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School Administrators as Instructional Coaches: Teachers' Trust and Perceptions of Administrators' Capacity

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As the Texas Education Agency (TEA) rolls out the state-wide implementation of the new teacher evaluation system, thousands of Texas school administrators have completed the required training and have become certified appraisers under the new Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS). During the state training, participants are challenged to serve as change agents in leading the shift in thinking about teacher evaluations to embrace a teacher growth model with an instructional supervision platform. Studies have indeed found that school principals who are involved in instructional supervision have a positive impact on test scores, including a constant improvement in scores at schools with an increasingly high percentage of economically disadvantaged students (Glanz, Shulman & Sullivan, 2007). T-TESS provides educators a tool that has the potential to significantly impact the quality of instruction in Texas classrooms, and ultimately student achievement.

Statement of the Problem

While the Agency's message is clear and the intent of T-TESS aligns with research that has shown instructional supervision can positively impact teaching and student achievement, the level of trust of teachers in a process that is new to Texas educators, ought to be explored and considered by school leaders. It would naïve to believe that the two decades under the Professional Developmental and Appraisal System (PDAS), a compliance evaluation system that was widely used as a way to document and removed ineffective teachers, has not influenced teachers' perspective and their trust in their administrators to serve as instructional supervisors. Hence, the current study aims to create an awareness among practitioners, scholars, and aspiring school leaders about the reality faced by educators as they implement a system that requires school administrators to serve as both evaluator and instructional supervisor. The data and findings shared in this manuscript are part of a larger study. The study aims to answer two research questions: (1) To what degree do teachers believe their administrators have the skills to serve as instructional coaches? (2) What is the level of trust teachers have in their campus administrators as evaluators and instructional coaches?

Theoretical Framework

The Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) requires that school administrators use observation data to engage teachers in conversations about the observed lessons and their instructional practices. The observation cycle embedded in T-TESS mirrors what scholars have defined as instructional supervision - a process through which educators engage in discourse about instruction for the purpose of enhancing teaching and learning (Glanz & Neville, 1997;

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Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2014; Goldhammer, 1969; Nolan & Hoover, 2011; Sullivan & Glanz, 2009). However, T-TESS also requires that the administrator rate the lessons they observe using the T-TESS rubric. Supervision and evaluation are fundamentally different; notwithstanding, T-TESS requires that administrators lead both processes simultaneously. Evaluation is the process through which the appraiser, generally a school administrator trained and certified to conduct evaluations, rates or grades the effectiveness of the observed lesson (Nolan & Hoover, 2011). While the findings of study reported in this article do not address the conflict between these two processes, it is important to differentiate between the two to begin to understand issues of trust and teachers' perceptions regarding their administrators' capacity to serve as instructional supervisors when they have generally served as evaluators.

Instructional Leadership

Educators across the United States are witnessing a continuous shift in expectations; instructional leadership is increasingly considered the primary role of school principals (Fullan, 2014; Stronge, Richard & Catano, 2008). With the simultaneous implementation of T-TESS and the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS), TEA has sent a clear message that instructional leadership is valued and the responsibility of Texas school leaders. The Agency's expectations as outlined in the teacher and principal evaluation systems are aligned to the current literature. Research has shown that "the principal is second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student" (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 5) and those that engage in instructional supervision have a positive impact on student achievement (Glanz, Shulman & Sullivan, 2007). However, some school administrators lack the knowledge and confidence in their skills to serve as instructional leaders (Wright, 2015). Campus principals' abilities to serve as instructional leaders is key to the success of teachers and ultimately students. For principals to effectively serve as the campus instructional supervisors, not only do they have to possess the curricular and instructional knowledge and skills, they must possess the skills to communicate effectively, build relationships, and earn their faculty's trust and respect (Knight, 2007).

