An examination of one factor in school reform: increased teacher accountability in two urban school districts

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Abstract

Beginning in 2009, and with the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, school districts across the United States began to be held to higher standards and their progress publicly reported. Student achievement began to be measured by standardized testing and great efforts were being made to reduce the achievement gap. This paper is based on a five-year study of teacher evaluation in two urban districts in Massachusetts where improving teacher practice was seen as an important factor in raising student achievement. This research studied efforts to address those teachers who were identified as underperforming and were supported through individual improvement plans. This paper used a case study approach to show what the practices of a sampling of these teachers looked like, teachers' reactions to being rated unsatisfactory, and teachers' reactions to the improvement planning process.
Keywords: Teacher evaluation; Teacher improvement; Teacher improvement plans

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Exame de um fator na reforma escolar: aumento na necessidade de resultados por parte do professor em duas escolas situadas em distritos urbanos

Resumo

A partir de 2009, e com a aprovação da Lei Americana de Recuperação e Reinvestimento, de 2009, os distritos escolares dos Estados Unidos começaram a ser avaliados com base em padrões mais elevados e seus resultados divulgados publicamente. O desempenho dos alunos começou a ser medido por testes padronizados e grandes esforços foram feitos para reduzir a lacuna de desempenho entre eles. Este artigo é baseado em um estudo de cinco anos sobre avaliação de professores em dois distritos urbanos em Massachusetts, onde a melhoria da prática de professores foi vista como um fator importante para elevar o desempenho dos alunos. Esta pesquisa estudou os esforços para abordar professores que foram identificados como tendo baixo desempenho e foram apoiados por planos de melhoria individual. Foi utilizada uma abordagem de estudo de caso para mostrar como eram as práticas de uma amostragem desses professores, as reações deles ao serem classificados como tendo resultados insatisfatórios e as suas posturas diante do processo de planejamento de melhorias.

Palavras-chave: avaliação de professores; Capacitação de professores; Planos de ação para melhor desenvolver a prática de professors.

Examen de un factor en la reforma escolar: aumento en la necesidad de resultados por parte del profesor en dos escuelas situadas en districtos urbanos

Resumen

A partir de 2009, con la aprobación de la Ley Americana de Recuperación y reinversión , los distritos escolares de los Estados Unidos comenzaron a ser evaluados sobre la base de estándares más altos y sus resultados divulgados públicamente. El desempeño de los alumnos comenzó a medirse mediante pruebas estandarizadas y se hicieron grandes esfuerzos para reducir la brecha de rendimiento entre ellos. Este artículo se basa en un estudio de cinco años sobre evaluación de profesores en dos distritos urbanos en Massachusetts, donde la mejora de la práctica de los profesores fue vista como un factor importante para elevar el rendimiento de los alunos. Esta investigación estudió los esfuerzos para abordar a los profesores que fueron identificados como de bajo rendimiento y se apoyaron en planes de mejora individual. Se utilizó un enfoque de estudio de casos para mostrar cómo eran las prácticas de estos profesores, las reacciones de ellos al ser clasificados como teniendo resultados insatisfactorios y sus posturas ante el proceso de planificación de mejoras.

Palabras clave: Evaluación de profesores; Capacitación de profesores; Planes de acción para mejor desarrollar la práctica de profesores.

Introduction

Across the United States, and since the introduction of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, cities, towns, and individual schools are being measured and held to high academic standards. There is no greater concern in education than in urban areas with diverse populations, high rates of poverty, and students learning English and living in families with the many stressors that often include low wages and a lack of understanding of their new culture. In 2015, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrated that the gap in large city school districts between Hispanic students and White students was nearly 25% (Blagg, G., 2016). There are many efforts across the US to address the achievement gap. These efforts are multifaceted and include such directions as improving curriculum, aligning curriculum to state standards, providing professional development for administrators and teachers; increasing parent involvement; initiating extended day; addressing nutrition, environment, cultural awareness, and social-emotional development of students; improving hiring practices; and increasing teacher accountability, to name only a few. This study addresses one of those issues: teacher accountability.

