The Sociology of Educational Supervision and Evaluation
Laura Burton, Maria Krug Carper, and Virginia Wilburn

Abstract

Comprehensive federal initiatives require revisions of teacher evaluation systems. Using tenets of the sociological lens, specifically symbolic interactionism, researchers have examined the personal interactions among school leaders and teachers. According to researchers, the use of symbolic interactionism leads to an objective, unbiased view of classroom performance. Moreover, effective personal interactions among administrators and teachers support reflective inquiry; self-reflection remains paramount to establishing antecedents and outcomes in the teaching-learning process. Contemporary research also suggests teacher quality has a major impact on student achievement. Thus, principals who use key aspects of sociological communication positively impact student performance and improve achievement. From a micro-sociological perspective, symbolic interactionism is at the heart of the exchanges between administrators and staff when it comes to developing faculty capacity through an evaluation system that seeks to truly change instructional practices.

Keywords: evaluation, student achievement, symbolic interactionism, supervision, teacher quality

Changing Paradigms

Past teacher evaluation systems served administrators primarily as an obligatory managerial tool which was part of the yearly rite of passage for all teachers. Teacher evaluation systems are an empty process with little interaction between administrator and teacher other than signing forms and a brief commentary highlighting the notations from one or two formal observations across the year. The antiquated teacher evaluation processes of previous administrative generations are finally being scrutinized. Observing teacher evaluation systems through an anthropological perspective provides an interesting vantage point. To this end social anthropologists suggest that a culture is defined by, “any social network forming a corporate entity in which social relations are regulated by custom” (Erikson, 1984, p. 52). Traditional teacher evaluation systems have been deeply rooted in cultural norms that dictate how the system works. To this end, Barrett (1984) describes culture as, “The body of learned beliefs, traditions, and guides for behavior that are shared among members of any human society” (p. 54). It follows that the enculturation of group behavior in administration often dictates the manner in which teachers receive their annual obligatory evaluations. In this regard, teachers have traditionally earned measures of standard marks and habitual commendations without regard for teacher performance; prescriptive norms and rules passed down from administrative generation to generation carry forth the age old practices in educational teacher evaluation processes. What is more, teacher tenure systems guarantee educators a lifetime of rights to contracts except during occasions of extreme malfeasance or moral turpitude.

In contrast today, from a micro-sociological perspective, symbolic interactionism is at the heart of the exchanges between administrators and staff when it comes to developing faculty capacity through an evaluation system that seeks to truly change instructional practices. Through this sociological lens, researchers view the interactions of school leaders as a critical component of school success. In this role, administrators help establish social reality by shaping the ways in which administrators work with teachers in an evaluation system and translate that work to changing
classroom practice. Thus, the use of symbolic interactionism as a means to monitor teacher performance and increase student achievement is a historical shift in the paradigmatic view of the teacher evaluation system.

Hoy and Miskel (2008) define instructional leadership as an “attempt to change such school factors as curricular content, teaching methods, assessment strategies, and cultural norms for academic achievement” (p.433). As schools move towards an instructional leadership model for administrators, interactions between school leaders and teachers must evolve to match the new rigor of instructional leadership. Namely, the teacher evaluation system, which facilitates the interactional process between administrators and teachers, needs to align with the tenets of instructional leadership. Furthermore, while teacher quality is a direct link to student achievement, school leadership serves as a critical indirect link impacting student achievement.

A new conceptual model for teacher evaluation systems, thus, is built on the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism and includes a supervisory process that aims to influence “school processes that are directly linked to student learning” (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008). The processes directly linked to student learning are the processes which impact teacher knowledge and skills. They start and end in a cyclical evaluation system of effective communication and action between leaders and teachers. Therefore, the conceptual model of today’s supervisory cycle is one of symbolic interactionism whereby the leader engages teachers in observational techniques, conversations, and actions that truly lead to improved teacher practice, and accordingly, increased student outcomes. This paper explores the issue of teacher evaluation and supervision using a sociological approach, specifically symbolic interactionism.

**Educational Climate and the New Paradigm**

In recent years, states have focused their efforts on revising teacher evaluation policies in order to achieve the goal of highly qualified teachers in every classroom through a federal government initiative called the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act (Hazi & Rucinski, 2009). Schools are under historic pressure to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and increase state standardized test scores. NCLB has aimed to improve education by placing highly qualified teachers in every classroom, yet most teacher evaluation systems have traditionally been purely subjective and do not measure student learning (McConney, Schalock & Schalock, 1997).

