

Evaluating the Evaluators: Teachers' Perceptions of the Principal's Role in Professional Evaluation

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Eighty-six educators from five northwest Florida counties were surveyed to examine their perceptions of their principals as effective evaluators. The results suggest that teachers' perceptions of an effective evaluation process involve a focus on their principals' knowledge, skills, and abilities as both experienced educator and educational leader. From the respondents' comments, four key domains emerged as pivotal components to a successful professional evaluation process: interactions between principal and educator; consistent evaluations; principal commitment to effective professional evaluation; and a principal knowledgeable in pedagogy, content, and evaluation.

Teacher evaluation plays an important role in the overall effectiveness of schools as learning institutions (Valentine, 1992). In general, educators agree that professional evaluation is one tool of continual pedagogical improvement for most teachers (Atkins, 1996). Many stakeholders and educational researchers would also agree that principals are key players in the success of an effective teacher evaluation (Zimmerman, 2003), and any subsequent teacher improvement and increased student achievement.

Since the 1970s, educational researchers have examined the principal's role in teacher evaluation (Blase & Kirby, 2000). Principals who initiate a more democratic environment in which teachers have increased participation in decision making and leadership roles generally have increased loyalty and respect among the faculty (Allen, Glickman, & Hensley, 1998; Crow, Matthews, & McCleary, 1996). Moreover, principals who rely on collaboration, open communication, and a focus on promoting professional development have more positive influence on teachers and their pedagogical skills (Blase & Blase, 1998; Conger & Kanungo, 1994; Sheppard, 1996). Studies have found that teachers respond better to principals' influences when principals rely more on their "human relations skill" (Blase & Kirby, 2000, p. 4) and technical knowledge of teaching than when they rely on the power of authority (Treslan & Ryan, 1986).

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Collaboration creates power, trust breeds confidence, and confidence facilitates growth (Zimmerman, 2003). Ultimately, it appears that there are several core principal-related factors that promote effective and successful teacher evaluations (Atkins, 1996; Oppenheim, 1994). The principal can be the catalyst for successful teacher evaluation, leading to a consistent and flourishing system of school improvement.

Hypothetically, the teacher evaluation process fulfills several criteria. Foremost, teacher evaluation helps quantify, and thus determine, the overall value and worth of any given teacher's instruction. As Peterson (2000) contended, teacher evaluation is especially critical because, for the most part, students are legal minors and "nonvoluntary" (p. 36). Therefore, effective teacher evaluation fills a protective need. In addition, the relative success or lack of success of a teacher's pedagogical skills may not be readily apparent, due to the extreme variability of student aptitude and prior instruction. Prior achievement explains almost 60% of the variance in student knowledge gains (Peterson, 2000); subsequently, it may be difficult for teachers to gauge the immediate effect they are having on a child's learning.

According to McGreal (1983), the relationship between a principal and faculty members has a pivotal effect on instructional effectiveness. Atkins (1996) noted that there are some critical skills a principal must possess to implement the evaluation process in a manner that promotes among teachers feelings of trust and confidence in the principal and the evaluation process. Protheroe (2002) suggested only when principals are knowledgeable and experienced educators can they understand, critique, and evaluate teachers. Principals must also be aware that the individuals that make up their faculties expect increased communication, constructive suggestions, and appropriate feedback during the evaluation process from educationally skilled leaders (Wang & Day, 2002).

When there is positive rapport, trust, and respect between teacher and principal, the likelihood of improved pedagogy and increased student achievement is almost assured (Zimmerman, 2003). Valentine (1992) maintained, however, that implementing the improvement component is one of the most challenging tasks for the principal in the performance-based developmental evaluation process. Principals should understand, be able to articulate, and be committed to a philosophy of improvement in such a way that they obligate themselves to a sustained and educated pattern of understanding the finer points of professional assessment issues. This understanding may generate, in part, from a principal's classroom experiences, feelings of respect for and dedication to staff members and their improvement, and willingness to provide open and honest communication with teachers (LoVette, Watts, & Wheeler, 2001).

