



Why principals often give overly high ratings on teacher evaluations

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ABSTRACT

Recent research found that principals who are required to evaluate their teachers often give higher ratings than what they think these teachers deserve. This study aimed to explore principals' considerations while evaluating teachers. Participants were 39 Israeli principals. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were analyzed in four stages – condensing, coding, categorizing, and theorizing. Four considerations emerged for principals' over-evaluations: (1) time constraints/prioritization (low perceived value for high time investment); (2) evaluation's ineffectiveness for improving teaching (via teacher development or dismissal); (3) the imprecision of teacher evaluation measurements; and (4) impingement on interpersonal relationships. This study demonstrated how principals serve as local mid-level policymakers by actively buffering, rather than bridging, the policies imposed on their schools from above.

1. Theoretical background

Since the turn of the century, teacher evaluation has been introduced around the world with the goal of upgrading teacher functioning so as to raise the level of student learning (Tuytens & Devos, 2017). In fact, teacher evaluation serves as a key component in many countries' contemporary educational policies that aim to improve their school systems (Marzano & Toth, 2013; OECD, 2009). In particular, current accountability trends, which have made teachers individually accountable for student achievement to a greater extent than ever before, have increased the role of teacher evaluations in educational policies (Marchant, David, Rodgers, & German, 2015). Therefore, today's principals are required to evaluate their teachers regularly (Donaldson & Papay, 2015; Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016).

However, researchers found that principals very often give their teachers the highest possible ratings (Donaldson, 2009; Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009), whereas teachers are rated as unsatisfactory only in rare cases (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017; Toch & Rothman, 2008). Such skewed ratings do not allow for discrimination between effective and ineffective teachers and do not provide high quality feedback to improve teachers' functioning (Marzano & Toth, 2013; Wechsler et al., 2007). Yet, the literature to date has barely investigated principals' core explanations for their over-evaluation of teachers (e.g., Kraft & Gilmour, 2017).

To further elucidate why principals frequently give higher ratings than they think teachers deserve, the current study aimed to explore Israeli principals' considerations during teacher evaluation. Thus, this study qualitatively examined a maximally differentiated sample of

principals to elicit their perceptions and interpretations of the Israeli teacher evaluation policy, seeking to explain their reasons for inflating teachers' ratings.

1.1. Teacher evaluation

Recently, teacher evaluation has become a preferred policy lever at the federal, state, and local levels (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016; Tuytens & Devos, 2017). In general, teacher evaluation has two basic purposes: measuring teachers and developing teachers (Marzano, 2012). Teacher measurement discerns differences between various teachers' levels of effectiveness, while teacher development provides teachers with meaningful feedback about their practice in order to bring about improved instruction and achievements (Donaldson, 2009; Wechsler et al., 2007). To achieve these goals, principals from all over the world are required to constantly evaluate their teachers (Marzano & Toth, 2013; OECD, 2009).

However, an increasing body of research has indicated that teacher evaluation by principals actually fails to provide reliable information regarding teacher quality, because teachers almost always receive high ratings from their principals. Toch and Rothman (2008) discovered that 87% of the 600 schools in the Chicago school system did not rate even one teacher as unsatisfactory even though 10% of those schools were classified as "failing educationally" (Marzano & Toth, 2013, p. 2). The rating scale used in Chicago included four grades: superior, excellent, satisfactory and unsatisfactory. Overall, only 0.3% of all Chicago's 25,000 teachers were rated as unsatisfactory, while 93% of teachers in the system were rated as "superior" or "excellent" (The New Teacher

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Project, 2007). Similarly, Weisberg et al. (2009) found that in a district with almost 35,000 tenured teachers, only 0.4% were given the lowest rating, while almost 70% received the highest. Weisberg et al. called this phenomenon "the Widget Effect" (p.4):

The Widget Effect describes the tendency of school districts to assume classroom effectiveness is the same from teacher to teacher. This decades-old fallacy fosters an environment in which teachers cease to be understood as individual professionals, but rather as interchangeable parts.

Weisberg et al., 2009 further demonstrated that these inflated formal teacher ratings did not reflect evaluators' actual ability to recognize differences in teachers' effectiveness. They found that a high percentage of principals and teachers (81% and 57%, respectively) could identify a poor-performing teacher in their school, despite the fact that in most districts less than 1% of teachers were given an unsatisfactory rating. More recently, Kraft and Gilmour (2017) revisited these findings in 24 states that had adopted large-scale reforms in their teacher-evaluation methods. Although the full distribution of ratings was found to vary widely across states, with 0.7%–28.7% of teachers rated as below proficient and 6%–62% rated as above proficient, the percentage of teachers rated as unsatisfactory remained as before, at less than 1% in the vast majority of states.