Current researchers in the field of teacher evaluation promote multiple and varied sources of data to document teacher competence through student achievement (Peterson, 2000; Stronge & Tucker, 2000). Peterson (2000) suggests specific sociological tenets undergird teacher performance and may either enhance or diminish teacher capacity in the classrooms. The sociological factors that influence teacher performance include knowledge of group dynamics and the comprehension of the impact and influence of rewards, status, and roles. More importantly, these authors suggest that, “Without the new developments in teacher evaluation, sociological relations in a school can be stacked to isolate the principal from teachers, to deny differences in teacher quality, and to support corrupting contracts of trivial behavior between principals and teachers” (Peterson, 2000).

What sociological variables tend to improve principal-teacher relationships and lead to student academic gains? In a meta-analysis of 299 studies, effective leadership was contingent on open communication that established strong lines of communication, according to Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005). Moreover, strong communication among teachers and their students correlated to a significant increase in student achievement. It follows that the principals’ face to face interactions with individuals and small teams throughout the school create meaning. According to Peterson (2000), principals who use key aspects of sociological communication to include authoritative reassurance, thoughtful questioning, careful listening, and reflective practice help teachers improve their practice. In addition, the language and dialogue around the observational and evaluative processes shape shared understandings,
and ultimately, the value individuals assign to the entire evaluation process. These sociological tenets align with current research in the field to positively impact student performance and achievement (Peterson, 2000). Thus, conversations led by principals do impact student achievement as educators develop meaning created through the teacher evaluation processes.

What is more, studies demonstrate that very few teachers have been rated poorly by building administrators, despite poor performance and inadequate assessment scores. For example, out of the 89,000 teachers in New York City Public Schools, only 1.8 percent of tenured teachers were rated unsatisfactory (Varlas, 2009). Research has been mixed about what criteria should be included in teacher evaluations. Some studies support the use of student achievement data in teacher evaluation systems (Haycock & Crawford, 2008; Varlas, 2009). Historically, the use of student achievement data to evaluate teachers has been highly controversial. However, research tends to support that using student achievement data has made teacher evaluations more valid and reliable (Peterson, 2000; Varlas, 2009).

The most recent federal initiative, Race to the Top, is a competitive grant program designed to entice states to improve student learning in a number of ways. The grant program has outlined many areas for educational reform; one area suggests building data systems that measure student growth and success. The program specifically requires student growth data as a means to inform school personnel about how they can improve instruction in order to increase student learning (United States Department of Education, 2009). Obviously, the idea of using student growth data to measure not only student learning, but also the performance of their teachers and principals is not going away. This popular topic in the political arena will likely have a future impact on the use of student achievement data in the teacher evaluation process.

Current Supervision and Evaluation Models

The traditional teacher supervision and evaluation system is criticized for relying on subjective data (Conley & Glasman, 2008; Kyriakides, Demetrious, & Charalambous, 2006). As an example, researchers assert that principals highlight the summative components of traditional teacher evaluations rather than the formative purpose of teacher improvement (Conley & Glasman, 2008). In fact, most traditional teacher evaluations do not provide feedback regarding performance (Milanowski, 2004) and rely solely on observation and a checklist (Toch, 2008). Currently, observation-based evaluations are viewed by teachers as an obligatory duty, rather than efforts to improve teacher effectiveness (Cooper, Ehrensal, & Bromme, 2005). Moreover, different evaluators assess different attributes when using the traditional evaluation system (Kimball & Milanowski, 2009). Thus, the criterion used to measure teacher quality on traditional teacher evaluation reports carries a low level of validity (Hazi & Rucinski, 2009; Sinnema & Robinson, 2007). As described, the sociological tools of status and reward play a key role in this effort. Teacher efficacy involves the teacher’s perception that their intervention will be successful. Efforts toward improvement must be supported in a collegial atmosphere of coaching and teamwork. Face-to-face and language-based interactions facilitate the sociological needs of teachers to achieve status within the learning organization.