Teachers' perceptions of the process and the evaluator are critical elements in the professional evaluation process. From a psychological stance, teachers who do not perceive their principals as competent and experienced will not be as likely to accept and internalize principal-generated evaluation results (Oppenheim, 1994). LoVette et al. (2001) devised a standardized assessment, *The Principal Profile*, which measures the differences between teachers' perceptions of their principals and principals' self-report ratings. Another way to evaluate how teachers perceive their evaluators is to obtain qualitative data in the form of written responses to open-ended questions.

A survey of teachers from five counties in northwest Florida was designed to concentrate on two components of the professional evaluation process: (a) the teachers' general perceptions about the evaluation process, and (b) the principal's role in the evaluation process. The teachers' general perceptions about the complete teacher evaluation process were detailed in an earlier report (see Zimmerman, 2003). This study focuses specifically on the second component of the survey—namely the teachers' holistic perceptions of principals as evaluators—and sought to answer these questions: How do teachers view the principal as their primary evaluator? What do they perceive is the principal's role in the evaluation process? and What makes a principal an effective evaluator?

Method

Participants

Eighty-six students attending graduate classes in the educational leadership program of the Department of Diversity Studies and Applied Research at the University of West Florida participated in this study. The participants were 79 women and 7 men from the northwest Florida counties of Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, and Escambia. All of the participants were employed as K–12 teachers in the Bay, Okaloosa, Walton, Escambia, and Santa Rosa school districts. Volunteers were not offered any rewards or inducements to participate in the survey. Participants were treated in strict accordance with federal, state, and institutional research ethics and laws. Gender, ethnicity, and age were not research considerations and information on these attributes was not obtained.

Assessment Instrument

The data were collected using an instrument titled, "Professional Appraisal Systems Survey" (see the appendix). The four items directed at obtaining teacher perceptions of the principal's role in teacher evaluation included "What methods do principals employ to gain information about the quality of a teacher's performance?" "Is teacher evaluation performed consistently throughout your district?"

Why or why not?" "How can teacher evaluation be improved?" and "Does the process of teacher evaluation/related feedback, help you to improve the quality of your teaching?" The answers were intended to be open ended, leaving blocks of space for writing answers after each question.

Procedure

Volunteers were solicited from classes offered through an educational leadership graduate program at the University of West Florida (UWF) during the Fall 2001 and Spring 2002 semesters. Research participants were recruited from each of three UWF sites, the main campus in Pensacola, a satellite campus in Fort Walton Beach, and a cohort program located at Chipola Community College, Marianna, Florida. Individuals who acknowledged an interest in participating in this study were asked to stay after class to receive information about the study and directions for completing the survey instrument. The survey instrument was distributed to participants; they were instructed to read each question carefully and to write their responses to each question on the sheet provided. Everyone was given an opportunity to ask any questions they had before beginning their survey. There was no time limit for completing the survey. Participants were instructed to turn their surveys in to the researcher when completed. Participants were debriefed after completion of the surveys through a question and answer period.

Results

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method of analysis was used to evaluate all of the survey information. All of the participants' responses were transferred into a database by question, followed by an examination of the responses for thematic similarity. Responses that appeared to have similar themes were grouped accordingly into general categories. Subsequent analyses of the categories exposed consistent themes. These thematic groupings were reevaluated for conceptual parallels. These conceptual parallels became the basis for identifying the main variables that shape teachers' perceptions of the professional evaluation process. Hypotheses were generated to explain the relationships that exist between the variables and teachers' perceptions of professional evaluation. These hypotheses were reformed and refined as the categories and conceptual parallels were revisited in light of each new hypothesis. The participants' responses revealed several conclusions concerning their perceptions about the principal and his or her role as evaluator. Their responses focused on four domains: interaction, consistency, commitment, and knowledge.

Role of Principal-Generated Interaction

The northwest Florida educators consistently expressed both a desire to have a reciprocal, communicative relationship with their evaluators and a need for the evaluation process to contain constructive feedback about their professional strengths and weaknesses. Eighty-nine percent of respondents expressed some form of the idea that a bidirectional process of professional improvement with their principals was vitally important to their continued growth as educators. They explained that effective evaluative interactions with their principals include constructive general feedback, encouragement, pedagogically appropriate feedback, and adequate time for the feedback process. A respondent noted that this interactive communication and feedback process helped her to “address areas of weaknesses, as well as strengths.” Another respondent noted that she viewed professional evaluation and feedback as a process that helps her acquire and meet new goals. Several respondents acknowledged that just knowing they were being evaluated and would be involved in follow-up interactions with their principals helped keep them sharp and “on my toes.” One educator noted that feedback after an evaluation is very useful “if it is honest and helpful.” Many teachers explained that any combination of these components of an evaluation were welcome and essential elements of their evaluations. One teacher explained that feedback was most effective when combined with “specific statements about areas of need or examples/suggestions for improvement.”

