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Measuring Up: Teachers' Perceptions of a New Evaluation System

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Teacher appraisal and evaluation systems have increased the level of teacher accountability, resulting in increased pressure to be successful in the classroom (Benedict, Thomas, Kimerling, & Leko, 2013; Derrington, 2011; Glazerman et al., 2011; Papay, 2012). As a result, several states have begun to stray from the traditional methods of evaluating teachers, thus creating their own appraisal systems in an effort to increase teacher quality and teacher accountability of student performance and success (Anderson, 2012). This approach to transform traditional teacher evaluation methods has attracted both teachers and administrators alike (Derrington, 2011).

According to Derrington (2011), administrators and teachers, who no longer approve of the traditional process of teacher evaluation, are focused on changing the evaluation system with a renewed focus on the updated accountability requirements. Due to the Race to the Top initiative spearheaded by the Obama Administration, there has been an increase in the number of states deciding to link teacher evaluation to student achievement (Anderson, 2012; Hinchey, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

According to Danielson and McGreal (2000), the effort to develop curriculum standards has transferred into ensuring that evaluations of teaching are accurate and reliable. Unfortunately, many of the traditional evaluation systems that have been used offer little to no support in assisting teachers, thus leading teachers to mistrust the validity and reliability of the ratings given. Moreover, the process of developing effective teacher evaluation frameworks is not new, and has been studied tremendously (Daley & Kim, 2010; Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Hinchey, 2010; Papay, 2012; Popham, 2013; Shakman et al., 2012).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the influence of one southeast Texas school district's new appraisal system on classroom instruction and student issues. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers' perceptions of the district's new appraisal system compare to that of their previous appraisal system?

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2. How has the new appraisal framework influenced teachers regarding classroom instruction?
3. How has the new appraisal framework influenced teachers regarding student issues, such as building relationships, implementing classroom procedures, behavioral management, and parental communication?

Summary of the Literature

In addition to improving classroom instruction, teacher evaluation systems primarily serve two purposes: to guarantee teacher quality and effectiveness and to encourage professional development (Danielson, 2011). Hill and Grossman (2013) recommended the development of a teacher evaluation system that focuses on the improvement of teacher quality. Additionally, Shakman et al. (2012) suggested the need for teacher evaluation systems to differentiate among teachers and their classroom instruction and student performance. However, Hill and Grossman (2013) and Toch (2008) noted that traditional teacher appraisal systems that have been predominately based on the observations of administrators, have proven to be ineffective in determining the quality of teachers, and suggest a system that goes beyond utilizing traditional checklists and generic instruments.

Teacher quality. According to Looney (2011), previous research has confirmed that adequately developed teacher appraisal systems, combined with quality professional development, results in improved teacher quality and student success. Moreover, Hinchey (2010) suggested that teacher quality is strongly related to other components: teacher performance and teacher effectiveness, although other researchers may identify these all as the same. The New Teacher Project (2014) noted the importance of defining good teaching quality before one can assess it, and ensuring that all individuals (teachers and instructional leaders) are able to identify attributes of good quality teaching.

Professional development. Gartia (2012) defined professional development as “a commitment to structured skills enhancement and personal or professional competence” (p. 1). Brown and Inglis (2013) suggested that professional development offers a wide range of options and opportunities, indicating that educators are able to receive information and training through settings other than a formal face-to-face session. Other methods of delivery include: podcasts, independent studies, videos, online courses and observations (Gartia, 2012).

Teacher Accountability

Due to an increased concern in accountability, there has also been an increase in measuring teacher effectiveness (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2011). Alvarez and Anderson-Ketchmark (2011) and Benedict, Thomas, Kimerling, and Leko (2013) suggested that current modifications to educator appraisal frameworks indicate a renewed focus on individual teacher accountability. State departments of education have since responded, resulting in statewide tactics to address the issue of measuring teacher effectiveness accurately (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2011).

