relationship between teacher evaluations and teacher tenure should be explored. Additionally, research should examine the impact such legislative changes may have on teacher retention (Davidson, 1998; Donaldson, 2011; McGuinn, 2010).

Alexander (2013) argued that by addressing the positions of key groups and noting their nonnegotiable points, policy makers can "determine whether a policy is acceptable to actors in the political process and if clients and other actors are receptive to any change in the status quo" (p. 93). Moreover, U.S. education reform relies on a plurality of interests; that is, citizens exert indirect influence through elections and in the case of teacher tenure, principals hold influence as actors, stakeholders and implementers for new policy. The influence principals' perceptions may have on policy should "encourage policy analysts to look at the larger policy ecology lest they miss important influences" (Weaver-Hightower, 2014, p. 117). By examining principal perceptions of contractual limitations that may impact teacher quality, policymakers may be better able to work with leaders at the district and state level to construct policy informed by perception data. In addition, rewards for experienced teachers as well as robust career growth opportunities could be

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considered if future tenure and evaluation revisions are to be made (Donaldson, 2011; Kersten & Israel, 2005).

Conceptual Framework

The framework selected for this study will provide the lens from which to view the possible impact of teacher tenure legislation. Specifically, the framework serve as a guide in examining the degree of impact tenure reform legislation has had on the principal's ability to evaluate and identify effective teachers. For this study, examining the political attractiveness of reform in the contexts of visibility and controversy will be utilized as the conceptual framework. Although this framework has been rarely used and only employed once in a similar fashion by Torres et al. (2008), employing this framework can allow for findings to portray a more holistic picture of teacher tenure and evaluation as perceived by public school principals, one which policy makers can consider when making decisions regarding teacher tenure and other educational policies. Torres et al. (2008) employed Hess' (1999) framework of policy attractiveness to examine principal perceptions of a school improvement policy in a high-impact policy environment. The authors noted that the results that places emphasis on understanding policies and their impact on perceptions could be used to "guide policy makers in designing and structuring educational policy" (p. 7). In this way, regardless of the policy at hand, policy makers will have a means to consider if a highly controversial, highly visible policy can still be perceived as successful by stakeholders, actors, and implementers for improving the quality of education in a state.

Political Attractiveness of Reform Concept

Hess' (1999) research on policy attractiveness provides a capable framework from which to measure policy appeal (Torres et al., 2008). According to Hess (1999), a legislator's preference for and selection of policy can be viewed through an interaction of two separate factors: policy visibility and policy controversy. Hess (1999) presented a four-quadrant format where a selected policy can be high and low in both dynamics. Figure I represents the proposed model for political attractiveness of reform.

Figure 1.

Two-by-two matrix for viewing the political attractiveness of reform

	Relative Controversy	
Visibility	*Low*	*High*
High	Attractive	Mixed
Low	Mixed	Unattractive

*Adapted from "Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform," F.M. Hess, 1999, p. 107. Copyright 1999 by The Brookings Institution. Used with permission.

Hess (1999) conducted a national survey of school district internal and external observers (teacher union chiefs, school board members, and education reporters) to examine the visibility and controversy levels of school policies such as site-based management (SBM), professional development, and student evaluation and scheduling changes. Hess found that policies such as scheduling changes scored low in visibility and high in controversy while policies such as SBM were more inclined to be selected by superintendents due to their less controversial and highly visible nature. In the case of scheduling changes, Hess (1999) asserted that

such reforms tended to disrupt the routine nature of the school day and were less likely to be selected by superintendents due to their adverse character (Hess, 1999; Torres et al., 2008). Meanwhile, student evaluation scored high in both controversy and visibility. Torres et al. (2008) noted that "while it seems intuitive to hypothesize that school personnel would tend to favor highly visible, less controversial policies over the contrasting case, this question has not been specifically tested on school leaders within a high-impact policy context" (p. 3). The authors utilized the political attractiveness of reform model by Hess (1999) to assess findings. Findings from the study indicated that less controversial, high visibility policies were perceived by principals as having a greater positive impact. Further, findings from their study confirmed Hess' material on policy attractiveness, which suggested that policy makers are likely to choose reforms that maximize political impact and minimize potential adverse reaction.