As noted, when questioned about evaluation-generated feedback, a majority of the answers reflected some aspect of the teachers’ desire to be engaged in a bidirectional process of constructive feedback with their principals. It was evident, however, not everyone receives the same amount or quality of principal-generated feedback. Some respondents complained about the unidirectional nature of the teacher evaluation process. A small number of educators (11%) noted that they had few, if any, opportunities for sustained bidirectional communication between themselves and the evaluator, and lamented this lack of feedback, as characterized by one teacher’s remark that “I would love to hear any suggestions at all from my evaluator.” Thirty-eight percent of these teachers noted that their principals conducted their evaluations in an inconsistent manner; many teachers explained that they are rated subjectively on a form, and then asked to sign on the dotted line to complete the evaluation. Another educator suggested that her principal never observes her teach or plan lessons; thus, “I don’t feel my administrator can give me any constructive feedback.” A respondent remarked that “I don’t get any constructive feedback, just always hear that it was great.” Overall, the teachers conveyed a deep desire for a constructive and collaborative relationship with their principals regarding their professional evaluation. Even those teachers who noted they did not receive constructive feedback from their evaluators

expressed the need to have those types of interactions during their professional evaluations.

Role of Evaluative Consistency

The results suggest that teachers are savvy about their professional evaluations and recognize the need for principals to use reliable and valid instruments, to standardize the evaluation process for all teachers, and to be as objective as possible. Some of the respondents articulated concerns about the lack of consistency in evaluation methods, both in house and across schools in the same district. Their comments reflect the need to reconsider the standard components of the evaluation process, including the assessment instruments, and the evaluator's assessment practices. Eighty-two percent of teachers characterized the teacher evaluation process at their school as consistent; their written responses, however, appeared to contradict this assertion. For example, several teachers expressed the notion that although "We all use the same forms," their district-wide experiences had been that "What is expected as a good answer at one school is often not a good answer at another." A few respondents noted that at some schools "the teachers fill out their own evaluation forms." One teacher communicated that he or she "had only been evaluated once in three years, and I know that in some other schools teachers are evaluated twice a year." One teacher wrote, "Our administrator conducts three formal evaluations every year. We are the only school out of seven that have that many. Some schools only have one evaluation." Another maintained, "Some principals are lax about the professional development process and other principals go overboard." One educator aptly struck at another important aspect of this issue stating, "I would guess that the same assessment form is used at every school; however, each principal likely utilizes the instrument differently."

Educators who had many years on the job or had transferred among his or her district's schools maintained that the lack of consistency in professional evaluations is readily apparent. This inconsistency is viewed as a demotivator to those being evaluated. If the "evaluation process is not carried out effectively and consistently," noted one educator, then teacher evaluation is not a helpful process.

The Principal as a Committed Evaluator

The respondents acknowledged an obligation to improving their pedagogical skills and viewed the evaluator as potentially assisting them in their quest to improve; many individuals agreeing that the principal's commitment to teacher evaluation can play a pivotal role in the relative success or failure of the process. One teacher stated succinctly, "It depends upon the role that the principal takes." A teacher explained that "I feel that if the evaluation process was done accurately and in the true meaning of helping a teacher to improve,

then the evaluation process will help me to improve.” One respondent noted, “Principals should continue to hold teachers up to the same high standards so that the teachers are always giving their best.” Many educators expressed the caveat that when the evaluator, namely the principal, is not motivated or is not inherently involved in the process as a school improvement method, then the evaluation process is an exercise in futility. Several teachers communicated that “many times the principal is not able to spend an adequate or equivalent amount of time in the classroom evaluating teachers.”