This paper is based on a five-year study of teacher evaluation in two urban districts in Massachusetts where teacher practice was being carefully examined. This research studied efforts to address teachers identified as underperforming and efforts to improve their practice through professional development and individual improvement planning. This paper will examine through a case study approach what the classrooms of these teachers looked like, teachers' reactions to being rated unsatisfactory, and teachers' reactions to the improvement planning process.

Literature

The Rand Corporation reported in 2018, using a 2016 national survey of 1825 public school teachers across the United States, that most teachers state that their practices have improved as a result of the teacher evaluation systems that their school districts have incorporated. The report examined teachers' perceptions of the teacher evaluation system around the issues of observations and feedback from administrators and other teachers. Seventy-six percent of the 1825 teachers said that they made positive changes to their instruction based on the feedback they received. Further, these teachers reported that those teachers who were observed and received feedback more frequently viewed the evaluation system positively. This is one of the few studies that has looked at teacher perceptions of teacher evaluation and whether the feedback teachers get from those evaluations is useful to their practice (Wells, 2018).

The Rand report goes on to say that the most common input to teacher feedback came from classroom observations and that teachers in high poverty areas were observed and evaluated more than teachers in higher income areas. Those teachers who believed that the intent of the teacher evaluation system was to help grow their practice were more likely to report that they viewed the evaluation system as fair (Prado Tuma, Hamilton, & Tsai, 2018).

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 tied Federal funding, referred to as Race to the Top, to six factors including improving the quality of teachers and leaders. Although many schools in the US were failing, a report entitled The Widget Report published that same year found that 99% of all teachers in the US were rated as satisfactory (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009). Before the Obama administration insisted that states develop rigorous guidelines for teacher evaluation, the standard evaluation for the three million teachers in the US consisted of a brief once-a-year check-in by principals, often with a checklist in hand, that focused more on quiet students and clean whiteboards than on the quality of instruction or student learning (Toch, 2016). This was about to change. It had long been known that the most significant factor in students' success is teachers' level of pedagogical skill (Marzano, Frontier, and Livingston, 2011). Researchers have found teachers have a powerful influence on the educational outcomes of the students in their care (Barr & Gibson, 2013; Evans, 1996; Jacobs, 2010, Schmoker, 2011). The effects of poor pedagogy were that students who had ineffective teachers, those ranked among the bottom fifth of teachers, for three years in a row could score as much as 50 percentile points on statewide exams below those students who had effective teachers (Goodwin, 2010). It was time to tie what scholars knew about pedagogy to teacher evaluation. The evaluation systems that now exist in the US have grown from Federal regulations adopted in 2009.

In the next two years, states began putting in place rubrics for multiple measures of teacher effectiveness including student academic growth as an indicator of teacher and leader effectiveness, while strengthening the consequences of both poor and exemplary documented performance (Aldeman & Chuong, 2014). In 2009, no states required districts to include student learning in the teacher evaluation process. By 2012, 16 states required districts to do so, and by 2017, 39 states required student achievement data as part of teacher evaluation (Wells, 2018, Doherty & Jacobs, October 2013). And then progress slowed. The training that needed to be done for teachers to teach more effectively and to help administrators observe and give effective and actionable feedback was time consuming (Aldeman & Chuong, 2014). Training for both teachers and administrators consisted of lesson planning, defining objectives, effective instruction, assessment, data analysis, and classroom and school culture.

The Research Design

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how two districts utilized teacher accountability principles to influence teacher practice. The accountability principals were developed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and then negotiated through local teacher unions with the districts. This study produced an overview of the process, examined the characteristics of instruction that prompted principals to identify teachers as underperforming, provided a sampling of what classroom instruction looked like, discussed samples of teachers' understanding of their own performance, demonstrated how some teachers went about improving their practice, and reported on what was done in each district to improve instruction and the results of those efforts.