Teacher Quality

It is important to note that contemporary research overwhelmingly suggests quality teachers have a larger impact on student achievement outcomes than any other single factor (Goldhaber, 2006; Holley 2008). Indeed, research indicates highly effective teachers can achieve a full year’s difference in academic growth for students when compared to marginally effective teachers (Goldhaber, 2006; Holley, 2008). Goldhaber (2006) proposes, “Teachers who look the same on the surface, in terms of credentials, may actually be more different than they are alike” (p 5). To this end, Holley (2008) suggests the term highly qualified, which loosely translates to taking a set of classes and/or achieving a passing score on a state licensure test, should be re-articulated as highly
effective to better capture the purpose of education and to improve educational outcomes for all students. It is clear that schools currently have difficulty maintaining a staff of high quality, highly effective teachers (Coates-McBride & Kritsonis, 2008; Goldhaber, 2006).

Research indicates teachers who have higher personal academic achievement attain better results in the classroom. For example, teachers who scored at the 85th percentile or higher on certification exams have a bigger impact on student achievement in the areas of reading and math than their counterparts (Holley, 2008). Unfortunately, Holley (2008) and Goldhaber (2006) suggest that many teaching candidates in universities come from the lower quartile of standardized tests scores on college entrance exams. Some research has demonstrated an elevated attrition rate for higher achieving teachers who yield surpassing results in student achievement in the classroom. This trend in high performing teachers exiting the profession contributes to a tendency toward a less academically able teaching staff overall, some researchers argue (Goldhaber, 2006). Many researchers agree that, “academics are compromised when districts have difficulty attracting, retaining and rewarding highly qualified teachers” (Coates-McBride & Kritsonis, 2008, p. 1). This problem is exacerbated in high poverty schools which often employ the least capable and/or least experienced teaching staff (Goldhaber, 2006).

Teacher quality impacts student performance and achievement, yet not all of the factors that determine teacher quality are assessed in today’s teacher evaluations. Blanton, Sindelar, and Correa (2006) recommend a multi-measure approach to assess teacher quality. In fact, many states test teacher content knowledge to ensure students receive a high quality education. However, a construct-centered method of evaluating teacher quality is needed rather than the task-centered approach which is in practice today (Berliner, 2005). New systems that facilitate teacher reflection and inquiry are targeted to increase teacher effectiveness as well as focus on the formative and summative purposes of supervision and evaluation (Kimball & Milanowski, 2009).

Supervision versus Evaluation

Academic improvement is the primary focus of administrators. Supervision includes efforts taken by the principal to support teachers and provide resources, including professional development, to facilitate teacher improvement. Evaluation includes evaluative judgments of teacher performance. These two roles must coincide simultaneously, through effective face-to-face interactions and quality feedback. Symbolic interactionism is the cornerstone to the social interactions of principal and teacher. The principal’s role in this effort is conveyed by DiPaola and Hoy (2008);

If quality teaching is to occur in the building, the principal has to lead this effort. Instructional improvement is the prime focus in the lives of effective principals, and their decision and priorities reflect their commitment. Increased learning and instructional improvement are the hallmarks of effective schools. (p. 7)

The supervisory cycle is one of the most direct links the school leader has with the school classroom, and according to DiPaola and Hoy (2008), effective supervisors develop knowledge, skills, and understanding in order to become instructional leaders and not just managers. Knowledge about subject matter, standards, curriculum alignment, pedagogy, interpersonal skills, school and community relations, decision-making, problem-solving, and communication are some of the major building blocks of supervision. This role, often overlooked in traditional evaluation methods, is critical to the work done in schools towards improving teaching and learning. Without understanding the role of supervision versus evaluation, and thus preserving a significant amount of time and energy for supervision, an instructional leader runs the risk of only playing a managerial role in a school. “The purpose of supervision is neither to make judgments about the competence of teachers nor to control them but rather to work informally and cooperatively to improve their
teaching” (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008, p.18) and the supervisory cycle process provides the framework necessary to equip leaders with the skills and tools needed. The tenets of symbolic interactionism support and guide the cyclical process through language based learning that guides and supports teacher improvement. The administrator has the responsibility to communicate clear expectations, align resources to meet the needs of teachers and students, and provide opportunities for teachers to take ownership of their learning and improvement. The teacher’s identity is determined through perceptions of interactions between principal and teacher.