Instructional Coaching

Jim Knight (2007) defines an instructional coach as a person whose responsibility is to develop teachers professionally by helping them implement instructional best practices while focusing on the individual's professional goals (p. 12-13). Knight's theoretical foundation for instructional coaching include seven principles: "equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis and reciprocity" (Knight, 2007, p. 53). He identified skills key to the success of an instructional coach including communication skills, relationship building, and the ability to facilitate teachers' reflection about their instruction (Knight, 2007). Instructional coaches must build relationships with teachers to ensure the instructional discourse is based on high expectations and honest feedback (Knight, 2007). Furthermore, it is important to define the scope of the knowledge and background of the instructional coaches. Instructional coaches are not curriculum experts but rather have a strong understanding of instructional best practices that transcend content areas. Based on Knight's work, his definition of instructional coaching, and the expectations set forth in T-TESS and T-PESS, Texas school administrators are expected to serve as instructional coaches or supervisors.

Trust

In addition to the principles identified by Knight (2007), relationships and trust are key to the success of instructional coaching. “Relational trust refers to the interpersonal social exchanges that take place in a group setting” (EL Education, n.d.) and “is grounded in the social respect that comes from the kind of social discourse that takes place across the school community” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Schools with strong sense of relational trust foster collaboration and promote the faculty’s willingness to grow professionally (Cranston, 2011). Without relational trust between teachers and administrators, it will be difficult to establish instructional supervision that is effective and impacts the teachers’ practices. Trust is considered a precondition for those looking to improve their schools (Cranston, 2011).

Methods

A quantitative study was conducted in order to answer the research questions: (1) To what degree do teachers believe their administrators have the skills to serve as instructional coaches? (2) What is the level of trust teachers have in their campus administrators as evaluators and instructional coaches? An anonymous survey was distributed to teachers at randomly chosen Texas school districts. A survey was chosen as the method to gather data for this study given what are considered strengths of surveys, such as the convenience, ease to access data about sensitive issues, generalizability and accuracy of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). By deciding to survey teachers, this researcher has made the assumption that teachers’ perceptions and level of trust “can be described or measured accurately through self-report” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 129).

In order to ascertain the validity of the survey, a pilot study was conducted. The pilot survey was completed and submitted by 27 Texas teachers. To ensure construct validity, the pilot participants answered open-ended questions and provided feedback to ensure the items were measuring what they intended to measure – teachers’ perceptions about administrators’ capacity and the teachers’ level of trust in their school leaders. Additionally, in an effort to increase the reliability of the data, different items related to the same construct were included in the survey.

The survey, distributed and analyzed using Qualtrics, consists of 14 items focused on the teachers’ perceptions of capacity and their level of trust in campus principals and assistant principals separately. Each participant was asked to complete the 14 items for up to three school administrators. Teachers rated, on 4-point scale, their administrators’ skills to lead the instructional coaching process including: teacher goal setting, instructional coaching, observation data collection, and professional development planning. Teachers also rated, on a 4-point scale, their level of trust in their administrators to lead each of the processes embedded in the instructional supervision process. When teachers rated their level of trust at a one, two or three, they were to asked explain the reservations that keep them from trusting their principals as instructional coaches.

Additionally, the survey included eight items aimed at gathering the participants’ and their administrators’ demographic data. The data collected includes the participants’ gender, level of school (elementary, middle or high), years of teaching experience, the gender of the participants’

principals, years of teaching and administrative experience of the campus principals. Participants were also asked to indicate which teacher appraisal systems their school districts used in 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 (PDAS, T-TESS or a district developed system). Only the survey items focused on goal setting and instructional coaching, and the differences in the responses of teachers with and without prior experiences with T-TESS are explored in this manuscript.

Data Analysis

To determine the differences between the measures of trust and perceptions of administrators' capacity, Qualtrics was used to run the descriptive statistics. The mean scores and percentages of the different measures were compared. The initial data analysis focused on the ratings for administrators as a whole, combining the principals' and assistant principals' data. Data was also disaggregated to compare the mean scores and percentages of teachers with prior experience with T-TESS and those with no prior experience with the instrument. While the descriptive statistics provide a glimpse into teachers' perceptions, the data does not allow the researcher to determine the reasons for the differences between the teachers' ratings of the administrators' capacity and their levels of trust in the administrators.