Teacher Tenure and the Political Attractiveness of Reform Framework

Similar to Hess' (1999) findings on student evaluation, a review of literature revealed the highly controversial and highly visible nature of teacher tenure reform by highlighting the need for teacher tenure and evaluation revisions to be made in the U.S. (Baker et al., 2010; Baratz-Snowden, 2009; Coleman et al., 2005; Dixon, 2011; Eady & Zapeda, 2007; Kersten & Israel, 2005; McGuinn, 2010; NCTQ, 2009, 2012; Oliva et al., 2009; Range et al., 2011; SCORE, 2009; Shakman et al., 2012; Weisberg et al., 2010; Wilson, 2012). According to Hess (1999), measures that attract more notice and engender little conflict are most attractive and are intended to generate the greatest sense of progress with the least amount of destruction. While tenure reform in

Tennessee was intended to generate a constructive sense of progress for evaluating and retaining effective teachers, tenure reforms have simultaneously generated high levels of controversy that have been recognized at the state and national level (Dixon, 2010; Finch, 2012; Mead, 2012; NCTQ, 2009, 2012; OREA, 2008; SCORE, 2012).

Changes to the Tennessee teacher tenure law have been accompanied by changes to the teacher evaluation system (Dixon, 2011). Hess' (1999) conceptual model of political attractiveness of reform allows for integrated findings to be viewed through a four-quadrant matrix to examine the political attractiveness of reform within the contexts of visibility and controversy. The framework for this study served as a guide in determining the degree of impact Tennessee's tenure reform legislation has had on the principal's ability to evaluate and retain effective teachers. Tenure reform is viewed as highly attractive while conveying high levels of controversy, accordingly allowing impact analysis of tenure reform measures regardless of apparent controversy. Though research on policy attractiveness is lacking in the field of educational reform, recommendations have been made in the literature that stress the importance of stakeholder and principal perceptions for informing policy (Alexander, 2013; Davidson, 1998; Donaldson, 2011; Kersten, 2006; Kersten & Israel, 2005; Ovando & Ramirez, 2007; Painter, 2000; Range et al., 2011, 2012).

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Methods

Instrumentation

This study reports the qualitative phase of a mixed methods study. The Phase 1 quantitative portion has been reported elsewhere (Lomascolo & Angelle, 2019). As part of Phase 1, Tennessee principals responded to a survey measuring their perception of the recent Tennessee teacher tenure law. Respondents who completed the survey (n = 177) were asked to contact us (contact information was included at the end of the survey) if they were willing to volunteer for an interview regarding teacher tenure in Tennessee. An interview protocol was developed from the literature as well as survey item responses which raised questions for the researchers, submitted to content experts for face validity, then piloted. The revised interview protocol was piloted to five practicing public school principals in Tennessee. Upon completion of all pilot interviews, feedback from pilot interviewees was taken into consideration, resulting in a final protocol that included ten open-ended questions. The revised protocol included questions meant to increase understanding of how principals enacted the current tenure and evaluation mandates, such as: describe how the current teacher tenure law under Senate Bill 1528 and your school's evaluation model has affected your ability to evaluate and retain effective teachers and would you make any changes to the current teacher tenure and evaluation system (if yes, what changes).

Sampling

Twelve respondents volunteered and were verified as practicing public school principals in the state of Tennessee. Telephone interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol (~60

minutes per respondent) to gain further understanding and deeper meaning about the possible influence teacher tenure has on principals' abilities to evaluate and retain effective teachers. School level, community type, or geographic region was not considered criterion for interview participation because attention to the tenure law is required for all principals, regardless of school context. Interviews were recorded and verbatim transcribed for analysis. Tennessee's teacher evaluation system is dichotomized into five different models. Since all principals must report teacher evaluation scores in accordance with the percentage breakdown in the state rubric (50% classroom observations, 35% student growth data, and 15% student achievement), the interview protocol was constructed so that transferability of results was attainable (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; First To The Top Act, 2010). Regardless of whether all principals in the qualitative sample of this study adhere to different (or the same) teacher evaluation rubrics, interview protocol and results can be of use for any principal or policymaker who may read this study.

Analysis

After all interviews were transcribed, data were uploaded to NVivo qualitative analysis software for open coding. Initial codes were assigned in reflection of how principals perceived the teacher tenure and evaluation system; that is, whether they perceived aspects of the system in a positive, negative, or uncertain manner. Any negative perceptions expressed by principals are represented and discussed as barriers. Initial codes reflected exact words of participants regarding their perception as well as factual statements referring to what evaluation model they used, whether their perception had been considered at any time by state policy makers and what influence (if any) they believed their perception would

have in state policy making decisions. The first iteration of open coding yielded 47 initial codes which were then condensed into 9 categories during the second iteration of coding. Finally, three themes emerged in the final iteration of coding. These themes include: (1) Positive impact; that is, the teacher tenure and evaluation system as having a positive effect on principal ability to evaluate and retain effective teachers; (2) the value of tenure; that is, tenure was perceived as a construct with less impact than it once had, regarding protection of ineffective teachers and tenure was perceived as having a negative effect on principal evaluation of teachers; and (3) perception matters; that is, principal voice is important to legislation and policy makers because their input provides valuable information regarding whether a policy is likely to be effective.