**Data Driven**

Student achievement data is considered an important component in the newer teacher evaluation systems (Hazi & Rucinski, 2009; Kellor, 2005; Kimball, White, & Milanowski, 2004; Kupermintz, 2003; Milanowski, 2004; Toch, 2008). In fact, the targeted outcome for teacher evaluation systems involve increased student achievement. More and more, teacher performance has been measured according to the achievement of students. In addition, states have begun to alter teacher evaluation systems. Currently, 12 states require teacher evaluations to include student achievement data (Hazi & Rucinski, 2009). In Virginia, the General Assembly approved the Educational Accountability and Quality Enhancement Act of 1999. This act requires student academic progress as an integral part of the evaluation system. It also requires administrators to receive training in evaluation and documentation of teacher performance based on student academic progress and knowledge. The act also includes that administrators and instructional personnel be assessed based on student academic progress as partial criteria for evaluation (CEPI, 2009). Symbolic interactionism provides a foundation in which principals and teachers can evaluate the academic progress of students and effectiveness of teachers. Effective communication between principal and teacher leads the evaluation process by focusing on student and teacher data to guide the improvement process, rather than merely relying on subjective measures of evaluation.

**Reflective Inquiry**

The concepts of reflection and inquiry remain paramount when determining the antecedents and outcomes of the teaching-learning process that promote student achievement. A new evaluation system that promotes and facilitates reflection and inquiry suggests significant improvement in student achievement (Sinnema & Robinson, 2007). Researchers suggest that the difference in traditional evaluation systems and newer systems lies in the focus on reflection and inquiry weaved throughout the evaluation process. In order for teacher evaluation to fulfill its intended purpose of improving instruction, researchers suggest blending inquiry, teacher reflection, and investigation into the impact of teaching (Sinnema & Robinson, 2007). Teacher efficacy is the outcome of an evaluation system that facilitates reflection and inquiry. A sociological approach to teacher evaluation unveils the realities of the teacher and principal to form a more objective, unbiased view of what is really occurring in the classroom. Symbolic interactionism insists the focus is on relationships: relationships between administrations and teachers; and relationships between teachers and students. The interactions of all parties must be tailored with the ultimate goal of improvement as a guide.

**Recommendations for a New Model**

McEwan (2003) outlines steps that characterize effective school leadership; her philosophies align with theoretical underpinnings of sociology. The tenets of symbolic interactionism focus on effective communication and the perceptions of reality between the evaluator and teacher. In order for professional growth and teacher improvement to occur, the perceptions of the principal and teacher must merge into a common theme for improvement. Although McEwan details effective leadership qualities as steps, they are more akin to attributes that foster administrative guidance and lead to school wide academic success. These steps include: establish and implement standards; serve as an instructional
resourcing to your staff; create an effective climate and culture for learning; communicate the vision and mission; set high expectations for yourself and your staff; develop teacher leaders; and create and maintain positive relationships with students, staff, parents, and community members. As part of the evaluation process, the instructional leader must provide clear directions when establishing and implementing standards; the standards refer to what students should be learning in the classroom. Although the standards are clearly delineated by the state, an effective instructional leader will provide the support necessary to ensure each curricular standard is addressed. Support is required to ensure teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to provide instructional activities at the appropriate cognitive levels in accordance with the standards and to ensure that students are properly assessed. Further, they must be equipped to assist teachers in helping their students when difficulties arise related to instruction. These difficulties often arise in regards to behavior management, classroom management, parent communication, or lack of instructional expertise. Effective instructional leaders are well versed in sociological perspectives and available to assist teachers through open honest professional dialogue, modeled lessons, and/or assistance with behavior management plans.

Symbolic Interactionism: The New Paradigm

Teacher evaluation involves conversations between teachers and administrators. Expectations are passed on to teachers formally, through linguistic interactions, and informally, through observations of behavior. The symbolic-interactionist approach takes into account the reality that a teacher’s personal self is dependent on social interactions. Language facilitates meaning by giving it a way to negotiate meaning through symbols (Lindsey & Beach, 2000). The administrator plays an integral role in communicating clear expectations, providing effective feedback, and responding to teacher needs to improve his/her practice. Principals as instructional leaders play a key role in promoting achievement through the socialization process. First, while much of the formative and more formal socialization process occurs in teacher preparation programs, Hoy (2001) suggests that experience on the job and within the school building provides the foundation of the teacher socialization process. In fact, according to Hoy (2001), new teachers learn the core of their functional roles in the public school setting through the socialization process. Moreover, there is increased recognition among educators that teacher professional development provides a vital lever to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and promote school improvement (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005).