Results

During the first two distributions of the teacher survey, 198 teachers completed and submitted the survey. Each participant had the opportunity to answer the questions multiple times, focused on their principals and assistant principals separately. When analyzing the data, the principal and assistant principals' data was combined; 198 participants rated their perception of the administrators' skills and their level of trust in 363 school principals and assistant principals. The descriptive statistics data for the teachers' surveys are presented in Tables 1 and 3.

Teachers' Perceptions of Administrators' Capacity

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics – Teachers' Rating of Principals' Skills

On a scale of 1 to 4, teachers' ratings of their administrator's skills to lead each of the steps in the instructional coaching process.

School Administrators	<i>n</i>	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Teacher Goal Setting	363	3.0	0.97	0.95
Instructional Coaching	363	2.78	1.09	1.18

4 representing "highly skilled" and 1 being "not skilled" to lead the process

Teachers rated their administrators' capacity to lead each of the instructional supervision processes using a 4-point scale where one (1) represents that they believe their administrators were not skilled to lead the process and four (4) represents that the administrators were highly skilled. Teachers reported having the most confidence in the administrators' capacity to lead the goal setting process ($M=3.0$, $s.d.=0.97$). For the purpose of the study, goal setting was defined as the process through which a campus administrator guides teachers to set professional growth goals that improve their instruction and have a positive impact on student learning. Teachers

reported the least confidence in the administrators' capacity to lead instructional coaching (M=2.78, s.d.=1.09). On the survey, instructional coaching was defined as individual meetings in which the administrator meets with a teacher to discuss an observed lesson. The administrator guides the discussion by posing reflective questions, based on the observation, and provide instructional suggestions to help the teacher refine his or her craft.

Given the variance reported in Table 1 data (0.95 and 1.18) in a 4-point scale, the raw data was analyzed in an effort to further understand the teachers' ratings of their administrators' skills to lead the instructional supervision processes. Upon looking at the data raw, 38% of the administrators were rated as "highly skilled" to lead instructional coaching, with a mean score of 2.78, while 37% rated their administrators as "highly skilled" to lead the teacher goal setting process, with a mean score of 3.0. The data was then grouped into two subsets: the lower ratings of the administrators' skills (ratings of 1 and 2) compared to the higher ratings (ratings of 3 and 4). The majority of the school administrators were rated as "skilled" or "highly skilled"; 72% of administrators were rated as "skilled" or "highly skilled" to lead the teacher goal setting process and 69% were rated as "skilled" or "highly skilled" to lead instructional coaching.

Further data analysis was conducted based on various demographic data points. When the data was disaggregated by teachers who participated in T-TESS pilot and those that had no prior experience with T-TESS, the analysis reveals a significant difference in the teachers' perceptions. The teachers who participated in the T-TESS pilot rated their administrators' skills to lead the different processes at a higher rate than those who had no prior experience with T-TESS. Table 2 presents the data.

Table 2. Teachers' Rating of Principals' Skills – Prior vs. No Experience with T-TESS

Ratings	T-TESS experience		No T-TESS experience	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
Teacher Goal Setting	17%	83%	34%	66%
Instructional Coaching	19%	81%	45%	55%

4 representing "highly skilled" and 1 being "not skilled" to lead the process

Teachers' Trust

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics - Teachers' Trust Measure

On a scale of 1 to 4, teachers' ratings of their trust in their administrators to lead the instructional coaching process.

School Administrators	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Teacher Goal Setting	363	2.90	1.16	1.34
Instructional Coaching	363	2.73	1.18	1.40

4 representing "completely trust" and 1 being "do not trust"

Teachers rated their trust in their administrators to lead each of the processes embedded in T-TESS. The teachers' level of trust was consistent across the targeted processes. The analysis of the raw data provides additional information regarding teachers' level of trust in their administrators as instructional supervisors. Forty-five percent (45%) of teachers indicated that

they “completely trust” their administrators to lead the teacher goal setting process while 39% “completely trust” their administrators to lead instructional coaching. When the highest level of trust (4) data is combined with those who rated their trust at a level 3, there is a significant increase in the percentage of teachers who trust their administrators. The trust levels are lower than the teachers’ perceptions of their administrators’ skills to lead the instructional coaching processes. When the two highest level of trust are combined the trust percentages are: 62% trust in the administrators to lead goal setting and 56% trust administrators to lead instructional coaching. Similar to the teachers’ rating of their administrators’ skills, trust levels among teachers who had experience with T-TESS prior to the study are higher than trust levels among those who had no prior experience with T-TESS. Table 4 compares trust levels among teachers with and without prior exposure to the T-TESS supervision cycle.