Findings

Positive Impact

Principals perceived that the teacher tenure and evaluation system in Tennessee has had a positive impact on their ability to evaluate and retain effective teachers as well as on the quality of education in their school. Principals responded that since the tenure law change, they have been able to assess teachers more thoroughly, provide consistent constructive feedback, and fairly standardize the evaluation of teachers. Specifically, principals related the positive changes to the state evaluation system. Despite positive sentiments regarding the tenure and evaluation system, principals nonetheless expressed some concern for barriers associated with the current system that may hinder their ability to properly evaluate teachers if they do not account for such barriers.

Evaluation Improvement. Principal 1 explained "the [state] model puts a greater focus on what the students are actually doing in terms of the type of thinking, problem solving, and those sorts of things. So, I think it is a more rigorous model" and that the "model has improved instruction because now, teachers, even good teachers – highly effective teachers, are still getting valuable feedback." As a teacher assessment tool, the evaluation rubric has "definitely improved" the way principals evaluate teachers. As Principal 3 stated, "under the old state model you could just make stuff up and write stuff down and it didn't really matter." However now, "evaluation is much more objective. There's this rubric that everybody knows about and is exposed to, but it gives us common language for evaluating teachers and setting goals for the year around them" (Principal 5). Principal 9 explained the ways the tenure and evaluation system has helped assess underperforming teachers: "The new model has sort of given us this universal understanding of what good teaching is because the rubric kind of touches all those things."

In addition to positive perceptions surrounding the evaluation system associated with tenure, principals had positive perceptions regarding the quality of education since the new tenure system was implemented; that is, principals generally felt that the quality of education in their schools has improved.

Educational Improvement. Principal 10 explained that "the change has been a good thing" and the quality of education in their district has "most definitely improved." With regard to education in the state, Principal 10 went on to state that "it is improving…we can see it in our scores, the increase in standards…I think in so many

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different ways we are on the right track." Principal 11 explained that the new model:

> *allows everybody to state up front 'here's what we expect a good plan to have in it.' We can articulate to teachers very clearly. I think that the standardization of the indicators in the rubric has been very helpful because it says to teachers we know what the minimum expectations are here.*

Principal 2 further affirmed the notion that the tenure and evaluation system has improved the quality of education in the state when they asserted "under the current model I think it gives a lot more [standards], everyone should evaluate and be evaluated the same way."

According to the majority of principals, the evaluation system has helped them be more specific in the "conversations had before and after an observation…has helped teachers be more deliberate about what they are doing in instruction daily" (Principal 4), has been beneficial in helping them "have the best of the best teachers" (Principal 6), and has brought "consistency to a lot of things" (Principal 11). Consistency is operationalized as schools that have enhanced classroom instruction which has "consequently led to greater achievement, greater growth in students, and also more accountable talk throughout the school and across grade levels" (Principal 4). Further, the system has helped principals "weed out people that didn't really need to be in [teaching]" (Principal 5) and retain those that are truly effective teachers.

Despite the positive impact that principals perceived the tenure and evaluation system has had locally, nearly all principals articulated the barriers they have experienced with the current system. Barriers may have negative consequences when retaining teachers worthy of tenure. However, principals generally took the

view that when barriers are accounted for by the principal, the overall evaluation system is effective in evaluating and retaining effective teachers.

System Barriers. A majority of principals responded that the teacher evaluation system has not been helpful in assessing teachers of non-tested areas of instruction. Specifically, the evaluation model was not designed to evaluate areas such as band and physical education. As Principal 2 argued, "what makes a good science teacher does not make a good P.E. (physical education) teacher, and I think our P.E. teachers here take as much pride in being a good teacher as the science teachers do" yet the evaluation rubric "does not clearly go with every job it's evaluated under…it was used in modified ways to evaluate music teachers or P.E. teachers or Special Education teachers and it doesn't always align perfectly with what they are doing" (Principal 5). Thus, principals felt that they are not always able to clearly assess teaching effectiveness within their school. Principal 4 explained that the current evaluation system falls short in its attempt to help principals assess the effectiveness of all teachers across grade levels in their school:

> *Right now there is no accountability…tied to student learning for every teacher. For instance in elementary schools, the teachers of 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade are the folks who are carrying the stress of what the assessment data is going to be each year.*

