

Research Article

Secondary School Administrators' Perceptions of Louisiana's Compass System as a Framework for Teacher Evaluation

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Abstract

Louisiana's relatively new Compass teacher observation and evaluation system is used to evaluate teacher quality or effectiveness in P-12 public schools. Secondary school administrators in one district were interviewed about their perceptions of the system and, especially, an iteration of the Danielson rubric used for teacher evaluation. Findings reveal that administrators' perceptions of the Compass system as an effective framework for teacher evaluations are mixed. While the administrators support some requirements of the system, concerns exist over the system's capability to reflect overall teacher performance. Given that teacher salary and sustained employment are based on results of this system, the stakes are high. This study examines the Compass system and its implementation through the perspective of secondary school administrators. Conclusions identify strengths, challenges, and considerations for the system's implementation.

Key Words

teacher evaluation system, Louisiana Compass evaluation system, Danielson framework

Introduction

Teacher quality has been consistently identified as the most important factor affecting student achievement (Looney, 2011; Muijs et al., 2014; Papay, 2012). This finding has spurred a nationwide movement toward the improvement of public school student achievement (Ahn, 2013).

Federally funded incentive programs, such as Race to the Top (RTTT) in 2009, reward states that adopt a more rigorous curriculum and performance-based pay for educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

As a result, several states have now implemented accountability measures aligned with teacher evaluation methods, which rate teacher quality and effectiveness (Hinchey, 2010; Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014; Louisiana Department of Education, n.d.).

Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, many researchers noted that there has been a dramatic shift in education toward school accountability (Kupermintz, 2003; Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005; Petersen & Young, 2004; Stumbo & McWalters, 2011; Valli, Croninger, & Walters, 2007).

Educational reform legislation, such as NCLB, sought methods to evaluate professional employees and assess student achievement and growth (Petersen & Young, 2004; Valli et al., 2007). The accountability measures that resulted stressed the importance of student standardized testing results (Kupermintz, 2003; Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005; Petersen & Young, 2004; Stumbo & McWalters, 2011). A few years later, the Obama administration began RTTT, a federally-funded grant

competition, to encourage states to revamp their academic curricula in order to further encourage student growth and achievement (Harris, Ingle, & Rutledge, 2014; Stumbo & McWalters, 2011).

This grant competition awarded funds to states based on each state's adoption of evaluation methods pertaining to school personnel and academic rigor (Stumbo & McWalters, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Welsh, 2011).

The two most commonly implemented evaluation systems for evaluating teacher performance and effectiveness include the Value-Added Model (VAM) and a standards-based teacher observation system (Looney, 2011; Muijs et al., 2014; Papay, 2012). Papay (2012) noted that the VAM evaluation method is quantitative and seen as an objective tool that is based on student achievement and growth in standardized tests compared to other students throughout the state.

The standards-based teacher evaluation method, on the other hand, refers to classroom observations that are subjective and can be skewed with the evaluator's biases. Of these two evaluation methods, the latter has been protested heavily amid perceptions of bias (Papay, 2012).

The scrutiny of these evaluation methods stems primarily from the accountability measures associated with their results, which include employment-related decisions such as tenure, pay, and dismissal (Act No. 1, 2012; Papay, 2012). Since the stakes are high for teachers, questions emerge concerning the validity of these teacher effectiveness and accountability measuring tools, especially in regards to the more

subjective teacher observation evaluation (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012).

In Louisiana, Act No. 54, which requires all educators to be formally observed and evaluated annually, was enacted into law in 2010 (Act No. 54, 2010). It called for teachers' annual evaluations to be scored and averaged with student academic achievement and growth on standardized tests in order to measure each teacher's effectiveness (Act No. 54, 2010; Stumbo & McWalters, 2011; Welsh, 2011). Act No. 54 specified that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) define measures of effectiveness and assigned respective values to those (Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014).

According to Papay (2012), teacher observation methods normally involve observations by expert evaluators to assess teacher performance and behavior relative to specific standards.

Whereas the VAM is quantitative and is viewed as objective, the teacher observation evaluations rely on classroom observations, which are subjective and may be perceived as bias by teachers.

Thus, teacher observation evaluations and their components have been heavily scrutinized and protested (Papay, 2012; Stumbo & McWalters, 2011).