Massachusetts Context

In 2011, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework. This framework was designed to support educators in their professional development and continuous growth throughout their teaching careers. The framework consists of a five-step cycle that includes teacher self-assessment, goal setting and plan development, plan implementation, formative assessment/evaluation, and a summative evaluation, with the cycle repeating throughout the career of the educator. Educators are assigned yearly to one of four assessment plans based on their last summative evaluation results. Professional status educators (those who have worked in a district under licensure for 3 or more years) who were rated proficient or exemplary are assigned to a self-directed growth plan of one or two years based on the professional judgment of the evaluator, and developed by the educator. Educators who were rated needs improvement are put on a directed growth plan developed by the educator and evaluator, together, and is for one year or less as determined by the evaluator. Educators who were rated unsatisfactory are assigned to an improvement plan developed by the evaluator lasting 30 days to one year. Educators in their first three years in a district are assigned to a developing educator plan which is a one-year plan developed by the educator and evaluator (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).

An important part of the ESE Evaluation Framework is the performance rubrics which act as scoring tools and translate the four Standards for Effective Teaching (Standard I: Curriculum, Planning and Assessment, Standard II: Teaching All Students, Standard III: Family and Community Engagement, and Standard IV: Professional Culture) into actionable descriptors of practice that are shared by teachers and administrators to ensure that each has a common understanding of the elements that comprise each standard (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011). Districts had the option of adopting the ESE rubric or negotiating their own standards. In the cases of the two districts studied, both adopted the ESE rubric.

District Context

The sites of this study were two urban school districts in Massachusetts that were working to improve student achievement in multiple ways, one of which was to identify underperforming teachers and work to remediate their practices. There were ongoing professional growth opportunities offered to teachers and administrators in both districts in areas that included subject-matter knowledge, school culture and vision, positive school climate, high academic standards, assessment, data analysis, student behavior, lesson design, effective instruction, and so on. Professional growth was a valued part of the school district culture in both districts. These two districts were studied because each made it a priority to train principals in effective instruction, teacher observation techniques, writing effective and actionable feedback, conferencing with teachers, monitoring ongoing instruction, and having difficult conversations, when necessary. As well, central office personnel and the superintendents of the districts agreed to support the

process and decisions of the principals and set up procedures to protect teachers while supporting the work of administrators. Each district negotiated a version of the ESE model contract along with the ESE developed performance rubric.

Teacher Context

All teachers in this study were identified as unsatisfactory overall in a formative or summative evaluation and moved to an improvement plan. Each improvement plan was initially set at 30 days to one-year, with some being extended if the evaluator thought more time might be beneficial to the educator's growth. According to the model contract that the ESE provided to districts and the section on improvement plans that both districts adopted, the following elements have to be included in the improvement plan. The plan must have a supervising evaluator who provides guidance and support for the teacher. The plan must define the problem(s) of practice that were identified and documented through observations and evaluations and provide improvement goals based on those problems of practice. For each improvement goal, the plan must specify the activities the educator must do to improve practice, the assistance that will be provided, the timeline for the goal and the measurable outcomes of the goal. During the course of the improvement plan, the educator will be observed frequently and will receive a mid-plan formative assessment and a summative assessment at the completion of the plan. At the conclusion of the plan, if the educator is rated proficient, the educator will be moved to a self-directed growth plan; if the education is rated needs improvement, the educator will be moved to a directed growth plan, and if the educator is not making substantial progress or is rated unsatisfactory, the evaluator is to recommend to the superintendent that the educator be dismissed (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).

Data Collection

This research is based on case studies of these two districts and the identification of common experiences and learnings from the two districts. This study extends the literature on teacher evaluation and teacher accountability by exploring the experiences of two districts that have make teacher accountability a priority.

In one district data collection started during the 2012-2013 school year, in the other during the 2013-2014 school year and data collection in both went through the 2017-2018 school year; five and four years of data, respectively, on the improvement plan process for teachers rated unsatisfactory on a formative or summative evaluation. The data collected included classroom observations by the researcher, classroom observation reports by evaluators, notes on discussions with teachers and evaluators, written formative and/or summative assessments and evaluations on teachers, and additional documents and artifacts such as memos and copies of student work.