In a preliminary attempt to qualitatively explore these quantitative findings, Kraft and Gilmour (2017) also interviewed 24 principals, who assigned their teachers an overall performance rating on a four-category rating scale based on their holistic assessment of evidence from various sources (performance measures based on standardized tests were not incorporated). Kraft and Gilmour's (2017) study yielded four possible reasons why so few teachers received below-proficient ratings, which often did not reflect principals' perceptions of teachers' actual performance. First, principals reported lacking the time needed to rate a teacher as unsatisfactory. Rating teachers as below proficient requires intensive amounts of time, which principals seldom have, to document their performance ("up to four unannounced formal observations," p. 241) and later to provide support by writing up and implementing improvement plans. Second, principals factored in teachers' potential and motivation when assigning an evaluation rating, especially when referring to teachers who were just beginning their careers. Third, principals wanted to avoid the personal discomfort involved in rating teachers as below proficient, particularly because such a rating might lead to these teachers' dismissal. Fourth, principals did not rate teachers as unsatisfactory due to their preference to avoid the long, laborious process of removing and replacing teachers. The current study sought to further elaborate on these initial interview findings, by conducting an in-depth qualitative analysis of principals' considerations while evaluating their teachers. Moreover, replicating Kraft and Gilmour's (2017) study in various socio-cultural contexts may enable generalization of their findings to broader populations, possibly substantiating their international validity.

1.2. Teacher evaluation vis-à-vis instructional leadership

Teacher evaluation has often been considered among the components of principals' instructional leadership (e.g., Hallinger & Wang, 2015; May & Supovitz, 2011; Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). In the instructional educational leadership approach, school principals engage in a wide range of activities aiming to promote their expected primary objective of explicitly improving the school's teaching and learning for all students (Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008; Murphy, Neumerski, Goldring, Grissom, & Porter, 2016; Shaked, 2018; Walker & Slear, 2011). Despite considerable effort invested by researchers and policymakers in campaigns over the last 40 years aimed at framing instructional leadership as a key component of the principal's role (Prytula, Noonan, & Hellsten, 2013), recent studies have shown that the amount of time that most principals

devote to actual activities aiming to improve their schools' teaching and learning has hardly changed (Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2016). Although some principals do practice instructional leadership, many others do not (Camburn, Spillane, & Sebastian, 2010; Goldring et al., 2008; Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013; Hornig, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; May & Supovitz, 2011).

Several main barriers to progress have been mentioned in the literature in regard to principals' investment of time and effort toward instructional leadership activities, although these barriers did not specifically relate to the teacher evaluation component of instructional leadership. First, principals may lack sufficient time to engage in direct attempts to improve teaching and learning (Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2016), largely because of ongoing structural limits on their time, which pressure them to attend to other issues such as student affairs (Camburn et al., 2010). Moreover, while instructional leadership tasks require uninterrupted blocks of time for activities such as planning, writing, conferencing, observing, analyzing curriculum, and developing professional growth activities for staff, a principal's average workday is usually made up of a mosaic of activities, each of which is given brief attention only (Murphy et al., 2016; Prytula et al., 2013). Inasmuch as considerable time is spent on unplanned events and crisis solutions, principals' efforts to work on instructional matters seldom receive sufficient time resources during day-to-day school operations.

In addition to time constraints, many principals seem to lack the explicit knowledge-base and skill-set necessary to function as instructional leaders. Their "instructional leadership content knowledge" appears to be underdeveloped – referring to knowledge concerning how students learn specific subjects, which teaching methods are effective in which contexts, and the like (Goldring et al., 2015; Stein & Nelson, 2003). "Without an understanding of the knowledge necessary for teachers to teach well... school leaders will be unable to perform essential school improvement functions such as monitoring instruction and supporting teacher development" (Spillane & Louis, 2002, p. 97).

One of the capabilities needed to engage in effective instructional leadership is the capacity to build good relationships (Robinson, 2010). The influence of principals on students is mainly indirect (Murphy et al., 2016). Principals who enact instructional leadership do so by influencing teachers' teaching strategies and by increasing teachers' motivation, loyalty, satisfaction, and other factors that, in turn, influence student outcomes (Blase & Kirby, 2009; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Supovitz et al., 2010; Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, & Peetsma, 2012). Through such positive relationships, instructional leaders can engage with teachers in productive and respectful conversations about the quality of teaching and learning (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015). Indeed, positive principal-teacher relationships were shown to help teachers adopt more effective teaching practices (Alsobaie, 2015), demonstrating a critical role in the improvement of student achievements (Edgerson, Kritsonis, & Herrington, 2006; Price & Moolenaar, 2015; Price, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

1.3. Uncovering school principals' policy interpretation as mid-level policymakers

Principals stand at the school "doorstep," as a mediating agent between the extra- and intra-school worlds (Kelchtermans, Piot, & Ballet, 2011; Maxcy, Sungtong, & Nguyen, 2010), negotiating between inside (within-school) desires and capacities and outside (national) demands and expectations (Louis & Robinson, 2012; Shaked & Schechter, 2017). Yet, rather than acting as mere gatekeepers (Salter, 2014), principals often act as unofficial mid-level policymakers who adjust and modify external policy to their particular school (Diamond, 2012; Louis & Robinson, 2012; Spillane & Kenney, 2012). By mediating between the school and external authorities, adapting and incorporating particular policy elements and practices to each school's specific characteristics, principals create new norms that change the original policy over time (Diamond, 2012; Louis & Robinson, 2012). In this unique position,

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