Evaluation Measures

Shakman et al. (2012) argued “a performance-based teacher evaluation system includes multiple measures of teacher performance and provides a range of evidence, demonstrating teacher knowledge and skills, related particularly to student achievement” (p. 3). Additionally, Hill, Charalambous, and Kraft (2012) suggested that United States has historically attempted many efforts to assess teacher quality using a variety of instruments including portfolios, content-specific assessments, and value-added scores. According to Benedict et al. (2013), it is imperative for appraisal systems to be valid, consistent, and developed so that all teachers are supported in the area of professional growth.

Classroom observations. Observation checklists have been used for many years to assess teacher performance, with little regard to increasing teacher effectiveness and student performance (Hill & Grossman, 2013). Earlier instruments, which included checklists and surveys, mostly concentrated on increasing the productivity of campus systems, instead of student achievement (Sheppard, 2013). Observations can both be announced or unannounced and range from one to several within one academic year (Shakam et al., 2012). However, the utilization of the checklists in teacher evaluation has proven to be quite unreliable in determining teacher effectiveness, specifically when principals observe a lesson for a brief moment (Papay, 2012).

Portfolios and self-reports. The submission of portfolios and teacher self-reports, including documentation and artifacts as evidence of teacher performance and student growth during that particular academic year, has become a popular option in recent teacher evaluation systems (Hinchey, 2010). Attinello, Lare, and Waters (2006) viewed portfolios as a useful element in teacher evaluation. They indicated that, like students, teachers have different abilities and needs, and a generic, standard evaluation will not provide them with the proper evaluation and supervision needed to become successful.

Peer evaluations. According to Goldstein (2007), studies on teacher appraisal systems have rarely questioned the influence of campus administrators in terms of quality control, partly due to the unwillingness of teachers to accept the responsibility of evaluating their peers. However, conducting regular observations and providing meaningful and significant feedback to teachers can be quite difficult for administrators, considering all the other tasks they face on an ongoing basis. Peer evaluation and review occurs when teachers assess the quality and effectiveness of other teachers (Benedict et al., 2013, Goldstein, 2007).

Student evaluations. According to Sheppard (2013), although students evaluating teachers is more common in colleges and universities, it is, however, becoming increasingly popular in K-12 schools. Hinchey (2010) expressed that although there may be reservations regarding students' ability to accurately assess their teachers, previous research indicated that student surveys could actually be a reliable source of information. Ripley (2012) noted that student survey answers have been found to be more accurate and reliable than any other evaluation instrument, including student assessment data and classroom observations. Ripley suggested that student surveys offer information that other evaluation factors, such as assessment scores, cannot.

The Teacher Advancement Program. The Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) is a teacher evaluation model that has garnered attention in several states, including the District of Columbia (Toch, 2008). Originated in 1999 by Lowell Milken and the Milken Family Foundation, it is now managed and operated by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (Daley & Kim, 2010; Toch, 2008). Based on Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, The TAP system evaluates its teachers according to the following: (a) designing and planning instruction, (b) the learning environment, and (c) instruction. The framework also utilizes "19 subgroups that target such areas as the frequency and quality of classroom questions and whether teachers are teaching students such higher-level thinking skills as drawing conclusions" (Toch, 2008, p. 33).

The Professional Development Appraisal System. The Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS) was first implemented in the state of Texas in 1997, after having been developed in 1995. Prior to the PDAS, the state recommended teacher evaluation system was the Texas Teacher Appraisal System (TTAS), which began its implementation in 1985 (Robinson, 2009). PDAS evaluated teachers on the basis of the following eight domains:

1. Active, Successful Student Participation in the Learning Process
2. Learner-centered Instruction
3. Evaluation and feedback on Student Progress
4. Management of Student Discipline, Instructional Strategies, Time/Materials
5. Professional Communication
6. Professional Development
7. Compliance with Policies, Operating Procedures and Requirements
8. Improvement of All Students' Academic Performance (Professional Development and Appraisal System, 2014; Shakman et al., 2012).