Data Analysis

A qualitative case study approach is a viable and well-respected research methodology that has the potential to provide a comprehensive in-depth understanding of a range of complex issues in real world settings (Harrison, H., Birks, M., Franklin, R. & Mills, J., 2017). This qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2015; Miles et al., 2014; Stake, 2006) was particularistic, descriptive and heuristic (Merriam, 2015). According to Merriam (2015), particularistic refers to the case study examining a particular situation, in this case teachers on improvement plans in two urban districts; descriptive refers to a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the phenomenon; and heuristic refers to the case study illuminating an understanding of the situation.

The process of data analysis, according to Merriam (2015), involves looking for underlying patterns of conceptual categories in order to begin to make sense out of the data. Data was reviewed, transcribed, and coded, using the axial coding method (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). Codes were then combined into categories. There was a need to consolidate and reduce data in order to enter into the interpretation stage, and even then, the researcher needed to move back and forth between data and interpretation to ensure final conclusions were accurate. After writing an initial draft of each case, the author re-examined the categories, combining some and eliminating others. This process formed the basis for the cross-case analysis.

District A

Background. In 2012, District A, while working on all aspects of school improvement, began an effort to examine seriously the practices of teachers and the relationship of a teacher's practice to student achievement. In the early stages of this process, principals needed to be trained on how to examine teacher practice objectively (Schmoker, M. (2016). They were trained on effective elements of a lesson, what good instruction looks like, how to collect data on instructional practices, and how to provide helpful feedback to teachers. All administrators worked on interrater reliability so that there was a common approach to evaluation and the feedback given to a teacher would be similar regardless of who the evaluator was. This is not a simple process and, consequently, training for administrators and teachers has continued yearly.

Teachers also needed to be trained on this new form of observation, feedback, and evaluation. Prior to this effort, there was not an agreed upon approach to observation and evaluation, and most teachers did not understand the criteria that evaluators used when they came into classes. There was a general consensus from teachers that evaluation was a subjective process. As well, there were teachers who did not understand that what they do in the classroom does affect student learning. Some of the comments in the early stages were: "We are with them for such a short period of time. How can we be responsible for what they learn?" "I love these students. Love is the most important thing I can give them." "If their families don't make them do their homework, how and I going to help them?" Some of these comments reflected a lack of understanding of the personal situations of students in the district. Students who needed to work after school

to bring in money for their families, students who had to cook for and babysit their siblings while their parent(s) worked two or three jobs, or students who lived in homeless shelters or on the street were often not taken into consideration when homework and projects were assigned (Gorski, 2018). Also, teachers did not understand the tight community that surrounded these students. There was much knowledge that needed to be gained on the part of both teachers and administrators.

To support the professional development that was occurring at a district level, coaches were put in schools, teachers were trained in how to effectively utilize grade level and subject level meetings, and principals and assistant principals were in classrooms more often monitoring instruction and instructional practices. This increased level of feedback and support was an adjustment for teachers.

The approach of District A to teacher improvement. Teachers and administrators found themselves heavily involved in professional development to help improve teacher practice and help administrators improve their observation skills. Professional development opportunities included such topics as lesson design, curriculum writing, classroom management, school culture, and content specific work. And at the same time, administrators were expected to be in classrooms observing teaching and providing feedback for growth and providing intense intervention in the form of improvement plans if instruction was poor. From 2012 to 2017, the number of teachers in District A averaged 1033. In the first year of this effort, 37 teachers, or 3.5%, were put on improvement plans. In the second year, 25 teachers (2.4%) were put on plans; in the third year, 4 teachers were put on improvement plans (.39%); in the 4th year, 5 teachers (.48%) were put on improvement plans; and in the 5th year, 4 teachers (.39%) were put on improvement plans. It was clear that as some of the poor teachers left the district, and there was intense professional development on instruction and providing support to teachers, the number of teachers in need of remediation rapidly went down. Teachers realized that the district, which historically did not take teacher evaluation seriously, had changed. Administrators now were trained in how to observe and how to give productive feedback. Teachers understood that the expectations for their work had risen. And teachers and administrators saw results from their work reflected in standardized test results. Each year, this district that had been stagnant in student achievement saw their scores rising. This all-out effort on many fronts was paying off.