Similar to Principal 4, Principal 6 asserted "you don't have test data in a [primary] scenario…you don't have test data for well over fifty per cent of your certified staff so that's gone." Principals generally felt that the testing data and percentages associated with the evaluation rubric have "been more of an obstacle than help" (Principal 6) and standardized testing data "takes into account one

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snapshot, and that's performance on one test" (Principal 12) thus "mucking up" (Principal 6) the true picture of a teacher's effectiveness. "You can still be a poor teacher, you know you can be a P.E. teacher in high school and not even be an ethical person and get tenure" (Principal 6) because to account for all teachers, principals have to "average a certain score to get that tenure" (Principal 9). As Principal 3 explained, "there are teachers in my building that don't have individual growth data, they go on the school data…so there are some teachers that aren't ever in jeopardy of losing their job because they don't have individual accountability…just because I'm a P.E. teacher doesn't mean I can't be ineffective." Principals seemed to feel that the evaluation rubrics should be modified to account for non-core subject areas because "one size does not fit all" (Principal 2, Principal 7, Principal 9).

While principals voiced standardized test scores as the most detrimental pieces that have affected their ability to evaluate and retain effective teachers, time spent on evaluations was noted among principals as another, smaller barrier associated with the tenure and evaluation system. Principal 10 stated: "from the principal's perspective, the workload has increased dramatically in terms of observations, time commitment…I think maybe two or three times the amount of time." Similarly, Principal 12 felt that "to hit all areas of the rubric in 45minutes, I think is nearly impossible…for basically three months this fall semester I will be doing an observation a day and a post-conference [with the teacher], and there are some days it is hard to find time to do that." Of importance to note is the fact that even though the amount of time required to properly observe teachers within the probationary period was perceived as a barrier, principals nonetheless felt as though when done properly, the observations of teachers were worth their time.

Principals perceived the evaluation system associated with the awarding of tenure as being a system that has helped them focus on instructional improvement and teacher quality. Yet teacher tenure, as a law by itself, seemed to hold little importance to principals in terms of improving the quality of education in their school and in the dismissal and retention of teachers.

The Value of Tenure

Tenure was perceived by principals as an outdated concept in terms of today's educational environment in that it is "not even an issue" (Principal 10) and "it doesn't mean a lot…it is an old school concept that probably doesn't have a place in education today" (Principal 12). Several principals expressed shortcomings and barriers of the teacher evaluation system, while also reflecting a lack of concern regarding teacher tenure. Despite the barriers of time and achievement scores associated with teacher evaluation, principals responded that tenure, as its own construct, has little effect on their evaluation and retention of teachers. Specifically, since the tenure law came into effect, tenure has become more of a goal for teachers to work towards since tenure in has become primarily a symbol of status and recognition for good work. Moreover, almost all principals noted if they carry out their duties as a principal appropriately when evaluating and hiring teachers, tenure status should have no influence over whether a teacher can be dismissed.

Tenure Barriers. Test data as a barrier to evaluation was directly related to tenure as a barrier. Since testing and achievement data were perceived by some principals as an inaccurate portrayal of a teacher's true effectiveness, principals felt that overall teacher evaluation scores may not give an accurate assessment of who deserves tenure. As Principal 12 stated, "I have no level of confidence

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that every teacher deserving of tenure status will earn that status with this current evaluation system." In addition, once a teacher receives tenure, some principals felt that there is "nothing easy" (Principal 10) about the dismissal process and that "very few tenured teachers get dismissed, ever" because "it is a lot of paperwork and a lot of trouble" (Principal 2). With regard to ineffective teachers, Principal 6 explained that "it is likely that if they are doing a poor job they will be put on a plan of improvement. It is not likely there would be much of a dismissal process. That is still just very difficult to do." Despite notions that suggest evaluation scores might not accurately inform whether a teacher should be awarded tenure and that dismissal proceedings are tedious and time consuming, principals overwhelmingly perceived the probationary period associated with tenure in a positive way.

Controversy/Visibility. Teacher tenure has generated considerable controversy surrounding its implementation and political practicality in recent years (Dixon, 2011; Hess, 1999; SCORE, 2012; Wilson, 2012). However, principals in this study generally did not perceive the law as detrimental or an obstacle in their evaluation and retention of effective teachers. Quite the contrary, principals perceived the probationary period associated with tenure adequate to evaluate teachers and implement comprehensive programs for remediation. Before the 2011 changes, "you really only had two and a half years" to collect data on a teacher which did not allow enough time to "average or look at any comparisons or correlations within the three years before they received tenure" (Principal 10). Since the probationary period for teachers has been extended from three to five years, "the lengthening of time it takes to get tenure has been a good thing. Three years was a little short, so I do think that it has improved" (Principal 2). As Principal 1 explained, "when a teacher

