A Study of Rural Principals' Evaluative Practices Using the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System

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The study of effective school leaders and teacher evaluators has been a topic of interest to researchers for decades. While there have been a number of studies performed on urban schools, this study seeks to add to the body of research from the perspective of rural schools. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the strategies and practices teacher evaluators employ in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses. The study highlights the important role that relationships, communication, organization, training, targeted feedback, and calibration play in creating an environment. While each principal noted the factors above are important to the evaluation process, they differed in their beliefs and approaches to improving teacher performance. Findings suggest that principals must use a variety of tools and methods to engage teachers in the evaluation process, which in turn, will help improve their instructional practices.

Keywords: educational leadership, teacher development, school principals, teacher evaluation, rural education

Successful schools are led by influential leaders who enhance student academic success by empowering their teachers and staff with the necessary tools, motivation, and ownership to support the mission (Clifford et al., 2014). This leadership responsibility is daunting, especially with the demands of teacher evaluations. The historical purpose of teacher evaluations is to measure teacher effectiveness accurately (Fan, 2022). The surge of reform in teacher evaluations has "expanded the role of principals as instructional leaders, but little is known about principals' ability to promote teacher development through the evaluation process" (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016, p. 1).

School reform has focused on the redesign of teacher evaluations. Most research in this area has been conducted in urban and suburban settings (Giles, 2016). However, in rural settings, challenges occur for school leaders, such as a lack of time for personnel management (Hansen, 2018), inadequate financial resources (du Plessis, 2017), and demands and expectations from the community (Hansen, 2018; Parson et al., 2016). These challenges also include limited capacity and a lack of alignment between policy demands and the realities of rural school communities (Battelle for Kids, 2016). These present several issues for rural school leaders, especially in the area of teacher evaluations. While conforming to teacher evaluation policy reforms, are these evaluations producing results that lead to practices that will enhance instruction and student achievement?

Purpose of the Study

"Despite major changes to teacher evaluation since 2009, scant research examines how principals enact these policies" (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018, p. 531). This qualitative study aimed to identify the strategies and practices that Texas

rural principals employ in the teacher evaluation process to improve instructional practices. Texas uses the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) as a teacher evaluation tool. The purpose of this tool is to improve instructional practices on their campuses. While most public school districts in Texas use some form of the T-TESS, there is a wide array of practices that take place in this process between the teacher and the evaluator in different districts and campuses across the state. Bearing in mind how vital school improvement is, rural schools in Texas are confronted with the dilemma of making the most of the interaction that occurs between the teacher and evaluator. Training is in place in Texas to certify that principals, assistant principals, and other designated campus leaders are qualified to evaluate teachers. However, there is room for improvement. To best understand this challenge and potential room for improvement, this study sought to answer, "What are the strategies and practices rural teacher evaluators in Texas employ in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses?"

Theoretical Framework

The sensemaking theory is the guiding framework for this study. The sensemaking theory addresses how people and organizations interpret and implement policies and reforms (Coburn, 2005; Halverson et al., 2004; Rigby, 2015; Spillane et al., 2002). Weick (1995) introduced the idea of sensemaking in organizational studies. He elucidated that sensemaking involves the process of giving meaning to the situations that people encounter. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking theory recognizes that past experiences and prior knowledge shape learning and that learning occurs through our social and situational context. The theory seeks to analyze how people process, understand, and respond to change (Halverson et al., 2004; Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995) and attempts to explain how and why social learning occurs (Weick et al., 2005). Empirical and theoretical research proposes that school leaders, such as principals, often engage in sensemaking to understand their role and responsibilities better (Bengston et al., 2013; Cottrell & James, 2016).

Sensemaking theory is suitable when attempting to answer questions about how individuals attempt to resolve policy demands and then implement those policies. This theory is applicable to this study due to the conflicts that principals face when juggling the demands of how to evaluate teachers. While principals determine their strategies for the evaluation process implementation, they are "situated precisely at the accountability nexus between education policy and practice" (Magno, 2013, p. 179). Principals are confronted with the conundrum of using the teacher evaluation process as performance accountability, resulting in rewards or dismissal, or using the evaluation process as a means of support and feedback to improve instructional practices. The various paths one takes while making sense of a policy is a reason why sensemaking theory provides another critical lens to analyze the data in this study. Principals in Texas implement the T-TESS, a state-developed tool mandated by several schools in Texas. The parameters of the T-TESS are set, and principals are required to follow those parameters (Teach for Texas, 2022). How they choose to use the T-TESS process reflects the sensemaking theory.

Research Literature

The literature review addresses rural schools and their effect on student outcomes, rural school leadership, the teacher evaluation process, and the practices and strategies employed in evaluation feedback. In addition, a review of the literature on rural school leadership and the challenges and opportunities that rural schools present will be conveyed.

Rural Schools

According to the *Why Rural Matters 2018–2019* report, there are more than 9.3 million, or nearly one in five, students in the United States attending a rural school (Showalter et al., 2019). This means "that more students in the U.S. attend rural schools than in the nation's 85 largest school districts combined" (p. 1). Texas certainly contributes to these numbers. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, Texas has more than 2,000 rural campuses, educating nearly 7000 students.