Common reasons for identifying teachers as underperforming. Teachers were put on improvement plans for a limited number of reasons. Goals were built around the areas in which teachers, through observations, were identified as being weak. These areas included poor lesson planning, ineffective instruction, poor assessment of students, poor classroom management, or lack of professionalism. Most teachers put on improvement plans were deficient in more than one area. Of these 75 teachers who were put on improvement plans in the five years, 62 teachers had a goal on lesson planning, 65 had a goal on effective instruction, 28 had a goal on improving classroom management, 10 had goals around student assessment, and 39 had goals on professionalism. Of the teachers who had goals on professionalism, 14 had goals around taking personal responsibility, 9 around respectful behavior, 8 concerned attendance, and 13 addressed appropriate expectations for student work.

District B

Background. When No Child Left Behind legislation brought the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to examine more carefully student achievement in districts, District B was identified as a district that needed to put more emphasis on increasing student achievement. District B also took a multi-pronged approach. Like District A, District B provide training to both teachers and administrators on effective elements of a lesson, what good instruction looks like, how to collect data on instructional practices, and how to provide and receive actionable feedback.   This ongoing training is done through district professional development, district curriculum specialists, coaches at schools, the development of professional learning communities, and school-based administrators providing feedback to teachers through observations and evaluations.

The approach of District B to teacher improvement. District B has seriously examined teacher effectiveness for four years. The district took a different approach to teacher improvement from District A. District A looked to make rapid change and immediately identified the poorest teaching practices across the district and worked quickly to improve the instruction of those teachers or move to dismiss them, while also working with the general population of teachers to improve instruction across the district.   District B took a slower, more methodical approach. District B needed to convince teachers that it was going to hold teachers accountable for proficient classroom instruction and it needed to convince principals that the district would support their efforts to dismiss poor teachers. Consequently, in the first year of this effort, three teachers were identified by principals as in need of intense intervention. This was the first time this district would dismiss a teacher for poor instruction. These improvement plans were watched carefully by other administrators in the district. With the knowledge that the district would support a principal who justified putting a teacher on an improvement plan, more principals gradually identified teachers who needed intense support and placed them on improvement plans. Results of these plans varied as some teachers took the plans seriously and worked hard to improve practice and other teachers did not understand the change in culture that was taking place and did not believe that there was a possibility of dismissal.

From 2013-2017, there was an average of 2018 teachers in District B. As stated above, in the first year of this effort, three teachers (.14%) were put on improvement plans. One plan resulted in the teacher being dismissed and two teachers resigned prior to the end of their plans. In the second year of this effort, 11 teachers (.54%) were put on plans. This resulted in two teachers resigning, two retiring, five being dismissed, and for the first time in the district two going on medical leave for stress related illnesses as a result of being put on an improvement plan. Medical leave became a somewhat attractive way to avoid being on a plan, at least for a period of time. Some teachers were able to extend the leave until they reached retirement age, some eventually resigned, and a few came back to actualize the plan. In the third year, 15 teachers (.74%) were put on improvement plans. Of the 15, one resigned, three retired, a principal did not follow through on one plan, one went to a self-directed growth plan, one went to a directed growth plan, five teachers went on medical leave, and three teachers were dismissed.   In the fourth year, 16 teachers (.79%) were put on improvement plans: three retired, six resigned, two

were moved to directed growth plans, one was moved to a self-directed growth plan, three took medical leave, and one was dismissed. In many cases where teachers resigned, there was some negotiation with the school district regarding benefits

Districts A and B: Examples of Teachers Placed on Improvement Plans

What did poor classroom teaching look like? Three examples. Poor classroom teaching took many forms. Some teachers had not prepared to teach the lesson. This usually manifested itself early in the observation. When the observer approached the teacher to say that this would be an unannounced observation, the usual reply was, "This isn't a good time." Observers would sometimes move on and other times, particularly if they heard this refrain from a teacher more than once, would reply something like, "Every lesson needs to be a good one for our students. We owe them that." Some classrooms had poor classroom management where the teacher was going through the motions of presenting material, but the students were not engaged. And some teachers did not present rigorous lessons nor have high expectations for what students could do. The following are synopses of three observations that resulted in unsatisfactory ratings.