Table 4. Teachers’ Trust – Prior vs. No Experience with T-TESS

Ratings	T-TESS experience		No T-TESS experience	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
Teacher Goal Setting	22%	78%	41%	59%
Instructional Coaching	24%	76%	50%	50%

4 representing “completely trust” and 1 being “do not trust”

When teachers were asked to explain why they do not trust or trust but have reservations about their administrators leading the instructional coaching processes, teachers reported that “a principal’s abilities to lead in the instructional process is limited based on their experiences” while others indicated that their administrators are seldom in their classrooms and unaware of what is going on in the classrooms on a daily basis. Others reported that their principals do not have enough experience in the content areas to accurately provide feedback, which leads to very generic suggestions. Another participant shared, “I trust my current administrator but I still have PDAS PTSD from bad administrators. I feel the system is very flawed and designed to punish not really improve anything.” The lack of time, consistency and a sense of favoritism were also repeatedly cited as reasons for reservations or the lack of trust.

Discussion

The data analyzed for this manuscript provides scholars, practitioners and aspiring principals with a small window into the reality faced by school administrators as they implement T-TESS. The differences in the ratings among teachers who have experienced instructional coaching and those who have not is not surprising; research has shown that effective instructional coaching can positively impact teachers’ practices. However, regardless of the positive outlook given by the previously mentioned differences, one cannot dismiss the number of teachers who expressed a lack of trust in their administrators’ skills to lead the instructional supervision process. While teachers were asked to explain their trust ratings, they were not asked to explain the difference between their rating of the administrators’ skills and their trust in their administrators to lead instructional supervision. It will be important to explore the issues that can potentially explain the discrepancy between the skills ratings and the trust level, 69% of teachers perceived their administrators as “skilled” or “highly skilled” to lead instructional coaching but only 56% expressed that they “trust” or “completely trust” the administrators to lead the same process. Similarly, 72% rated their administrators as “skilled” or “highly skilled” in leading the goal

setting process but only 62% rated their trust level at 3 or 4. The difference between teachers' trust and their perceptions of the administrators' skills must also be explored. Administrators and aspiring principals must be conscious of the impact these issues might have on their efforts to serve as instructional supervisors.

Based on the teachers' comments, it appears that teachers recognize what many consider the biggest challenge in implementation of T-TESS, the administrators' apparent lack of commitment to consistently visit classrooms with the goal of providing teachers with meaningful feedback. Research has shown that principals who are highly effective in promoting teacher growth conduct brief unannounced classroom observations on a weekly basis followed by specific feedback (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). The teachers in this study reported experiencing the opposite; no constructive feedback and a lack of administrators' presence in the classrooms. Campus leaders have many responsibilities to juggle. The implementation of an instructional coaching model as the state teacher appraisal system requires administrators to make the commitment to find the time to be in the classrooms and most importantly take the time to provide meaningful, timely feedback to their teachers.

Moreover, as principal preparation programs engage in continuous improvement efforts, it is imperative that they scrutinize their current practices to develop aspiring principals' instructional supervision skills to improve teachers' trust in their administrators and the instructional supervision process. TEA has provided Texas educators with a system that has the potential to positively impact student achievement; however, the system will become a compliance piece, as PDAS did, if school leaders lack the instructional skills and the commitment to maximize the impact of T-TESS. Ultimately, it will take the administrators' commitment to building their capacity and establishing trusting relationship for the process to have the impact on teaching and learning that research has shown instructional coaching can have.

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