



THE IMPLICATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH TEACHER PERCEPTION AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE DANIELSON FRAMEWORK IN SELECTED HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE U.S.A.

PETER MONAGHAN

Glenbard West High School, Illinois, USA

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ABSTRACT

The improvement of teacher pedagogical practice is a central focus of contemporary school reform in the U.S.A. Moreover, the systematic evaluation of teacher pedagogical practice is viewed as an essential means to improve student achievement. The Danielson Framework is a theoretical construct that is widely used by school districts in the U.S.A. to conduct the evaluation of teachers. This paper is based on the summary findings of a study conducted in three selected suburban Chicago high schools in the State of Illinois. The study assessed teacher perceptions of their understanding of the Framework, teacher perceptions of their evaluators understanding of the Framework, and the extent to which teachers altered pedagogical practice as a result of teacher evaluation. Data were collected through survey, interviews, document analysis, and focus groups and were analyzed employing descriptive statistics and qualitative research methods to identify codes and themes. An analysis of the data revealed that there is an ongoing need to develop professional practices that enhance collaboration and deepen the mutual understanding among stakeholders of components within the Framework. While the survey results demonstrated a clear understanding of the Framework among the teachers, it was also revealed that teacher evaluation has a low impact on teacher's pedagogical practice. There are important implications of this study related to teacher development and the targeting of particular components within the evaluation that are high impact. The study highlights the limitations of teacher evaluation as a tool to improve pedagogical practice. Implications for practice for school administrators responsible for the planning, development, and implementation of teacher evaluation are presented.

Part I: Review of Literature

Teacher Evaluation and its Connection to Student Achievement

School districts throughout the U.S.A. today are focused on measuring and ensuring student achievement. In an effort to accomplish this goal, many school districts have committed to developing more rigorous teacher evaluations that are supported by research and designed to improve overall teacher performance. Underlying this change is the contention that improved teacher competence and knowledge can positively affect student learning. School districts have recognized that planning lessons, developing strong instructional practices and maintaining professionalism are all key to student achievement. Hanushek (2011) summarizes the importance of teacher qualifications while also identifying some of the challenges with which policy makers and administrators are faced:

Literally hundreds of research studies have focused on the importance of teachers for student achievement. Two key findings emerge. First, teachers are very important; no other measured aspect of schools is nearly as important in determining student achievement. Second, it has not been possible to identify any specific characteristics of teachers that are reliably related to student outcomes. Understanding these findings is central to the subsequent discussions of policies and their underlying economics. (p. 3)

A sound teacher evaluation model recognizes the need for schools to hire and retain the very best teachers possible. This is only possible with a teacher evaluation system that is supported by research, articulated by districts and understood by teachers.

At the close of the twentieth century, teacher accountability and the impact that it had on student learning became a central driving force for educators and policy-makers throughout the U.S.A. Influencing this change was the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001). This law required states to provide evidence that schools were staffed with highly qualified teachers by the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year. Furthermore, each state was to determine the qualifications required to meet the standard as a highly qualified teacher

(Strong, 2011). Most states chose to define “highly qualified” in terms of licensure and training (NCLB, 2001). This is what Michelle Rhee, a former chancellor of Washington D. C., public Schools, calls “front-end qualifications” (Strong, 2011). Thus, in recent years determining teacher quality through teacher evaluation has become an important focus of education reformers.

Elements of a Strong Teacher Evaluation Process

Developing a meaningful evaluation system for teachers can be difficult. A relevant assessment tool must reflect three distinct needs: accountability and a summative judgment of individual teachers; formative feedback that supports ongoing professional development; and systematic feedback to human resources that would, in theory, help to develop sound practices (Maslow & Kelley, 2012). Administrators in schools throughout the country have struggled to address all of these needs at the same time. Educational researchers have recognized that there are inherent inconsistencies and shortcomings when talking about teacher evaluation.