Observation 1. This observation took place in an hour-long high school social studies class. The observer waited at the door for the teacher and introduced herself to the teacher saying she was going to do an unannounced observation. The teacher welcomed her in then sat at his desk and began to take attendance. Students continued to come into the class over the next 10 minutes with the teacher not addressing them or asking them for late passes as they entered. The teacher went to the front of the class and wrote on the board: 20 minutes – study for quiz, 20 minutes – take quiz, 20 minutes – new material. The teacher then went back to his desk and wrote the quiz and printed it out on an in-class printer. This took approximately 20 minutes. Periodically, a student would ask the teacher a question and the teacher would answer it. Meanwhile, there were few students studying. A group of five students were sitting together in the back speaking loudly in their first language and laughing. Another student had a ball that he was bouncing against the wall for the entire time. Other students wandered in and out of the class. Students from other areas wandered in to visit students in this class. Some students sat with their friends and chatted, talked with friends on their phones, texted, or played video games on their phones. When the 20 minutes was up, the teacher walked up and down the rows passing out the quizzes. By the time he was half through, the first students had completed their quizzes and started handing them in. Once all quizzes were passed out, the teacher went back to his desk and looked at his computer screen. When all students finished the quiz, the teacher collected them. He then went to the front of the class and said, "Okay, we are going to now start the next unit." He told the students the title of the unit and then said, "You know, I haven't really prepared anything on that so why don't you take the rest of the period as a study hall." The teacher went back to his desk and the students continued to socialize.

Observation 2. This observation took place in a middle school academic support class of five boys. These were students who had Individual Improvement Plans (IEPs) because of some type of learning disability. The students went to all mainstreamed aca-

demic classes, then came to this class once a day for academic support. The teacher was a licensed teacher who was expected to prepare for the class and support students to keep them up with the rest of the students in their mainstreamed classes. When the observer entered the room as the bell rang, the five students were sitting talking quietly, but there was no teacher present. The radio was playing popular music that could be heard throughout the room. Five minutes later the teacher arrived, apologizing that she had been in a meeting. However, just before the observer entered the class, she saw the teacher standing in the hallway laughing with a colleague. The teacher went to one of the students and told him that she talked with his English teacher who gave her an assignment for him. She then added, "most teachers do not get back to me." She asked students to get out their agenda books and write down their assignments from their other classes. The teacher went to another student and asked who his math teacher is. This teacher has been working with these students for seven months and still did not know who their teachers were. She told the student that she would ask the teacher for work, but added, "he hasn't been good about getting back to me," again disparaging her colleague in front of the students. The teacher asked another boy who he had for English, then loudly tells another boy that she is meeting with his parents this afternoon. This makes the boy flush, perhaps not wanting the other students to know this. The teacher asked who students have for history. The teacher asks if anyone has Smith for science, saying that Smith talks to her regularly, but that she never gets anything from Brown. A girl joined the class and the teacher asked if her mother was coming in this afternoon. The girl responded that she doesn't know because she doesn't live with her mother. The teacher responded, "Okay, I might not have called her then". Discussing these personal issues in front of the entire class was a breach of confidentiality with the student. The teacher then sent one of the students to his English class to get work and sat with two students to help them with science. She read the science chapter to them stopping periodically to ask a recall question. One of the two students left to go to the bathroom. The teacher continued reading to the other student. Meanwhile, no other student was working. One had his head down, one was texting, two were talking. The class continued with no substantial learning. The teacher did no preparation, so this was lost valuable learning time for students

Observation 3. As the observer came into this kindergarten class, the teacher was sending students to the rug for math. She told them that they should sit in two rows like they always do, and she rearranged them. School had been in session for four months, but students did not have a routine established for sitting on the rug. Four students ignored the teacher and remained at the back of the room.

The teacher reminded students that they were not in school on Friday because of the snow. This started everyone talking. She quieted them down and said that she was going to give them whiteboards and they were going to subtract. "If you are a boy, come get a whiteboard." Then she called girls. Students were very noisy, with several of them yelling. Two students were still at computers. The transition took several minutes. When students came back to the rug, they were no longer in their two rows and the teacher rearranged them again, although this time in three rows, so perhaps there was no established routine.