The Charlotte Danielson Framework. One common evaluation system is the Charlotte Danielson Framework (Benedict et al., 2013). According to Alvarez and Anderson-Ketchmark (2011), the Danielson framework intended for teachers' self-assessment, training, attaining and retaining, mentoring, observation, and appraisal. Since its introduction in 1996, there has been a renewed focus on the framework, particularly due to recent federal government funding and foundational grants that have been geared towards implementing teacher evaluation systems that precisely measure teacher effectiveness (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2011).

Administrative Campus Support

One factor that affects teacher evaluations and ultimately leads teachers to abandon the field of education is the lack of support from veteran teachers, and primarily, campus administration (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). The principal is critical, and is sometimes the most significant person in the minds of new teachers, particularly in regards to the evaluation process (Derrington, 2011; Roberson & Roberson, 2009). Roberson and Roberson (2009) suggested that administrators can assist teachers best by: (a) providing instructive feedback, (b) meeting regularly to determine and attempt to meet individual needs and concerns, and (c) allow opportunities for new and veteran teachers to collaborate, discussing successes and addressing challenges.

Teacher burnout. Several studies have supported the notion that teachers, especially those who are employed in urban campuses, are more likely to suffer from teacher burnout, leading them to

seek employment at other campuses or in a field other than education (Greenlee & Brown, 2009; Ng & Peter, 2010; Prieto et al., 2008). Prieto et al. (2008) suggested the importance of analyzing an individual's psychological welfare and determine stress and emotional factors that could potentially hinder an educator from being successful in the classroom.

Impact on urban campuses. In the United States, the stereotypical image of an urban school refers to a dilapidated building located in a deprived city neighborhood in which mostly African Americans or Hispanics reside (Jacob, 2007). According to Thompson and Smith (2004), every institution that provides teacher education faces the challenge of attracting, training, and maintaining educators in urban and high need campuses. Campus leaders have realized that individuals, who lived in the same urban areas when they were children, have a better possibility at becoming successful teachers because they are already aware of the challenges the students may face (Petty, Fitchett, & O'Connor, 2012).

Methodology

This phenomenological study focused on the exploration of the perceptions of teachers regarding a newly implemented appraisal system. The rationale for utilizing this particular method of study was to investigate a specific group of people who all experienced a common phenomenon and to capture detailed accounts of the participants and their experiences (Creswell, 2013). It was important for the researcher to conduct face-to-face interviews with the participants during this study for the purpose of allowing teachers to fully describe their lived experiences regarding the district's newly implemented evaluation system, in an effort to determine how the appraisal system impacts the participants' classroom instruction and management of student issues.

Participants

This study focused on teachers in a large, predominately minority, urban school district located in southeast Texas. Prior to the full implementation of the new evaluation system, the district introduced the framework and tested the appraisal system in 34 schools, which were indicated as pilot campuses. Teachers and administrators at pilot campuses were provided with the opportunity to experience the new evaluation system one academic year prior to its full implementation in 2013. Participants selected for the study were teachers at a pilot campus for the new appraisal system during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 academic years.

Eight participants were selected from pilot campuses within the district. The researcher utilized criterion sampling when selecting participants, ensuring that all individuals have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Participants were also selected through the use of snowball sampling, as the researcher was able to gain access to other individuals who met the criteria from those who were already participating in the study (Creswell, 2013). The participants must have worked at the same campus from 2012-2014 to obtain purposeful information regarding their experiences by having participated in the new appraisal framework for two consecutive years. Additionally, participants must have been employed by the district at least one year prior to the pilot implementation.

Results and Discussion

Major findings from the study are organized and reported by each respective research question. Additionally, emergent themes for each research question are provided.