takes a hit on their scores, whether that be the student data or the qualitative component – the observation data – there is a plan for remediation where you design some professional development for that teacher around where the problem areas are." Even for teachers who have awarded tenure and have since become "ineffective" as indicated by evaluation scores, in many cases this allows "a year-long process of getting better" for the teacher(s) (Principal 11). Regardless of a teacher's tenure status, principals can develop and implement plans for improvement that include "conversations with the teacher on how to get better" (Principal 11), meeting with "professional learning coaches and data coaches" (Principal 12), partnerships with "teacher mentors that can give specific feedback on things we want to see improved" (Principal 2), and individualized learning cycles (ILC) that consist of "nine weeks with coaches that give really direct support of a teacher" (Principal 5).

Overall, principal perceptions indicated that the probationary period and remediation processes associated with teacher evaluation has diminished the levels of controversy and visibility that previously surrounded teacher tenure (Baker et al., 2010; Baratz-Snowden, 2009; Coleman et al., 2005; Dixon, 2011; Eady & Zapeda, 2007; Kersten & Israel, 2005; Wilson, 2012) to the extent that some principals suggested the tenure law be abolished entirely. As Principal 12 stated, "If it was me, I would just say that there would not be any such thing as tenure." Even for teachers, especially those new to the profession, tenure is no longer held in high esteem. The controversy and visibility the law once brought for teachers in regard to their contracts and employment seem archaic. Principal 5 explained the deterioration of tenure's status among teachers and principals:

I really don't think that they think of tenure much anymore. I think that they believe the potency of it has diminished to a point where it just really doesn't matter. And what I share with teachers often is your job security is really performance. So if you do your job and do it well, that's your new tenure.

Since the new law has been in place, principals perceived tenure as "a professional goal for a teacher to have" (Principal 1), something tangible for a teacher to work towards – a status that does not necessarily protect their job, but gives them a sense of achievement after a rigorous probationary period. Tenure to principals is "the kind of thing that just gives teachers a recognition…a credible identification" of their "work, their effort…it is nothing more than just a label on somebody" (Principal 7). In this way, tenure is still highly visible but no longer holds the negative connotation it once did, assuring lifetime employment for teachers. As principals generally perceived the tenure law as holding little influence in their systems, principal responsibility was voiced among participants as an obligation for principals to do their jobs well because their dedication strongly impacts the effectiveness of the teacher tenure and evaluation system in Tennessee schools.

Principal Responsibility. The need to do their jobs well as an administrator and as an evaluator was a concept voiced by nearly all principals who participated in this study. In accordance with the themes and categories discussed thus far, the success and/or failure to properly evaluate and retain effective teachers, regardless of tenure, was perceived by most principals as dependent upon the extent of effort put into working effectively. For example, when asked about evaluating and dismissing teachers, Principal 10 explained, "I think it is solely based on the building level administrator. It goes back to documentation…once you start the process of requesting someone's tenure, I think it is based on a lot of the competency of the building

level administrator, the commitment they have." Much of the reasoning behind the notion that tenure is no longer a concern is that if principals properly evaluate teachers and document teacher progress, tenure is not an issue. While principals admitted that dismissing a teacher can be tedious and time consuming, dismissing an ineffective teacher is still possible. As Principal 10 stated, "based on the importance of my faculty and children, the same thing as the evaluation model, it is worth the time, but it does take time, yes. But it is nothing that I would not begrudge or did not do because of the time it was going to take." Further, "there have always been tools in the administrators toolbox to be able to get rid of ineffective teachers" (Principal 11) and the principal is good at "documenting, presenting memos and getting signatures" (Principal 12) then tenure is "not a barrier to getting rid of ineffective teachers" (Principal 7).

If principals can show "they have taken the right steps to remediate the teacher" (Principal 1) and "giving the supports that they need to give and doing their documentation then it is very possible" (Principal 4) to dismiss an ineffective teacher. Moreover, principals felt that in addition to effective evaluating and remediating, they have a responsibility to make logical hiring decisions to avoid dealing with ineffective teachers in the future. Aside from the generally positive perceptions expressed by principals regarding teacher tenure and evaluation, principals felt their abilities as a building level administrator can and have been limited when the state previously implemented changes.

Perception Matters

Far too frequently, principal voice has remained absent from the political discourse. Principals in this study responded that their perception should play a role and "principals need to be

heard…people would listen to principals and really understand that we are really the spokes in the wheel, we keep things connected" (Principal 10).