During the past few decades, extensive research contributed to a richer understanding about the issues of professional development, teacher learning, and teacher change (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Guskey, 1985; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Richardson & Placier, 2001). Hoy and Clover (1986) suggest building principals impact the climate of the school more than any other single factor. Other notable researchers have established the direct and measurable relationship between a principal’s behavior and the organizational climate (Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Marzano, 2005). In School Leadership that Works, Marzano (2005) reports that, “…school leadership has a substantial effect on student achievement…(p. 12).” According to Marzano’s meta-analysis of 69 studies from 1978-2001 involving 2,802 schools, researchers measured an average correlation of .25 between a principal’s leadership behaviors and student achievement suggesting that school leadership has a profound effect on student achievement. Therefore, a sociological approach to teacher evaluation, specifically symbolic interactionism, helps guide leadership behaviors to facilitate effective human interactions that convey meaning to the teacher.

One component of instructional leadership includes effectively communicating a vision of learning and leading to the staff, students, and community. A contributing factor in a leader’s ability to realize a vision is effective communication; communication, in turn, must be supported by a detailed action plan that is both transparent to all stakeholders and achievable. To
achieve this, teachers, students, and parents need support. Support comes in many forms such as staff development and mentoring for teachers, remediation and extension for students, community dialogue and effective parental community involvement. The necessary resources to achieve this end come through school board members, city council, parents, and other volunteers. Enlisting support takes skillful communication of a vision. Thus, the success of symbolic interactionism in the leadership realm rests heavily on the leader’s communication skills.

Implications for Future Research

Researchers conclude teacher perception should be valued in the teacher evaluation system in order to garner support for its formative and summative use. The sociological approach to teacher evaluation provides a framework for analyzing the social interactions of the organization. Effective communication through face-to-face interactions and language-based interactions provide a roadmap for discourse that leads to teacher and student improvement. The criteria of teacher evaluation based on the tenets of symbolic interactionism are suggested to aid effective goal-setting and discourse. The need to develop data collection instruments and construct validity should be examined in future research. A new evaluation system in which teachers are directed and supported to inquire into the impact of their teaching needs to be created to truly serve as a teacher/student improvement tool. The student outcome data should only be used as one component of teacher evaluation. The measures of assessment must be fair, valid, and aligned with the curriculum. Finally, student learning scores should be used for normative purposes to improve instruction. Reflection and inquiry of student and teacher data are the goals of an effective teacher evaluation system. Future research on the benefits of a teacher-directed evaluation of student/teacher needs is paramount to determine if such an evaluation system achieves its purpose of improving instruction.

Conclusion

The traditional teacher evaluation system lacks the crucial components of effective communication, self-reflection, and inquiry that are essential in developing teacher efficacy. At the same time, the principal is faced with a two-pronged task of evaluating teacher performance and, simultaneously, providing guidance toward teacher improvement. This layered task can only be accomplished through a collaborative process that utilizes data to guide instruction and set the tone for reflective inquiry. A growth model should be used to evaluate student learning. This would require the use of pre- and post-test data to measure student growth each year. This type of test would also ensure equitable evaluation of teacher effectiveness. Assessments must be high quality and well aligned with state curricula and instructional practices. In order for teacher evaluations to accomplish the goal of improving the practice of teaching, evaluations should be used to drive instruction, improve student learning, and foster reflective practice.

An important means of improving teacher evaluations and supervision, and thus, teacher practice, begins with the alignment of the tenets of a sociological paradigm with leadership practice. Peterson and Peterson (2008) suggest that principals have a key role in communicating sociologically to teachers. In terms of symbolic interactionism, principals use key aspects of sociological communication to include authoritative reassurance, thoughtful questioning, careful listening, and reflective practice. These sociological tenets correspond with current research in the field to positively impact student performance and achievement. These tenets also undergird effective administrative practices associated with the role of supervision in the evaluation process.

References


