Teacher Perceptions of the Evaluation System Including Walkthroughs and Administrator Feedback in Rural South Texas School Districts

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined teacher perceptions of the evaluation process including informal walkthroughs and administrator feedback in South Texas rural schools to determine whether teachers felt that there was a connection to teacher effectiveness and student achievement. The findings of this study may assist administrators in determining how teachers perceive the evaluation process.

This study may further allow teachers to understand the reasoning behind the evaluation process. Students may also benefit from this process as it may help produce more effective teachers who provide constructive, targeted instruction. Data was gathered from interviews conducted in the natural setting of the participants. Nine teachers from three different rural South Texas school districts were interviewed.

Key findings in this study indicated that teachers need more thorough training on the evaluation process. Teachers expressed that the evaluation process is not tied to student achievement, and because they believe that evaluations do affect teacher growth, feedback given to teachers should be more specific. The results also found that evaluations and walkthroughs do cause stress to teachers. Accordingly, administrators should incorporate multiple sources of data to fully evaluate teachers, frequent walkthroughs and evaluations are necessary and wanted by teachers, and administrators should provide teachers with additional resources. This study provided invaluable information that will benefit school systems by refining their processes to meet the teachers' needs. Administrators should be able to provide teachers with valuable feedback and resources to help improve their teaching.

Keywords: School Administrator, Classroom Walkthrough, Feedback, Observation, Perceptions, Principal, Teacher Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Student achievement is the primary focus of any school campus or district. As accountability standards have continually increased, schools have felt additional pressure to improve student achievement (Koretz, 2015; Rossi, 2007). Teacher evaluation standards give schools a framework to assess the efficacy of teaching in their institutions (Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2009). Therefore, in addition to parents, another significant stakeholder who plays a vital role in students' lives is the teacher.

However, research shows that administrators also have a direct influence on outcomes in student achievement where in schools with effective principals, student achievement climbed dramatically, but ineffective principals' schools observed a decline in student accomplishment (Brance et al., 2013). Principals' responsibilities as an instructional leader include identifying high-quality education, understanding the curriculum well enough to ensure that all students are receiving the right kind of training, and giving constructive criticism to help teachers do better (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). The administrator has a direct effect on teachers, and teachers have a direct impact on students. Research is justified then to determine how the relationship between administrators and educators affect student achievement.

Teacher quality is the single most significant in-school variable determining student success (Alderman, 2017). One of the factors which directly impacts teachers is teacher observations, which serve to give administrators and instructors a chance to collaborate to enhance student accomplishment as well as improve student performance (Reinhorn et al., 2017). Teacher observations can be informal (walkthroughs) or formal and are designed to facilitate instructional feedback. The feedback offered to teachers by supervising principals can impact teacher performance Teacher observations and evaluations may be used for a variety of reasons, such as professional development, gathering information to justify a teacher's nonrenewal or dismissal, or gathering information to give teachers incentive compensation or bonuses.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teacher Evaluations

In a public school system, principals must evaluate teacher performance, which increases pressure and strains the relationship between administrators and teachers (Namaghi, 2010). Evaluations are necessary and play an important part in the continued improvement of teachers and the overall success of the students (Warring, 2015). Evaluations and feedback, if properly conducted, should provide assistance and support for the teachers (Feeney, 2007). The more administrators visited classrooms; the more teachers felt that they cared. In the past three decades, teacher accountability for the quality of instruction that they provide to the students in their classrooms has expanded compared to previous generations of educators (Smith & Kubacka, 2017). Reinhorn et al. (2017) found that administrators gave struggling teachers "developing" rather than holding them accountable and giving them a lower rating of "needs improvement." Administrators are frequently too busy to engage in thorough and constructive evaluations. Teacher evaluations are mandatory in the United States. Weiss (2012) found that

although this requirement was being met, many supervisors were ineffective in this process as they were not providing teachers with opportunities to grow professionally. A study conducted by the National Council of Teacher Quality (NCTQ) found that although there have been improvements in the teacher appraisal system, work remains to be done to ensure students are being taught by effective teachers (Texas Association of School Boards, 2013). Teacher evaluation tools are designed to be able to identify effective teacher characteristics and evaluators often used checklists to identify these characteristics (Manning, 1988). Manning (1988) found that evaluations were mostly completed once or twice a year with these checklists, which did not offer significant opportunities for improvement. Before creating or implementing a specific evaluation tool, evaluators must fully understand the purpose of this process, which is to help improve or develop teachers and their craft of teaching (Marzano, 2012). Teacher evaluations have been the primary source in identifying or making decisions regarding staffing concerns, pay increases, and the removal of ineffective teachers (Manning, 1988).