"When we subtract, we start with the bigger number and we take away the other number." There was no check for understanding. "There are 5 shamrocks on the ground. The girl came and picked 2. How many are left?" Students yelled out 5. "Write it down." The teacher modeled: 5-2=. Some students were shouting so the teacher yelled above them, "Let's draw it underneath. Five take two away. I want to see the problem. I want to see the problem. I want to see the problem. Show me down here. Five take two away. Take two away." Several students are baaaaing like sheep. "Okay, students, we are making more noise than we need to. Catch a bubble." This quieted students for a few seconds, then they were all talking again. The teacher did the problem with one student while the others were all off task. "Okay, erase it. Okay, erase it. You should all have an eraser. You should all have an eraser. Erase it. Erase it. Erase it." The teacher yelled over the students.

"Okay, I want your eyes up here." The teacher told a student to move up to the table. He did not move, and she ignored him. "There are 7 tennis balls. Thomas, right there." He didn't move. "Thomas right here." He finally moved. "Three of those tennis balls went over the fence," she yelled twice over the shouting. "How many do you have left?" She walked around and looked at the whiteboards and commented loudly to keep her voice above that of the students. She spoke to one student in Spanish.

"Girls and boys erase your boards." There was no differentiation for students who could do more and no individual checking for understanding. The teacher gave out little bags of blocks. She said to a student, "How sad that you are not listening, everyone else is listening." In reality, very few students were listening; everyone was talking or yelling. "Put your cover on your marker. 3-2-1 Put your cover on your marker. Put your marker on the floor. Put your marker on the floor. Put your whiteboard on the floor. Put your whiteboard on the floor. Alright, girls and boys, I want you to make a tower of 10. Alright girls and boys, I want you to make a tower of 10. If you have more than 10, leave them in the bag. When you have your tower, go like this." but she did not show them what to do. Everyone was talking. "Okay, we should have a tower of 10. Okay, eyes on Mrs. Case. Eyes on Mrs. Case." Everyone was talking at once. "I want you to take 4 off the tower. Take 4 off the tower. Take 4 off the tower. Take 4 off the tower. Okay, girls and boys, you have 2 towers."

"Okay, Mrs. Case is going to stop right now. I want eyes on Mrs. Case." Some students quiet, but not all. "So, you have how many in the tower? We took 4 away, how many do we have, Olivia?" Everyone yells. "You know what, I asked Olivia." No one was listening. They were knocking down their towers, building, trading colors. "Listen to Oscar. Listen to Oscar. He is going to tell you what to do. He is going to tell you what to do. Take six away." No one could hear the child, so the teacher yelled. "Take six away. Take six away. Take six away." She then told each student individually what to do. "Okay, my friends. Boys and girls", she yelled. "Take your white boards and your tower and you are going to go to your table when I call your table." She called out the first table and several students from other tables went to their tables. It took the teacher 25 minutes to do 4 simple subtraction problems.

Teachers who took initiative to improve their practice. Three examples. Teachers who were put on improvement plans had serious flaws in one or more Standards accor-

ding to the Massachusetts Rubric for effective teaching. Even though these teachers had severe weaknesses, with the support of administrators and a roadmap for success (the improvement plan) several teachers were able to improve their practice to the level of proficient. The following are the experiences of three teachers who improved their practices and how they approached their need for improvement.

Teacher 1. This teacher had been teaching science for four years in a small alternative school. She knew her subject and enjoyed working with her students. Like many teachers in an alternative school, she particularly enjoyed supporting those students who often were experiencing life in a way that their teachers could not even imagine (Hidden in Plain Sight, 2016). The issue with her teaching is that she wanted to do all of the work for the students. She wanted to tell them everything they should know. She did not understand how to turn over the authority for learning to the students themselves (Hornstra, 2015). When her observations came back citing this flaw in her practice, she embraced the improvement plan. She read the books and articles about effective teaching that the plan prescribed. She did a coaching cycle with the academic coach where she watched the coach teach a class, then the coach watched her teach the same class and gave her feedback. She got so excited about watching other people teach and having her peers give her feedback that she arranged to go into classes of each of the 15 other teachers in the school and arranged for each of them and every administrator to come to her class and give her feedback. By the end of the improvement plan, this science teacher was well on her way to being proficient. Through her careful observations and her experimentation with her own practice, the growth in her teaching was observable and exciting.