By the end of the first decade of the new century, the inadequacies of teacher evaluation systems were well known and a matter of public discussion. This enhanced level of public awareness, along with federal legislation, placed educator evaluation in the spotlight. (Marzano, 2013, p. 3)

Typically, evaluation systems have suffered from inconsistencies in implementation, lack of understanding, and competing demands (Maslow & Kelley, 2012). Any meaningful evaluation system must be clear and consistent in order to be effective. Charlotte Danielson sums up the importance of tethering teacher evaluation to evidence and a consistent set of expectations:

Any evaluation system used for high stakes personnel decisions should be highly evolved. For example, does it clarify what will serve as evidence for each item in the instructional framework, such as observation, planning documents, or conferences? Are the words in the rubric clear enough to enable both teachers and supervisors differentiate one level of proficiency from the rest? (2012, p. 34)

Developing an instrument or model to evaluate teachers has become of paramount importance to policy makers and administrators. One influential report titled *The Widget Effect* (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern & Keeling, 2009) portrayed an overall failure of evaluation systems to provide accurate and credible information about individual teachers' instructional performance.

Improvements in Teacher Evaluation

A significant step was taken in advancing the importance of teacher evaluation with the introduction of the comprehensive study taken on through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Researchers funded by this foundation conducted a study titled *Gathering Feedback for Teaching: Combining High Quality Observations with Student Surveys and Achievement Gains* (Kane & Staiger, 2012). These researchers concluded that high quality teacher evaluation would require clear standards, certified raters and multiple observations. Concurrent with the Kane and Staiger (2012) study was a federal initiative designed to stimulate reform in teacher evaluation. The Race to the Top Act (2011) was developed to motivate nationwide education reform and, in particular, to reform teacher evaluation (Marzano & Toth, 2013). The Race to the Top Act (RTT) included the recommendation that states adopt new teacher evaluation systems that would include a performance-based system that takes student growth into account.

Many states within the U.S.A. were then motivated to pass legislation that would position them to get funding from RTT (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2011). In the state of Illinois, this effort resulted in the Performance Evaluation Reform Act (2010) which required all schools to change how teacher and principal performance is measured. The Performance Evaluation Reform Act, (PERA) was passed in 2010 and mandated that all districts in the state of Illinois design and implement performance evaluations systems that assess teacher skills as well as incorporate student growth. PERA furthermore established that the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council (PEAC), which was comprised of teachers, principals, superintendents and other stakeholders, would advise Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE)

on how these evaluation systems are developed and implemented (ISBE, 2011). These recommendations apply not only to principals and assistant principals but also to teachers. The new law, as interpreted and enforced by ISBE, has several important components that relate to teacher evaluation, but one important one was the requirement to evaluate teachers using an instructional framework that was based on improved instruction, planning and classroom management.

Many school districts in Illinois adopted the Danielson Framework for Teaching (hereafter referred to as FFT) as their framework for teacher evaluation. The FFT is a theoretical construct that identifies 22 components as essential areas of teacher focus that positively impact student learning (Danielson, 1996).

An underlying assumption in teacher evaluation is the existence of evidence-based teaching practices that are identifiable and influence student achievement. More explicitly, teacher evaluation is based on the idea that there is a "codified or codifiable aggregation of knowledge, skill, understanding and technology, of ethics and disposition, of collective responsibility – as well as a means for representing and communicating it" (Shulman, 1987, p. 4). Some educational reformers hold that there are pedagogical skills and practices that result in higher academic achievement. They see "teacher quality solely in terms of classroom practice rather than of the front end qualifications or personal attributes that a teacher may possess" (Strong, 2011, p. 16). It is important to understand how certain teaching practices are connected to student achievement. As a profession, there has been a growing understanding that there are a preferred set of teaching practices that represent a more effective impact on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Strong (2011) claims there is evidence that certain teaching practices are more closely correlated with student achievement than other practices. His research demonstrates that there may be a set of effective teaching practices that relates to all contexts (Strong, 2011). The evidence associated with the impact of teaching practice on student achievement has subsequently been identified in educational research literature as process-product research (Wilén & Clegg, 1986). Wilén and Clegg (1986) further explain that outcomes from research employing the

process-product research theoretical framework suggest procedures that teachers can employ to increase student achievement (p. 153). Understanding the research and literature that relates to the components within the four domains of the Danielson FFT was essential to this study. Furthermore, there are a number of research studies, based on the process-product theoretical construct, that have documented a relationship between teachers' performance on the Danielson domains and student achievement (Brophy & Good, 1984; Ames & Archer, 1988; Zimmerman, 1990). Much of this research contends that there are teachers who excel in these high level practices can expect higher student achievement and learning.