Perception in Policy. When asked whether their perception has been considered and/or collected by state policy makers, principals in this study said that they "have not been heard enough" (Principal 10) and they "really don't have much of a voice as a school administrator" (Principal 11). Principals generally remarked that their voice is important as they "are the people in the trenches who are working with the teachers" (Principal 9). When asked whether the state department of education considers principal perception when implementing legislation, Principal 2 said "there was no feedback, no conversation, it was just 'this is what we are doing, live with it'…I don't know that any state policy is influenced by the school level… They tend to make their own decisions and tell us what they want us to do." Further, principals felt that policy makers "don't listen to what we have to say often enough" (Principal 3) and input from the school "certainly has not influenced legislation on the state level" (Principal 5). Principal voice, according to the respondents in this study, has remained absent from conversations surrounding policy. As such, principals expressed that their perceptions could have an impact on the quality of education in the state, if considered and taken seriously by policy makers. Principal 11 said:

> *We are the people doing the work. I think absolutely that we should be involved in the discussion, and most of your school administrators think that there is a balance that has to happen with what the business community wants, what the legislative community wants, what the parents in your community want, but we're the ones with boots on the ground actually balancing those three demands on a daily basis.*

Accordingly, if principal perception were considered, then the likelihood of "principal buy-in" (Principal 12) would increase; that is, principals believed if they were heard, their willingness to properly implement legislative changes would increase as "things are funneled in to the school through principals" (Principal 10) and policies can be received negatively "when educators don't feel like they have been involved in the process" (Principal 1).

Policy Barriers. Principals in this study voiced a number of barriers associated with policy implementation on which they had no input. Additionally, principals mentioned shortcomings in properly addressing principal concerns regarding education policy. Principal 2 provided an example of such a scenario:

> *They changed the graduation requirements to require four years of math. But when you pass a law and there is already a shortage of math teachers and you increase the requirements by twenty-five percent, you have just made a shortage of math teachers a critical shortage of math teachers. If they had discussed that with principals, principals would have pointed out that 'hey I can't find a math teacher already' and maybe they would have invested some in training or invested some in recruitment of math teachers by just asking for feedback on the practical application of laws.*

As a consequence of failing to acquire principal buy-in, the state may risk overlooking crucial elements related to school environments where principals may have knowledge. Principal 2 pointed out that "the state does so much for political purposes that really is not functional at the school level." Principal 3 argued that the state "needs to do more study on what the impact these laws are going to have – the unexpected consequences of what they are mandating." Currently, "there is a big disconnect between legislators and educators" (Principal 5) as the state "seems to be all over the place in the last two years" (Principal 9) concerning changes in policy. As a

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result, principals felt as though changes aren't as likely to work properly because "legislators aren't educators" (Principal 5) and thus principals become frustrated as policies may complicate "school operations and may impact the balance" (Principal 11) of what principals are trying to accomplish in their school every day. Although principals had positive perceptions of the teacher evaluation system, barriers such as time and test scores could have been alleviated or avoided if principal voice been considered. Principal 2 pointed out that if legislators had reflected: "if this bill is passed, what will happen?" a more accurate projection of the law's intended impact could have been assessed.

Collecting Perception. When discussing level of participation in the development of policy, principals provided suggestions for how policy makers could collect principal perception data. Suggestions included "advisory committees of principals" (Principal 10), "interest groups" (Principal 11), "send surveys" (Principal 3), and "form regional committees" (Principal 9) that "assess principal perception at all different levels – elementary, middle, and high – from rural, suburban, and urban" (Principal 4). Principals felt that policy makers could "seek input pretty simply" (Principal 1) and the potential for unforeseen barriers, such as those associated with tenure and evaluation, could be diminished. Responses indicated that the potential for barriers to surface increases when change occurs with no consideration for those working at the school level.

Discussion

Principals generally perceived the teacher tenure and evaluation system as having a positive impact on their ability to evaluate teachers and on the quality of education in their schools. The

evaluation rubric, the extended probationary period and standards for teacher performance have helped principals remediate teachers in need of improvement and develop high performing teachers. Despite the barriers of time and achievement scores associated with teacher evaluation, principals responded that tenure has little effect on their evaluation and retention of teachers.

However, despite the positive sentiments expressed regarding tenure and evaluation at the time of this study (2016), during the period when the new tenure law, the revised evaluation system, and the policy dialogues were taking place (2011), there was a great deal of distress, fear, negative conversations, and angst regarding the impending changes. The visibility was high as governance structures made clear that change in tenure policy was imminent. The controversy surrounding the policy was higher still as principals and teachers generally viewed tenure and evaluation as paperwork processes.