Despite wide scrutiny, the Louisiana legislature passed Act No. 1, permitting all employment-related decisions to be based on performance, effectiveness, and qualifications (Act No. 1, 2012). Since this Act allows subjective methods to be factored into teacher salary and tenure decisions, questions have been raised concerning the effectiveness of the teacher observation evaluation system as an

effective method for determining teacher salary and tenure (Papay, 2012; Stumbo & McWalters, 2011).

Previous studies have determined that there is support from teachers and principals regarding teacher evaluation methods (Bulbul, Tunc, Ozdem, & Inandi, 2013; Champ, 2013; Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Vernaza, 2012). However, there have also been concerns regarding the validity and reliability of these methods (Papay, 2012; Vernaza, 2012). Regardless of such concerns, like Louisiana, several states have adopted accountability measures that allow employment-related decisions to be based on performance and rated effectiveness (Petersen & Young, 2004).

This qualitative phenomenological study explored Louisiana public school leaders' perceptions of Louisiana's Compass teacher observation evaluation system as a framework for assessing teacher performance and determining teacher effectiveness.

The investigation examined those perceptions in terms of: (1) leaders' abilities to implement the Compass evaluation system accurately, (2) quality of the Compass evaluation system, and (3) influence of the Compass evaluation system on teacher performance.

Methodology

Design

The research design for this study was qualitative with a phenomenological narrative approach in order to answer the question: What perceptions do public school administrators have of the Compass teacher feedback, support, and evaluation system as a method for assessing teacher performance?

Creswell (2013) noted that the purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe

commonalities behind individuals shared experiences. Ultimately, the goal in a phenomenological study is to develop a composite description of the meaning and essences of the experiences from all individuals (Moustakas, 1994).

In order to capture detailed accounts of the participants' experiences, it is important for the researcher to conduct face-to-face interviews with each participant (Creswell, 2013). In this study, interviews allowed for the documentation of school leaders' descriptions of their lived experiences with Louisiana's Compass teacher observation evaluation system, and those interviews yielded findings that are unique to the context of Louisiana's model and are not necessarily generalizable to all teacher observation evaluation systems.

However, these narrative descriptions will aid in future efforts to further examine the Louisiana Compass system and, hopefully, systems used in similar contexts.

Setting

To protect confidentiality, the pseudonym ABC District was used for the school district in southwest Louisiana selected for this study. This district is the fifth largest in Louisiana and was chosen for this study due to its balance of rural and urban schools; that includes 34 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and 11 high schools.

Within these schools, the ABC District educates approximately 31,980 students with 13 percent of these students categorized under Special Education and 64 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged. Throughout ABC, administrators have implemented the Compass teacher support and evaluation system since 2012 with the ultimate goal of raising student achievement (Louisiana Department of Education, 2015).

Participants

As part of the Compass teacher observation evaluation system, administrators must formally evaluate teacher performance in the classroom using the Danielson rubric (Act No. 54, 2010).

Therefore, all administrators who participated in this study were selected from schools within the ABC district, had at least two years of experience as an administrator, and had previously conducted at least one Compass teacher observation evaluation during the duration of a school year.

This criterion was used in the selection process because Compass is relatively new, having only been implemented in Louisiana public schools since 2012 (Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014).

Additionally, experience and understanding of the role as an administrator is also paramount to this study. The participant selection for this study depended on the purposive sampling of administrators.

Ten participants who met the study's criteria were interviewed regarding their administrative experiences with the Compass teacher observation evaluation system. Of these 10 participants, two were female, and eight were male. Additionally, 50% were principals, and 50% assistant principals at their respective schools.

However, six of the administrators worked at a high school in ABC, while four were administrators at middle schools. Notably, four of these participants were administrators at rural schools, whereas six were administrators at urban schools. These participants had between two and 29 years of experience as administrators, with an average of 9.6 years of experience. The ethnicities of the

participants included African-American, Hispanic, and Caucasian.

Data collection

Data for this study were obtained through individualized, face-to-face interviews. Dates, times, and locations of the interviews were at the discretion of the participants. The interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 60 minutes in duration. Interview guided protocol questions were developed as an outline to gain information about the perspectives of these participants as well as to gain information about the factors that might contribute to their perceptions.

The interview guided protocol questions served as a method to encourage participants to share their personal stories concerning their experiences with the teacher observation evaluation system. Furthermore, the guided protocol was created based on the literature of the teacher observation evaluation method and the research questions. Each interview followed the same outline of questions.