Research question one. The first research question investigated teachers' perceptions of the district's new appraisal system compared to the previous evaluation framework. Participants provided their descriptions of both evaluation systems, identified any similarities and differences, and discussed strengths and challenges of the new framework. Additionally, participants provided their thoughts on their first evaluation from the new appraisal system. Emergent themes included:

- **Objectivity** - All participants described the district's previous appraisal system, PDAS, as being subjective and based on one rater's opinion of their teaching ability. Additionally, all the participants indicated that the newly implemented appraisal system allows more opportunities for objectivity.
- **Fear of the Unknown** – Participants mentioned that it was difficult to ensure that all teachers understood the new appraisal system. They indicated that administrators should have been able to explain it more to help teachers understand the expectations.
- **Professional Responsibilities** - The participants suggested that essentially the appraisal system is looking to rate teachers in terms of classroom performance and teacher attendance.
- **Specificity and Opportunities for Reflection** - Participants mentioned that with the implementation of the new framework, they are able to monitor progress and discern individual student capabilities easily. One participant stated, "Whether I agree or not, that's what they do, they look at more specific data records... specific information." Another participant noted that specificity was a benefit with the new appraisal system. One of the requirements was to provide evidence of what one is doing in their classroom.

Research question two. The second research question investigated how the newly implemented appraisal system influenced teachers in regards to classroom instruction. Participants were asked about their feelings regarding the expectations and requirements of the appraisal system. They were also asked to describe their relationship with their appraiser, and their thoughts regarding observations and conferences. Lastly, participants were asked how their instructional practices changed as a result of the new appraisal system. The following themes emerged:

- **Clearly Defined Expectations** – The participants indicated that the expectations were clear and well defined. They mentioned that they were already meeting the expectations and requirements of the new evaluation system, however, and now justification must be provided. One participant stated, "It's exactly what you're doing, just put a copy of what you're doing into your binder. You're doing everything that you're supposed to be doing. They just want to see it."
- **Open Communication** - The participants expressed having favorable relationships with their rater, regardless of whether the administrators were very knowledgeable and able to

explain in depth the new evaluation system. They enjoyed conferencing (whether it was informally or formally) with their rater.

- **Effective Teaching** - Participants expressed that the new appraisal system has allowed them to reflect more on questioning strategies, fostering a classroom where students are comfortable enough to participate in classroom discussion, and provide opportunities for students to be leaders. The participants suggested that one of the facets in being an effective teacher, is knowing the students, and being able to adjust the instruction to fit their individual academic needs.

Research question three. The last research question investigated how the newly implemented appraisal system influenced teachers regarding student issues, such as building relationships, implementing classroom procedures, behavioral management, and communication with parents. Emergent themes included:

- **Respect through Building Relationships** - The participants discussed building student relationships. They specifically mentioned the importance of giving and receiving respect when asked to describe their relationship with students.
- **Setting High Expectations** – Participants expressed the importance of setting high expectations and letting students know that mediocrity will not be celebrated. Additionally, one participant mentioned how he continuously pushes the students in his class, which has resulted in “great gains” in terms of student growth.
- **Various Forms of Communication** - The participants discussed utilizing several different tools when communicating with parents, e.g. phone calls, text messaging, letters, face-to-face conferences, and emails.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the district’s previous appraisal system allows opportunities for objectivity and mostly relied on administrators’ observations. This conclusion based on the findings is consistent with Hill & Grossman (2013) and Toch (2008), who noted that traditional teacher appraisal systems that have been predominately based on the observations of administrators.

It can be concluded that teachers and administrators both faced fear of the unknown with the new appraisal system. There were challenges in terms of understanding the implementation of the new evaluation system accurately.

Findings indicated the difference in how observations were communicated with the teacher. Participants admitted that communication with their appraiser in regards to classroom performance was minimal under the district’s previous appraisal system, which resulted in more professional responsibilities for the administrators.

As a result of the findings, it is concluded that the new appraisal system created specificity and opportunities for reflection. The participants agreed that the new appraisal system was much more specific than PDAS, and the system seemed to be truly based on student growth and results from various data.