Teacher 2. This teacher is recognizable in many schools. She is a supporter of students and befriends many students. Her classroom is the room that students congregate in, sometimes when they are assigned to other classes. Her relationship with students can sometimes be seen as straddling a line of professionalism. This teacher followed school protocol only when it was convenient to her. She could be rude to administrators and often talked poorly about them to other teachers and to students. She would also talk with students about other teachers, again overstepping a professional line. This teacher, however, was an excellent teacher in the classroom. She had high expectations for students and students worked hard to meet those expectations. The flaw in her teaching was that if she did not like something in the curriculum, she did not teach it thus depriving students of a part of the curriculum they had a right to receive. She was put on an improvement plan under the standard that referred to professional culture. The improvement plan laid out how other adults saw her, her lack of judgement about what she taught and did not teach, what she would need to do to improve, and the support she would be given. It was made clear to this teacher that unless she changed her attitude and behavior, she would be recommended for dismissal. Her first reaction was shock; she asked if this was serious. She went to her union who told her that the reasons for her being put on an improvement plan were justified. After several days of thinking about what she would do, the teacher made an appointment with her primary evaluator and the director of human resources. She stated that she had thought carefully about what she was being told about herself and she realized that the model she was setting for stu-

dents was not a positive one. She said that in order for her to make the changes in herself permanent, she would complete the improvement plan this year and change her behavior, but she wanted a clean start next year. Would the district be willing to move her to a different school if she was able to earn a rating of proficient in professional culture this year? An agreement was reached. The teacher proved her professionalism and moved to a new school where she remains a valued member of that staff.

Teacher 3. When this teacher was observed, she was one of the teachers who often told the evaluator that this was not a good time for an observation. Eventually, that excuse was no longer accepted. She taught English language arts (ELA) in a support class for students with special needs. It was obvious that she enjoyed the students and knew her subject. It was also obvious that she put no effort into her teaching. Even though her classes were no larger than 10 students, she did not differentiate instruction. She did little checking for understanding and she had students doing worksheets that involved lower-level thinking for most classes. She was put on an improvement plan for lesson planning and effective instructional techniques. She was embarrassed. She did not see herself as a poor teacher and she did not think that others saw her that way either. This was a wake-up call for this teacher. She decided that she was going to turn her instruction around. She followed the improvement plan, but this was a teacher who did not need an improvement plan to get better. She needed a shake-up to get better. With the shake-up that year she improved to proficient. At the beginning of the next year she asked to meet with her administrator. She told the administrator that she was very angry and embarrassed when she was put on the improvement plan but now she was grateful. She told the administrator that she had once been an excellent teacher but then life got in the way. She had two young children and many other family obligations that interfered with her doing her best at work. She thanked the administrator for the second chance. Two years later, she was made head teacher for ELA in her school.

Conclusion

This study extends the existing literature by examining over a five-year period the efforts of two urban school districts to use their teacher evaluation system as one factor in school improvement. Teacher evaluation cannot be used in isolation as a method to improve student achievement. In order to evaluate teachers effectively, the evaluators and the teachers need to receive intensive professional development in such areas as pedagogy, subject matter knowledge, curriculum development, and school and classroom culture (Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2015). In addition, observers need training in observation techniques and providing actionable feedback that the teacher can hear and utilize. Administrators need be trained in interrater reliability (Wilhelm, Gillespie Rouse, & Jones. (2018). The process is complex. School districts that have worked intensely to develop teachers and leaders, and school districts like the two discussed here that are willing to hold teachers accountable to educate our students while supporting those educators to be effective teachers are seeing the benefits of their hard work in terms of effective classroom instruction that leads to increased student achievement.

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