For a system of performance evaluation to be successful, there must be some knowledge and understanding on the part of those being evaluated and on those conducting the evaluation. Ultimately, there must be some impact on future teaching methods and strategies. The purpose of this study was to uncover teacher perception of their own understanding of the instrument while also determining their perceptions of how the evaluation process impacted their own teaching.

Part II: Methodology

The study was designed to gain an understanding of 1) teacher perceptions of the teacher evaluation instrument in a suburban Midwest high school district and 2) how teacher evaluation impacts their pedagogical practice (Redacted, 2016). The three research questions were:

1. What is the extent of teachers' perceived understanding of the teacher evaluation tool, specifically, the various components used in the District model?
2. What are teachers' perceptions regarding the expertise of their evaluators in regard to the Danielson Framework for Teaching?
3. Does the evaluation instrument impact teacher pedagogical practices and if so, how?

The particular suburban Midwest high school district examined, is a high school district in a western suburb of Chicago comprised of four large high schools. The district serves over 8000 students and employs

over 500 teachers and 32 administrators. It is the third largest high school district in the state of Illinois and viewed by many in the area as a premier high school district within the state. The suburban Midwest high school district adopted the Danielson model, and developed an evaluation handbook and establishing a rubric where each component within the FFT was able to be rated. In doing these things, the district had committed itself to the belief that this evaluation tool is clear, cohesive and effective in changing teacher behavior and improving student learning. The district was interested in supporting this study as a means of enhancing their ongoing efforts to modify and improve the teacher evaluation instrument and process. The study was approved by the Roosevelt University IRB and the suburban Midwest high school district being studied.

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, which consisting first of a quantitative and then a qualitative phase. In the first phase, quantitative data was collected using a survey titled "Teachers' Perceptions of the Framework for Teaching Survey." The survey was developed by the researcher and was comprised of four sections (Redacted, 2015). The first three sections of the survey included a number of questions designed to measure teacher understanding of the evaluation system, teacher perception regarding the expertise of their evaluators, and the degree to which their pedagogical practice changed as a result of the evaluation. The fourth section of the survey included a number of demographic questions useful in profiling the respondents. The survey was administered to 245 certified teachers who had undergone a full evaluation during the fall semester of the 2013-2014 academic year. One of the four high schools within the district was excluded due to the researcher's role as an administrator at that school. The survey was administered electronically using the approved Redacted University survey tool, Qualtrics.

The data from the survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics, examining standard deviation, variance and means. After analyzing the survey data, the researcher began the second phase of the study by interviewing six teachers out of the group that had been surveyed. These teachers were selected randomly after indicating interest in participation. The qualitative semi-structured interviews helped codify and confirm

findings drawn from the quantitative portion. The researcher also conducted document analysis of key district and school teacher evaluation documents including the teacher evaluation handbook. The researcher also compiled field notes and a reflective journal during the study. Codes and themes were derived through the triangulation of survey data, interview transcripts, document analysis, and reflective journal.

Part III: Findings and Conclusions

The findings of this study led to a three important conclusions. First, teachers who participated in this study saw themselves as having a clear understanding of the Danielson components. The survey results indicate that mean scores associated with teacher perception of their own understanding of the Danielson components were consistently higher than mean scores associated with teacher perception of their evaluator's understanding of these same components. Although, the high mean scores associated with teacher perception of their clear understanding of the Danielson components were not necessarily reflected in the semi-structured interviews. Second, the quantitative and qualitative results suggested that teacher respondents perceived their evaluator's understanding of the Danielson components at a consistently high level. The quantitative data suggested that for each component, teachers' perception of their understanding of the Danielson FFT was higher than their perception of their evaluator's understanding of the Danielson components. Additionally, both the quantitative and qualitative portion of the research indicated that the evaluation process had little to no impact on instructional practices. Finally, survey results clearly indicated that mean scores associated with teacher perception of the extent to which they altered their teaching practices within the Danielson components as a result of the formal evaluation were consistently low as reflected in the mean scores of the survey.