Teacher Evaluations in Rural Schools

One factor that may impact student achievement and teacher evaluations is the size of the campus or district. For instance, small districts do not have the same resources available to larger districts to be able to seamlessly analyze data (Amrein-Beardsley et al., 2020). Moreover, small, rural school districts do not have the money needed to provide additional support and resources to students who are struggling or failing (Amrein-Beardsley et al., 2020). This factor would, in turn, influence teacher evaluations. On the contrary, in smaller school districts, the student to teacher ratio is significantly smaller compared to larger districts, and thus, teachers are more easily able to make connections and build relationships with their students. Building these teacher-student relationships increases trust and support and in turn, can be a positive factor influencing student achievement (Preston & Barnes, 2018). Therefore, one might assume that the relationship between teachers and administrators in small districts is more closely knit than those in bigger districts. However, this outcome may not always be positive. For instance, if an administrator builds close working relationships with the staff, it will be more difficult to address situations or to be unbiased on an evaluation in which the performance is not meeting the proficiency level.

Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System

Texas implemented the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (TTESS) statewide in 2016-2017 which was designed to promote continuous improvement amongst teachers (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2016). Continuous improvement is having daily quality improvements on behalf of employees from an organization (Park et al., 2013). TTESS consists of goal setting, classroom observations, coaching, and professional development on both strengths and weaknesses. How teachers perceive the evaluation tools can impact their willingness to fully engage in the process (Minnici, 2014). TTESS consisted of multiple measures including classroom observation, goal-setting opportunities, and student growth measures that would be established by each school district (TEA, 2016).

The TTESS rubric has general descriptors under each domain that guides educators to help improve the quality of their instruction, but does not have specific content descriptors (TEA,

2016). Cohen and Goldhaber (2016) state that face validity and social validity can influence a teacher's ability to improve. TTESS ratings can be influenced, however, on the competency of the evaluator (Minnici, 2014). Thus, it would behoove any school district to use multiple appraisers to help increase the reliability of the evaluation outcome (Cohen & Goldhaber, 2016). Teachers believe that an evaluator will be able to provide a more reliable evaluation outcome if they have knowledge of the content (Nordin, 2014). The goal of TTESS is to provide feedback and data to teachers to help them continuously improve and seek professional learning opportunities based on their strengths and weaknesses. TTESS was promoted by TEA as a system that revolved around continuous improvement as it allowed for collaboration between teacher and appraiser, provided for feedback opportunities, and loan itself to professional learning opportunities (Teach for Texas, 2016).

Walkthroughs

Although the models may be different or vary, walkthroughs have been used as part of the evaluation process in most school districts for many years (Kachur et al., 2010). Over the years, and across districts, this evaluative method has also been referred to as "learning walks," "focus walks," "instructional rounds," "data walks," "mini observations," "administrative walkthroughs," and "classroom walkthroughs," among other similar names (Kachur et al., 2010). Although the names may vary, each one consists of similar traits or techniques being identified or utilized. A walkthrough is defined as a brief, frequent, informal, focused classroom visit by an administrator or observer for the purpose of gathering data on the teaching practices and providing some type of feedback (Kachur et al., 2010). Walkthroughs are different from a full summative evaluation but can be used towards the summative evaluation (Kachur et al., 2013). Walkthroughs provide observers with various pieces of information such as the lesson objectives, the level of classroom rigor, classroom management, student engagement, and the overall appearance and physical learning environment (Kachur et al., 2010).

Meaningful feedback leads to an increased level of student performance (Stronge & Tucker, 2003). Administrators may use walkthroughs to identify areas in which students and teachers may have specific instructional needs (Mentoring Minds, 2019). Jensen and Overman (2003) list five principles that should be involved when evaluating teachers:

1. Discover opportunities for growth and improvement;
2. Place primary focus on teacher effectiveness;
3. Implement opportunity for mutual discussion of future goals and a plan to achieve them;
4. Involve self-analysis from the person being evaluated; and
5. Schedule and conduct a pre-conference and post-conference so that parts of the evaluation can be discussed and formalized.

Duffett et al., (2008) states that a walkthrough is the most used technique to assess teacher quality and can be used as part of the evaluation process but does not necessarily accomplish the goal of improving student achievement or teacher growth. In their study, over 25% reported that their evaluation was useful. In fact, many teachers felt that the evaluation was completed just as a formality (Duffett et al., 2008).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine teacher perceptions of the evaluation process including walkthroughs and administrator feedback in South Texas rural schools. The following questions guided this qualitative study:

RQ$_1$: How do teachers in a rural South Texas school district describe the teacher evaluation process?

RQ$_2$: What are the teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of the teacher evaluation system including informal walkthroughs??

RQ$_3$: What are teachers' perceptions regarding administrator feedback based on classroom walkthroughs as an aid to improving their classroom instruction?

RQ$_4$: What ideas do teachers at a rural South Texas school district have to improve the teacher evaluation process at the school?