Findings indicated the implementation of the new evaluation system was noted as a challenging experience. It was concluded that the new system provided clearly defined expectations. This study suggests the need for appraisers to maintain open communication by observing teachers on a regular basis and conferencing with them on what they can do to become more effective. These conclusions are consistent with Roberson and Roberson (2009), who suggested that administrators can assist teachers best by: (a) providing instructive feedback, (b) meeting regularly to determine and attempt to meet individual needs and concerns, and (c) allow opportunities for new and veteran teachers to collaborate, discussing successes and addressing challenges.

Additionally, based on the findings from the interviews, it can be concluded that the new appraisal system uses more than just teacher observations as a way of determining effective teaching. Teachers are required to provide additional documentation justifying their classroom practices, and student growth through standardized test scores are also taken into consideration when rating a teacher under the new framework. This conclusion is consistent with research by Glazerman et al. (2011), who indicated that teacher evaluation systems should include information from various sources other than just classroom observations, including assessment scores and surveys. Also, based on the findings, it can be concluded that when administrators communicate and support teachers, it increases effective teaching.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that when building a classroom environment that promotes respect through building relationships, classroom discipline and student management issues are less likely to occur. This was inconsistent with several studies that have supported the notion that teachers, especially those who are employed in urban campuses, are more likely to experience difficulties, suffer from teacher burnout, and seek employment at other campuses or in a field other than education (Greenlee & Brown, 2009; Ng & Peter, 2010; Prieto et al., 2008).

Moreover, according to Toch (2008), it is best that several informal classroom observations are conducted throughout the year, focusing on teachers' knowledge of pedagogy, classroom management techniques, professionalism, and lesson delivery. The conclusions from the findings suggest that the new appraisal system encouraged teachers to set high expectations for students. This was done by teachers adjusting classroom management techniques, providing more opportunities for leadership, and allowing students to have responsibilities in the classroom. Based on findings from the study, it was concluded that the new appraisal system influenced teachers to use various forms of communication. This allowed more opportunities for parents to understand what was happening in the classroom.

Implications for Practice

This study clarified that teachers desire to do what is best for their students, regardless of evaluation system implemented in the district in which they are employed. Additionally, Benedict et al. (2013) and the findings of this study suggest that when administrators and teachers are all knowledgeable about the expectations and requirements of an appraisal system, it allows for a smoother evaluation process, ultimately resulting in increased teacher quality. Lastly, although it was determined by the findings that administrators are often busy and unable to meet with teachers on a regular basis, previous research supports the communication between

the rater and the teacher, indicating its significance to successful implementation (Roberson & Roberson, 2009). Implications for practice should include the following:

1. Offer several different avenues of open communication between the rater and teacher, not just limited to face-to-face meetings
2. Encourage peer evaluations within the campus and district, and provide opportunities for teachers to engage in discussions that promote instructional best practices, and reflection on their classroom delivery and management of student issues
3. Offer opportunities in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) provided by teachers who have earned high ratings from the new evaluation framework, allowing them to share their instructional practices, behavioral management techniques, and their management of other professional responsibilities.
4. Offer ongoing sessions or webinars to assist teachers who are still experiencing difficulty understanding aspects of the teacher evaluation system.

Recommendations

This study was conducted in one urban school district in southeast Texas, it is important to consider that teachers in other school districts may or may not share the same perceptions and feelings toward their district's evaluation system. Other recommendations for future research include:

1. Interview students to investigate their perceptions regarding teachers' instructional practices and management of student issues.
2. Interview administrators to determine their perceptions regarding their role in the newly implemented appraisal system.
3. Investigate teachers' perceptions regarding the evaluation framework after at least five years of implementation.
4. Conduct a quantitative study, in an effort to determine how many teachers have been able to increase student growth as a result of the new appraisal system.
5. Conduct a quantitative study, in an effort to determine if there is a relationship between the evaluation framework, teacher retention, and job satisfaction.

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