Data analysis

Creswell's (2013) recommendations for qualitative research data analysis, which involve arranging and structuring the data, coding the data, and finally representing the data, were followed. Interview transcriptions were prepared from the participants' remarks. Recordings were transcribed carefully.

Transcriptions were examined for patterns, primarily common key terms and phrases. Recurring key terms and phrases were noted during transcript analysis. Those terms and phrases were examined repeatedly to condense duplicative or otherwise synonymous terms or phrases. Once complete, the results were deemed themes and labeled according to the common characteristics or meanings among the terms and phrases.

Member checking, thick descriptions, and acknowledgement of potential researcher bias were employed to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

Discussion of Themes

Three major themes emerged from the data. Each relates specifically to Louisiana's Compass system, and the nuances found for each are discussed.

Implementation of Compass system

Participants provided explanations of their perceptions of the purpose of the Compass teacher observation and evaluation system, provided descriptions of their training and preparation, identified strengths and weaknesses associated with the training, discussed their ability to mentor and provide feedback to teachers, and described their perception of the teachers' reception to this guidance.

Based on the data, implementation of the teacher observation and evaluation system varies from school to school based on individual administrators' approaches and personal beliefs concerning the pre-conference, observation, post-conference, and purpose of the Compass system as a whole.

These findings are consistent with Papay (2012) regarding the subjectivity associated with teacher observation systems. However, in addition to the subjectivity of the observation, biases were found in the expectations given during the pre-conference and administrative approach to post-conference feedback. This further supports Papay, as well as Benedict, Thomas, Kimerling, and Leko (2013) who identified biases and inaccuracies found within every component of an evaluation system. These and the impact of these factors on the reliability and validity of the evaluation tool's results must be recognized and

considered when making decisions about teacher quality.

Additionally, administrators expressed confusion regarding the expectations concerning their roles and delivery of expectations for classroom teachers. This conclusion is consistent with Danielson and McGreal (2000); Sartain, Stoelinga, and Brown (2011); and Sloan (2006) who described the impact teacher observation and evaluation systems have school-wide.

Specifically, Sloan described policy change impacting classroom practices and further identified inconsistent practices in each classroom due to individual translation of state policy requirements.

Quality of Compass system

Participants were asked to describe the strengths and weaknesses associated with each component of the teacher observation and evaluation system. Participants also provided their insights on the impact the teacher observation and evaluation system had on teacher performance and student achievement.

Hill and Grossman (2013) described states adopting a comprehensive instrument that clearly defines expectations and standards for teachers. Furthermore, these researchers emphasized that such teacher observation instruments must be flexible to all subject and content specific classes and encourage practices that are useful, effective, and promote student growth and achievement (Hill & Grossman, 2013).

However, findings from the current study indicated that the state of Louisiana adopted certain components in the Danielson rubric instead of adopting the complete rubric. Participants identified the negative impact this

has on the scoring system for teachers as well as the inability to apply this rubric to teacher performance in all subject areas and grade levels. Moreover, participants described teachers changing their classroom practices in order to achieve a high rating on the abbreviated rubric.

Participants expressed concern over the inaccurate portrayal of these classroom observations due to teachers putting on a dog and pony show.

Darling-Hammond (2012) emphasized that it is imperative for evaluators to be able to distinguish teacher quality and teaching quality.

The findings from the interviews indicated that administrators began the teacher evaluation process of teacher quality and teaching quality in the pre-conference. Participants identified that they became aware of the multi-faceted structure of the classroom during this conference. They would have been unaware otherwise.

However, some participants acknowledged that this positive aspect is sometimes limited based on constraints on administrators' time. Participants admitted that the conferencing is not always done with integrity and fidelity but that it is most beneficial to both administrators and teachers and can make administrators more effective observers during the teacher evaluations.

Influence of Compass system on teacher performance

Participants described the effects the observation and evaluation process had on teacher performance, student achievement, and school improvement practices; they also described the impact recommendations given to teachers had on teaching practices.

According to Jaquith, Mindich, Wei, and Darling-Hammond (2011), individual schools have more recently taken responsibility to promote a culture of inquiry among their educators and support collaboration among teachers to improve their skills and stay current with their teaching practices.

Additionally, Danielson (2011) specified that these professional development opportunities can simply include professional conversations between colleagues. When educators are able to collaborate on evaluation results, the evaluation results are better received and therefore more useful to teacher growth (Hinchey, 2010).