In the years following passage of the law, principals and teachers began to view the new systems as beneficial to instruction. The awarding of tenure has become less critical while the improvement of pedagogy has become the most important factor, even though principals indicated that barriers still exist. Nonetheless, respondents in this study indicated that had their voice been a part of the policy process, initial resistance would have lessened, barriers might have been avoided, and implementation would have been a much smoother process. Principals responded that had their perceptions been considered prior to changes in policy, their inability to properly implement procedures might have decreased. Principals believed that with inclusion of principal voice, more efficient and thoughtful

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policies could be created that would seek to minimize barriers associated with said policies.

This study sought to examine whether a highly controversial, highly visible law such as tenure was perceived by principals as an effective policy with positive benefits. According to Hess' (1999) concept of political attractiveness of reform, policies with high levels of controversy and high levels of visibility are not likely to be successful. In the case of teacher tenure in this research, findings showed that despite previous levels of controversy and visibility, over time, principals perceived the tenure law positively.

Despite the generally positive perception of a law that once held high levels of controversy and visibility, results surrounding the importance of principal perception in education reform affirm recommendations from the literature that principal and stakeholder perceptions are necessary if reforms are to be implemented effectively. As Alexander (2013) argued, understanding the perceptions of key stakeholders can help policy makers implement more effective strategies for change that are more likely to be valued and accepted.

This study confirmed findings from literature (Eady & Zepeda, 2007; Range et al., 2011) where principals described barriers such as the "one size fits all" approach to evaluation, time spent on observations, and shortcomings with the evaluation system. These were all reiterated by principals in this study. Findings here indicated that if policy makers had considered principal perceptions prior to making changes to the tenure and evaluation system, such barriers could have been eliminated or, at the very least, accounted for as possible limitations. Therefore, inclusion of principal voice

may diminish controversy surrounding legislation, increase positive visibility and decrease the likelihood of barriers to implementation.

Turning again to the neoliberal agenda of decisions made by those in power to mandate policies meant to standardize, a complete understanding of the consequences of these policies for those responsible for implementation is often missing. Visible evidence for teacher performance is a part of this agenda. However, principals who enact said policies in efforts to support teachers and improve pedagogy decrease controversy surrounding the implementation. Thus, the experiences of principals in Tennessee may serve as a lesson for other states and countries whose policies are passed without inclusion of those who implement the policies in the discourse.

Limitations of the Study

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the limitations from this study. We first note the location and size of the sample. A survey administered to the principals in only one state is not indicative of the perceptions of principals in the US and we make no claims that the respondents in our study represent the perceptions of all principals. Future research should expand the breadth of this study so that generalizations may be offered.

The sample size was also small, both in Phase 1 and in Phase 2. We suggest that this study be replicated in an attempt to increase the size of both the quantitative and qualitative sample.

While Tennessee has experienced some satisfaction among principals and teachers with the tenure and evaluation system in the years following implementation, future studies are worthy of consideration. A longitudinal study of Tennessee principals is called

for to examine whether this satisfaction continues. Moreover, investigating the perceptions of teachers who are evaluation and undergo the tenure process is needed to find whether teachers share the perceptions of principals regarding the tenure and evaluation system.

Finally, states, other than Tennessee, as well as other countries, likely use different systems of evaluation, different processes for awarding tenure, and different governance structures. Future studies may include cross comparative studies to examine success rates and principal and teacher satisfaction.

Successful Policy Implementation Model

The model proposed here is a modification of the political attractiveness of reform matrix presented by Hess (1999). Modifications are based on findings from this study, which have shown Hess' (1999) concept may be improved through consideration of stakeholder voice. As such, we present a revised model that expands upon the concept of political attractiveness of reform. Moreover, once policy has been enacted, this model is predictive in gauging a policy's likelihood of success. Figure 2 depicts the Successful Policy Implementation Model.

Figure 2.