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population comprised school teachers with at least one full year of teaching experience from three different rural South Texas public school districts. Teachers participating in this study had been evaluated in the districts they are working in using TTESS rubric. The target number of teachers included in this study was nine.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Before any data was collected, Institutional Review Board approval was granted. Data was gathered from three different school districts. Teachers' interviews occurred in person. A series of open-ended questions were asked to help in answering the research questions in this study. Open-ended questions allowed for the interview subject to be answered in several ways including extensive responses, short answers, or lists (Weller et al., 2018).

Each interview was video and audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim utilizing the zoom platform and then cleaned up, ensuring accurate documentation of participants' perspectives. Handwritten notes were also taken to point out potential themes or important pieces of information. Participants were able to view the interview questions prior to the interviews so that they were able to fully understand and answer the questions being asked. Once the data was cleaned up the data, each participant was given the opportunity to review their responses to ensure their thoughts were captured fully. Once the participants confirmed there were no changes, the process of thematic analysis was conducted. To help keep the participants anonymous, pseudonyms were used. The data was then coded manually. Once coded, themes were identified.

RESULTS

During the analysis phase of this study, twenty-four codes were identified from the transcripts. These codes were then analyzed further which led to the existence of eight themes.

These themes were evident during the analysis of the interviews and transcripts of the teacher participants.

Theme One (Training is Generic): A substantial percentage of the teachers identified that they were not thoroughly trained on the TTESS evaluation system. The teachers also felt that their administrators did not have thorough training as well. This theme of *generic training* hinders the maximum output of the evaluation system.

Theme Two (Student Achievement not tied to Evaluations): One hundred percent of the teachers in this study did not feel that student achievement is directly tied to teacher observations. It is evident in the transcripts of these interviews that there are many factors that were mentioned by teachers that led to this common theme.

Theme Three (Evaluations do Affect Teacher Growth): Most of the participant teachers felt that evaluations, including walkthroughs and feedback, provide guidance for teacher growth.

Theme Four (Feedback is Generic/Should be Specific): The transcripts of the participant teachers revealed a strong belief in this theme. Teachers feel and crave more specific feedback from administrators. The teacher participants feel that the feedback they get has been mostly generic.

Theme Five (Evaluations Cause Stress for Teachers): The transcripts of the participant teachers revealed a strong belief in this theme. Teachers feel a sense of stress with evaluations.

Theme Six (Incorporate Multiple Sources of Data): The transcripts of the participant teachers revealed a strong belief in the need for administrators to incorporate multiple forms of data into their overall evaluation.

Theme Seven (Additional Walkthroughs/Evaluations Necessary): The transcripts of the participant teachers revealed a strong belief that evaluations and walkthroughs should be required to hold teachers accountable. There is also a substantial percentage that feel they need more walkthroughs and evaluations to take place.

Theme Eight (Resources Needed): The transcripts of the participant teachers revealed a strong need for additional resources including feedback.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

Literature dating back to 1988 shows that evaluators often used checklists during evaluations, which did not offer significant opportunities for growth for teachers (Manning, 1988). The transcripts reveal that feedback was generic with many administrators using "checkboxes" to provide feedback instead of giving specific feedback. Literature indicates that meaningful feedback leads to an increased level of student performance (Stronge & Tucker, 2003). This outcome was evident in the transcripts of the teacher participants. The participants almost craved meaningful feedback from their administrators. Papay (2012) found that in traditional evaluation systems, teachers are not provided with meaningful feedback that leads to professional development. In a study conducted by Weisberg et al. (2009), approximately 50% of teachers reported that they did not have any type of informal conversations to help improve their practice. Jenkins (2016) reported 26% of teachers who participated in this study also stated they did not have any type of feedback or conversations after an evaluation. Again, over the years, this one hindrance on teacher evaluation systems has not improved as is evidenced in the transcripts of teacher participants. According to Darling-Hammond (2013), another barrier is that principals are not experts in all content areas but should seek professional development and support needed to become expert instructional leaders and evaluators. This also developed as codes tied to the theme of "specific feedback is necessary." Teachers believe that an evaluator will be able to provide a more reliable evaluation outcome if they have

knowledge of the content (Nordin, 2014). Teacher participants felt that the feedback given to them by their administrators is generic and not content specific. In their response to research question 4, teacher participants suggest that evaluators provide feedback and information tied to their specific content to be able to help improve their teaching.

A common code among participants was that administrators were busy. Therefore, they were not able to provide teachers with the adequate training that is needed to fully understand and implement the evaluation process to its fullest potential. This evidence was also found in the literature review. However, it is difficult for administrators to find the time in their busy schedules to visit with teachers to provide feedback and dialogue concerning the observations that took place (Danielson, 2011).