Similarly, participants described the teacher observation and evaluation system as guiding professional development, such as Professional Learning Communities and faculty in-services. Participants also indicated that these professional development opportunities address aspects of the observation and components within the rubric teachers struggle with in order to promote success.

Despite best efforts, participants still acknowledge that participants seem to implement more drastic changes to their teaching strategies during observations. Nevertheless, administrators admit that they are seeing small positive changes in teaching strategies throughout their staff on a daily basis due to encouragement from Professional Learning Communities and faculty in-services that focus on best teaching practices promoted through the Compass teacher observation and evaluation system's components and resources.

Additionally, Benedict et al. reported that teachers find more meaningful insight when discussing evaluation expectations. These discussions are likely to yield implementation of best teaching practices associated with the

expectations (Danielson, 2011; Hinchey, 2010). Interviews supported these findings.

Administrators offered that they could only do so much toward mentoring and providing opportunities for teacher growth; therefore, teachers would benefit from constructive conversations with peers about the evaluation expectations and results. They believed they were not solely responsible for teacher development and concluded that teachers must have the intrinsic motivation to grow and change with best teaching methods in order to succeed in the observation evaluations.

Conclusions

This study investigated public school administrators' perceptions regarding Louisiana's Compass teacher observation and evaluation system as a method for assessing teacher performance.

Results show that administrators' perceived requisite pre- and post-conferences are the most important and influential aspects associated with the teacher observation and evaluation system. Participants identified that these conferences promotes the continuation of teacher growth and development. They perceived the conferences to be more valuable than the observation evaluation itself, which is consistent with findings by Danielson (2011), Gartia (2013), Jaquith et al. (2011), and Papay (2012).

In addition to these strengths, administrators identified problems with the observation task, the rubric, and their abilities to implement each component of the Compass framework due to time constraints associated with administrative positions; this finding is consistent with Benedict et al.'s (2013) findings regarding administrators' work and the time they have to complete that work. Moreover, and consistent with Danielson (2007) and Harris et

al. (2014), administrators noticed inconsistencies between the observation evaluations and the accuracy of these observations in comparison with daily teacher performance.

Most notably, teachers routinely doing good work and fostering academic success among students in manners appropriate for their students may not have scored favorably during evaluations because they did not adhere to specific practices prescribed on the observation rubric.

Implications for practice

This study clarified that administrators understand and acknowledge the value of the pre- and post-conferences; however, the findings highlight administrators' perceived limitations associated with their roles in the teacher observation and evaluation system. Similarly, Benedict et al. (2013) and the findings of this study suggest that when administrators are knowledgeable about the expectations and requirements of an observation and evaluation system, improved teaching practices and professional collaboration and growth are promoted.

Additionally, when administrators have a positive attitude and are willing to provide resources, they foster success and positivity throughout their faculty (Roberson & Roberson, 2009).

With that, implications for practice include the following:

1. In addition to leading Professional Learning Communities, train teacher leaders or instructional coaches to perform teacher observations and evaluations in order to lessen the burden on administrators. This could increase the quality of teacher

observation and evaluation process and its components (Danielson, 2011).

2. Provide professional development for administrators that define all components and verbiage on the Danielson rubric in order to make the tool and how the tool is used more objective and consistent across the district, which is a recommended matter for superintendents to consider and which is supported by Danielson (2011), Darling-Hammond (2012), and Hill and Grossman (2013). Moreover, superintendents are encouraged to utilize a Professional Learning Community model where administrators engage in a community of practice with their peers to provide peer support for those professionals conducting evaluations comparable to the support suggested for those professionals being evaluated.
3. Lessen accountability associated with the observation and individual teacher scoring. Instead, transition the current accountability framework that may yield erroneous results of a teacher's overall, long-term quality to a formative teacher growth and development framework as proposed by Sartain et al. (2011).
4. Adopt a thorough or complete rubric for the teacher observation and evaluation process that is applicable to all grade levels and subject areas (Hill & Grossman, 2013).

The Louisiana Compass teacher observation and evaluation system is still

young, and, based on our findings, its implementation is somewhat fragmented. Administrators feel that their roles within the system are still unclear and that the system overall does not portray all teachers' overall performance accurately. This yields a process sometimes regarded as punitive rather than

formative. Because administrators are still becoming familiar with the system and methods for implementing it successfully in their schools, further research is warranted and could provide the State-level decision-makers with valuable feedback "from the field" as the Compass system's use continues.

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