The Principal as Knowledgeable Educator and Evaluator

Many teachers perceive their principals as mentors and potential sources of valuable pedagogical information. From many of the comments, there is a sense that an experienced and successful educator is a more effective evaluator. Their responses were mixed, however, regarding the extent to which they perceived their principals as competent educators and knowledgeable evaluators. Accordingly, one teacher explained that teacher evaluation is helpful because “I receive feedback from a more experienced individual/administrator that is beneficial for me.” Another respondent shared that “Many times administrators are more experienced than the teachers they evaluate and their insight can be very helpful to a teacher in her delivery of instruction.”

Conversely, when principals are perceived to have little teaching or pedagogical experience, or reduced content knowledge, teachers’ belief in their principals’ abilities to be competent judges of teaching abilities is greatly reduced. Statements such as, “The administrators who have evaluated me in the past have never had the same (or even close) subject matter background,” “...the evaluation process is only effective if the evaluator has a good understanding of teaching,” and “I don’t feel that my administrator can give me any feedback, because he never taught in a classroom,” aptly sum up many of the respondents concerns with evaluator knowledge of teaching as a precursor component to being a successful evaluator.

Discussion

Williams (2000) suggested that teachers look to their principals for competent guidance in all aspects of the educational experience, including professional evaluation, and to provide direction toward the ongoing goal of teacher and school improvement. It is evident from this qualitative analysis that educators have an intuitive sense of those principal-related characteristics necessary to make the teacher evaluation process a valid and useful experience. Their principals are viewed both as an enhancement and, sometimes, a hindrance to successful teacher evaluation and teacher improvement. Teachers seem to view the process as holding great potential for improving their pedagogical knowledge, skills, and abilities. The theme throughout their responses showed that teachers expressed an understanding of the complex professional evaluation

process and identified many of the important related factors that are supported in the literature as critical to a successful teacher evaluation process. Principals' behaviors, expectations, and perceptions help build the climate of a school and these data suggest that teachers are looking to their principals to be leaders in this critical domain of assessment and evaluation. When teachers believe that their evaluators do not have the pedagogical background necessary to critically evaluate their teaching, they lack trust in the process, their evaluators, and the results.

Protheroe (2002) maintained that a principal's knowledge of teaching standards and what constitutes pedagogical skill is critical to the evaluation process. She further addressed the absolute necessity for a principal's sustained commitment to and involvement during professional evaluations. Similarly, Atkins (1996) found that a significant problem with the teacher evaluation process includes principals' lack of instructional competence or educational leadership experience. In addition, the principal must be able to effectively communicate constructive feedback to teachers after completing an evaluation. Teachers desire to be a partner in the feedback loop with their evaluators. In a study of 375 teachers, Bulach and Peterson (1999) found that their main complaint about their principals was there was not enough listening and trust in the teacher-principal relationship. These components must be first and foremost in an open, trusting, and honest reciprocal relationship between teachers and their principals. These interpersonal skills will promote the communication and feedback desired by teachers.

In conclusion, principals must carefully evaluate their own knowledge, skills, and abilities with regard to the critical process of teacher evaluation. They must be willing to adapt to the new expectations for today's educational systems and provide inspired, knowledgeable, and imaginative evaluations. Teachers appear to instinctively understand the dynamics necessary for a principal to engage in effective evaluation. The outcome of effective teacher evaluation has the potential to raise standards and substantially improve student achievement. The large scale reform initiatives that many, if not most, of American schools are faced with can be enhanced when the principals are committed, consistent, knowledgeable, and skilled evaluators of teachers' pedagogical skills. 🐾

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Appendix

Professional Appraisal Systems Survey

1. What are the components of an effective teacher evaluation instrument?
2. *What methods do principals employ to gain information about the quality of a teacher's performance?
3. Is the process of teacher evaluation helpful to you? Why or why not?
4. *Does the process of teacher evaluation/related feedback help you to improve the quality of your teaching? Why or why not?
5. Does the process of teacher evaluation lead to increased student achievement? Why or why not?
6. What is the most valuable part of the teacher evaluation process for the teacher?
7. *How can teacher evaluation be improved?
8. Is teacher evaluation linked to professional development in your school?
9. What is the purpose of teacher evaluation?
10. Does the process of teacher evaluation fulfill the purpose at your school?
11. *Is teacher evaluation performed consistently throughout your district? Why or why not?

*Questions designed to collect data on the teachers' holistic perceptions of principals as evaluators in the professional evaluation process.