Another theme that revealed itself and was evident was that teachers felt they were not provided with enough resources to help them grow. Teachers perceive that part of the responsibility of administrators is to provide them with resources for them to attain their goals in the classroom (Celebi, 2010). It is evident through the transcripts that teachers want to improve and understand the goals of evaluations but need administrators to provide them with necessary and valuable resources to help them grow.

Darling-Hammond (2012) found that teacher evaluations did not necessarily assist in teacher growth. This contradicts what the teacher participants stated in their interviews. All nine participants felt that teacher growth is directly tied to teacher evaluations. Although this was evident, they did make suggestions for improvements.

Another theme that emerged with common codes was that frequent walkthroughs and evaluations are needed to help teachers grow. Teachers feel that administrators do not visit classrooms frequently enough throughout the year (Papay, 2012). In theory, this approach appears sound, but the reality is that principals struggle with finding time to conduct walkthroughs on a regular basis. Finding time to provide instructional support through evaluations and walkthroughs can be challenging (Darling-Hammond, 2013).

Overall, teachers felt that they should be held accountable and value walkthroughs and evaluations but implicated that the processes are not fully engaged to attain the maximum potential from this process. TTESS was promoted by TEA as a system that revolved around continuous improvement as it allowed for collaboration between teacher and appraiser, provided for feedback opportunities, and loan itself to professional learning opportunities (Teach for Texas, 2016). Although this process is mostly followed, it is not followed with fidelity according to the teacher participants. A study conducted by the National Council of Teacher Quality (NCTQ) found that although there have been improvements in the teacher appraisal system, work remains to be done to ensure students are being taught by effective teachers (Texas Association of School Boards, 2013). Teacher participants in this study also felt that work remains to be done regarding the evaluation process including feedback provided.

IMPLICATIONS

Understanding how teachers feel about the evaluation system should help inform district and campus leaders on practices that need to be revamped or improved to create a positive learning environment for all stakeholders involved in this process. Improving teacher quality and increased student achievement utilizing the evaluation system is dependent on the positive beliefs and actions of the classroom teachers (Minnici, 2014). The findings from this study implicate that the purpose and processes of the current evaluation system utilized in Texas, TTESS, is not serving its purpose to its fullest capacity to improve both teacher quality and student growth measures. Another important implication is that teachers need to be heard and have a seat at the table when educational policy decisions are being made. Teachers are the key component to student success and their voice must be heard and valued.

CONCLUSION

To continue to see an increase in student achievement, teacher performance also must be evaluated and improved over time. For this to happen, teachers need to have faith in the evaluation system. To be able to do so, teachers must feel that they are being evaluated with a valid and reliable tool, that they are receiving feedback that is meaningful and beneficial to their teaching practice, and there is truly a continuous growth model employed where teachers and administrators are constantly learning and revamping their practice to achieve the overall goal of increased student success. Without a positive perspective and trust in the evaluation system, teachers will merely be going through the process for compliance purposes (Stecker et al., 2018). The findings that were discovered were intended to provide districts with teachers' perceptions of the evaluation process for the purpose of implementing educational improvement systems within current systems in place. Ample evidence was collected showing that teachers crave and welcome feedback; however, they do request that the feedback be specific and not just restating verbiage from the TTESS rubric. The goal for teachers is to continuously grow and improve for the betterment of their students, but they need to be provided with more specific guidance.
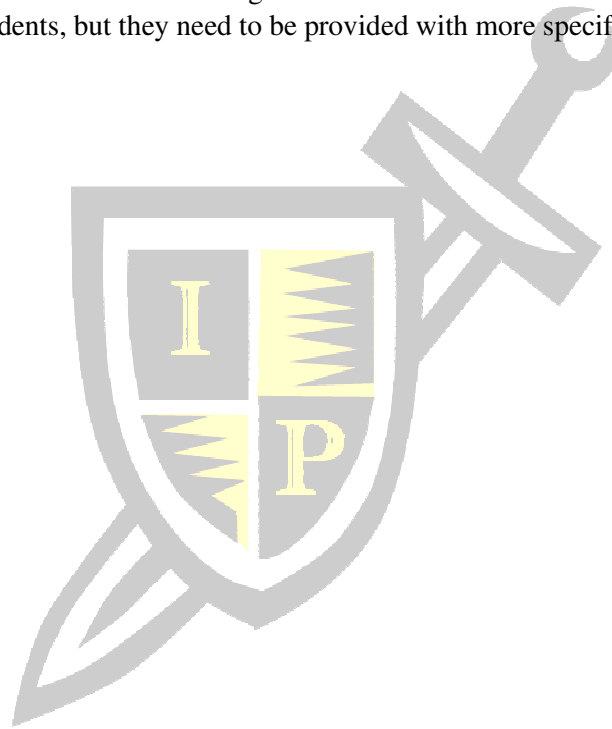
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