Successful Policy Implementation Model
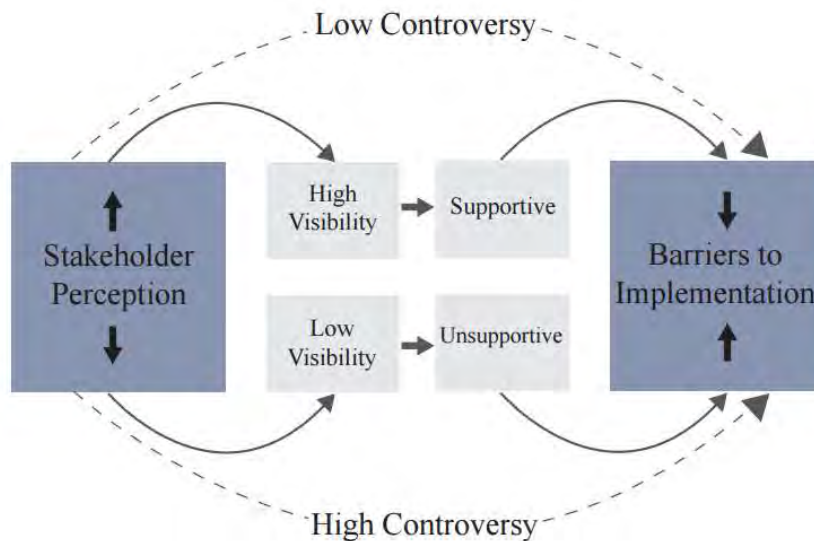
Following findings from this study and extant literature that
surround the need for principal perception in education reform
(Davidson, 1998; Kersten, 2006; Kersten & Israel, 2005; Ovando &
Ramirez, 2007; Painter, 2000; Range et al., 2011, 2012), this model
illustrates that the more stakeholder perception is considered in the
arena of policy debate, the more likely that policy is to be highly
visible and supported by stakeholders while maintaining low levels
of controversy. As a result, barriers to implementation are likely to
decrease once said policy is in effect. This model is not meant to
suggest that if stakeholder perceptions are considered then the policy
unconditionally will be supported and successful. Rather, this model
is meant to allude to the likelihood of those events when increased
stakeholder perceptions are considered. As stakeholder perception

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increases, visibility likely will be high by default as more individuals are aware of the policy. Similarly, if stakeholder perceptions are not considered, visibility likely will be low as the majority of stakeholders will not be aware of the policy in question.

However, even when stakeholder perceptions and visibility increase, stakeholder perception of the policy may not always be positive nor may the policy be considered attractive. We argue that although negative perception expressed by stakeholders exists as a possibility, stakeholders are nevertheless more likely to support the implementation of a policy when they feel their voice has been considered. Thus, as stakeholders believe their perceptions have been considered, despite expressing a negative opinion of a policy which nonetheless has been enacted, support for the policy is more likely. As several principals in this study pointed out, if their perceptions had been considered prior to policy initiatives, their support of and willingness to implement changes would have increased.

These findings lead us to recommend that policy makers should scan the educational environment and in doing so, should be alert to likely areas of resistance and support (Alexander, 2013). As Alexander (2013) argued "while implementation is not equivalent to outcome, managing the implementation process bolsters the chance that the enacted policy will yield the results sought" (p. 154). Likewise, the less stakeholder perceptions are considered, the more likely the policy is to hold low levels of visibility, thus limiting support from stakeholders while maintaining higher levels of controversy. As a result, barriers to policy implementation are likely to increase.

There will never be a "one size fits all" solution to any issue in education. As educators, researchers, policy makers and

stakeholders, we know that there are far too many variables that can impact a student's success in the classroom. This study has highlighted the need for principal voice in policy research since principals enact policy at the school sites through implementation; they are the eyes on the ground. While an intricate and rigorous rubric for evaluation can have perceived positive benefits, barriers are likely to surface. The question then becomes: how can we account for said barriers? The plight, then, becomes minimizing barriers as best we can. As principals in this study mentioned, as a consequence of failing to acquire principal or stakeholder perceptions, policy makers may risk overlooking crucial elements related to school environments for which principals may have first-hand knowledge. Therefore, the first step in working to bridge the gap between theory and practice is knowing that for researchers, understanding is the output of their work and for practitioners, understanding is the input of their work.

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About the authors

Pamela S. Angelle is Professor and Director of Graduate Studies for Educational Leadership and Policy at The University of Tennessee, USA. Dr. Angelle's research interests include teacher leadership, organizational conditions and contexts which contribute to socially just leadership, and international perspectives of social justice. She has presented at national and international conferences including AERA, BELMAS, and UCEA and has been published in journals including Journal of School Leadership, Journal of Educational Administration, and Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education.

E-mail: pangelle@utk.edu

David J. Lomascolo, Ph.D. is an adjunct professor at Trevecca Nazarene University in Nashville, Tennessee in the Masters of Leadership program. Prior to joining Trevecca, he was a Researcher and Policy Analyst for Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago where he specialized in organizational assessment using safety science to enhance team culture and reliable outcomes for government child welfare jurisdictions. His work developed new professional development tools for training child welfare workers, as well as helped place child welfare into the public health arena of analysis. David received his Ph.D. in Educational Administration with a concentration in Leadership Studies in from the University of Tennessee in 2016, and holds a Masters in Adolescent Education from the College of Saint Rose.

E-mail: dj20loma@gmail.com