Part IV: Recommendations

The results from this study revealed challenges and opportunities for improvement associated with adopting the Danielson Framework as an evaluation model. While District 87 developed

an evaluation process where teachers have confidence regarding their understanding and their evaluator's understanding of the areas in which they are measured, many admitted that they had not significantly changed their teaching practices as a result of the evaluation (Redacted, 2015). This study suggests that in order to have an impact on teaching and learning, administrators and evaluators should intentionally embrace specific actions associated with the evaluation. These activities would include prioritizing or emphasizing important Danielson components, supporting the components with specific professional development, emphasizing collaboration between evaluators and teachers and allowing teachers an opportunity to implement practices associated with the evaluation. Four key recommendations for District 87 emerged from the study. These recommendations, while idiosyncratic to this particular district, have broader implications for schools and districts using the Danielson framework for the purposes of teacher evaluation. These four recommendations are as follows:

1. Prioritize individual Danielson components that are associated with learning standards.

Having a total of 22 components within an evaluation can prove to be confusing for teachers and evaluators alike. These components do not all have similar impact on student learning. Districts implementing the FFT should consider prioritizing components to help clarify the central goals of an evaluation. Additionally, there are certain components that are recognized as having a more significant impact on student learning than some of the others. For example, those components found within the *instruction* domain should be viewed as key levers that promote effective teaching along with student growth. Within this domain, the components of communicating clearly, engaging students in learning and providing feedback to students are all areas that, if done well, impact teaching and learning more significantly than some of the other areas or components. For example, teachers who implement strategies around clear communication typically establish specific learning targets that are made explicit to students at the beginning of each lesson.

Teachers post these learning targets and explain and discuss them with the students. Throughout the lesson, these targets are revisited. These learning targets are associated with units and standards that have been identified by the team of teachers who teach the course. Another component within the instruction domain, providing feedback to students, involves checking for understanding and then effectively sharing with students their individual progress. This provides additional clarity related to these learning targets. Finally, teachers who are able to implement strategies that maintain student engagement establish classroom activities that are aligned with practices that allow student to interact with the content as well as each other. A high degree of engagement indicates that students are challenged and universally connected to the activities of the classroom.

In designing effective evaluation procedures, districts might also emphasize certain components based on individual teacher needs, experience in terms of years served and the particular discipline taught. Currently, the framework and The Handbook do not make these distinctions. For example, less experienced teachers might need some of the components associated with maintaining records, parent communication, managing procedures and managing student behavior – all important areas that need to be mastered in the first few years of teaching. More veteran teachers might need a bigger focus to be placed on innovative instructional practices. For example, the implementation of assessment literacy practices and the use of formative assessments is closely associated to providing feedback. Assessment is no longer considered the end to the teaching process, but instead an integral part of learning and an opportunity for both students and teachers to make adjustments. Feedback used in this way transforms the learning environment and activates engagement among students. Providing effective feedback is considered by some to be the most impactful change a teacher can make to influence student learning.

The respondents within the study appeared to have a better understanding of particular components when they were emphasized, either at the department level or throughout the building. Allowing and encouraging teachers to focus on a smaller number of components might

be more impactful in regard to how teachers improve their practice.

2. Link the Evaluation to targeted professional development

As indicated by the survey results, the evaluation appears to have a low impact on teaching practices, or teachers perceive that the impact is low. In considering the evaluation process, districts would be wise to place a focus on key professional development strategies. This study suggests that the evaluation alone is not enough to alter teaching practices. By their nature, evaluations tend to be limited by time and relegated to particular classes or courses. Furthermore, with the evaluation comprised of 22 components, systematic teacher improvement becomes more difficult and diffuse. As districts work to prioritize their focus when it comes to the Danielson components, they might also consider the important role of targeted professional development opportunities. Districts should target three or four components throughout the year that are viewed to be especially significant and build professional development opportunities around those choices.

Determining which components to focus on could be done in multiple ways. For example, a district or school could evaluate overall teacher performance from one year to the next and determine the components where there is the greatest need for improvement. Establishing a data that builds in continual year-to-year progress and process is logical and can help to establish a system for monitoring improvement. If three components were identified, the school could identify experts within the staff who could provide these growth opportunities throughout the year for teachers. When school systems connect professional development to the evaluation process, it allows for a more systematic, ongoing and progressive approach to teacher improvement that truly impacts student learning.

3. Personalize the evaluation

Teachers who work in districts where the FFT is used need to have personalized direction on to how to implement instructional improvements that are aligned with the components. Districts should consider providing teachers with

specific examples of ways in which various components are implemented within a classroom setting. It is important to make suggestions and recommendations that are aligned with the needs of individual teachers. For example, when teachers are evaluated, specific recommendations could emerge that are identified as areas where improvement is needed. The process for teacher improvement would not end with the evaluation. Instead, teachers would be given specific components on which to improve based on the evaluation. Districts could in turn develop a post-evaluation process that requires teachers to coordinate with their department chairs, instructional coaches and peers on strategies to get better.

When teachers undergo evaluation, each of the 22 components is given a rating. At the end of the process, there is a summative meeting where the co-evaluators sit down with the teacher and review these ratings along with the collected evidence that determined the ratings. Teachers are provided a full report that lists out the ratings for each of the components; these ratings are calculated and averaged for each of the four domains. The compilation of those four domains make up the “summative rating” of the teachers professional practice evaluation. Teachers are provided this full report prior to the meeting. This research suggests that evaluators should, rather than focus on all of the components instead hone in on two or three components that were identified for future improvement.

From there, it is recommended that districts and evaluation teams examine ways to track teacher progress from one year to the next. This would allow evaluators, administrators and districts as a whole to hold individual teachers accountable for their own progress. Furthermore, the evaluation model would be specific and useful for those being evaluated.

4. Emphasize collaboration and trust between teachers and evaluators

Throughout the qualitative interviews of this study, it was clear that teacher emotions and personal opinions regarding the evaluation process may have interfered with their ability to understand the Danielson components. Teachers expressed a concern with the summative rating and at times dissatisfaction

with the evaluation process as a whole. Furthermore, some shared a sense that teaching practices previously acceptable were no longer deemed as effective. They were upset with the notion that their work was not viewed as being valuable or effective.

Increased opportunities to collaborate between administrators and teachers might alleviate some of these concerns and provide opportunities for evaluators to address issues directly before they interfere with the evaluation. When communication from administration is clear, non-judgmental and consistent, there are less likely to be perceptions of unfairness. Administrators need to demonstrate clearly that the primary goal of teacher evaluation is to improve student learning. In general, interactions between evaluators and teachers need to be collaborative rather than adversarial. Administrators should listen and respond to teacher concerns so that there is a shared sense of trust. These important conversations could happen within the setting of a teacher advisory group. This group could meet monthly and be organized so that either administrators or teachers could contribute to the agenda. These semi-formal opportunities to work together for shared goals are productive and contribute to a shared understanding of terminology, instructional practices and the conclusions of this study points to the need for administrators and evaluators to include intentional practices when evaluating teachers. Essential in this practice is aligning feedback so that it promotes specific, high impact components within the teacher evaluation. Evaluators should also personalize teacher growth and improve collaboration between administrators and teachers. Accountability measures are important and should be catered to individual teacher strengths and challenges. At the same time teachers need clarity and trust when it comes to meeting the changing demands of the ever-changing educational field. This study has shown that evaluation alone is not enough to provoke positive teacher growth. Evaluators and administrators should concentrate their efforts around key practices designed to support the evaluation and positively develop the professional growth of teachers.

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