Nationally, Texas has more schools in rural areas than any other state, with more than 20% of campuses located in rural areas (Texas Education Agency, 2022a).

Rural schools are generally ignored because of their size and small enrollments, especially compared to urban school districts. When examining financial support, "national and state legislation tends to be more directly applied to the larger districts in an attempt to affect the most positive change for as many students as possible" (Bailey, 2021, para. 1). Nationwide, rural school districts receive just 17% of state education funding. Inequity in rural schools is particularly troublesome in Texas. Even though these numbers are high, Texas invests relatively low amounts ($5,386 per rural student) in instruction (Showalter et al., 2019).

Rural schools offer several benefits that make them attractive. They have smaller classroom sizes, a low teacher-to-student ratio, and a strong sense of community value (Kotler, 2017). Rural communities expect schools to play a central role in the community and with the student if they are to be successful (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Israel et al., 2009). Building social capital between the school and community is catalyzed and bolstered by nurturing the rural community's robust sense of place and social capital, inviting parental involvement, and utilizing community stakeholders as a resource (Bauch, 2001). Rural families frequently have deep-seated connections in the community and dense social networks that support community norms, morals, and viewpoints (Bauch, 2001).

Rural School Principals

The rural school principal is seen as an integral part of the rural community, and great expectations rest on the principal's shoulders by the constituents as a result (Preston et al., 2018). Rural communities demonstrate a solid identification and pride in their communities. Because schools mirror the attributes of the surrounding populations, the idea of reform in the school is frequently a contentious subject for rural principals (Preston et al., 2018). Due to the smaller enrollment of rural schools, principals report that they have the prospect of meaningful relationships with students, which yields greater

consideration of the individual student, awareness of student learning, and evaluation of student needs (Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

Principals in rural areas are often required to be adaptable in performing their jobs. They encounter "complex daily tasks in their efforts to articulate visions and goals, motivate teachers, allocate resources, discipline students, and develop organizational structures in order to foster an effective learning environment" (Yang et al., 2021, p. 2). This role is impacted by the lack of resources, various responsibilities, and the obligation of maintaining a prominent, visible role within the community (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Wood et al. (2013) identified struggles presented in the rural setting, including greater and higher demands of the principal from the community, federal and state mandates, and the internal public, with limited time and resources. In consideration of these struggles, it is essential to note that the ultimate goal for any school leader is increasing student growth and academic achievement (Fox et al., 2015; Wise, 2015). Indeed, rural principals face diverse challenges that are unique to their settings, and there is limited research that targets this group (Preston et al., 2018).

T-TESS

To create more frequent, timely, formative feedback that incorporated multiple indicators of success, including student measures, the Texas Education Agency created the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS). In the 2016–17 school year, T-TESS was initiated in Texas. A study conducted by Lazarev et al. (2017) during the piloted years of the T-TESS suggested that the T-TESS process demonstrated the potential to be an effective, consistent, and efficient evaluation tool.

The T-TESS evaluation structure presents each teacher with the prospect to develop their teaching practices by supporting professional development and professional goal identification and realization (Texas Education Agency, 2016a). The goal-setting and professional development plan and the evaluation rubric are considered a pivotal part of teacher progression utilizing T-TESS (Texas Education Agency, 2016b). A key point of T-TESS

is the opportunity to shift the evaluation perspective from teacher fault to an innovative pattern of constant cooperative feedback with the encouragement of professional development and growth (Texas Education Agency, 2016a).

The Principal's Role in T-TESS

The charge of adhering to the T-TESS principles rests on the evaluator's shoulders because of their grasp of the system. The school district has the authority to assign this role to any of its school campus leaders. In rural schools, due to their size, this responsibility generally falls on the campus principal.

Being a T-TESS appraiser/evaluator involves several aspects. The pre-conference, post-conference, goal-setting, and professional development phases of T-TESS allow evaluators significant opportunities to offer actionable, well-timed feedback to teachers throughout the process (Texas Education Agency, 2016b). These crucial parts allow teachers to self-reflect on pedagogy and recognize areas for improvement (Texas Education Agency, 2016b). Furthermore, teachers are urged to utilize their reflections to change their instructional practices.

All T-TESS appraisers must obtain certification training and complete a certification assessment online on the teacher observation process (Texas Education Agency, 2016a). Appraisers are also expected to attend training at their educational service centers and are required to meet Texas Education Agency prerequisites and any following certification through online instruction. The T-TESS certification process involves the prospective appraiser observing a teaching situation video, scripting a teacher's lesson, and responding to appraiser-related questions from the video. Although scripting is not a new phenomenon in formal observation, the training stresses its value in T-TESS. Appraisers utilize scripting notes throughout feedback conferences, which supports objective and encouraging feedback during the cooperative conversation (Templeton et al., 2016). New teachers must complete T-TESS training prior to the fourth week of school and no less than two weeks before the formal classroom observation (Texas Administration Code, 2022a).

Once training concludes, both teachers and principals are needed to approve the teacher's self-determined goals for the impending year. Texas Education Agency procedures charge that a goal-setting and professional development meeting should transpire between the appraiser and each teacher in their first year in a district (Texas Administration Code, 2022b). After the goal-setting meeting, some campus principals and teachers continue formative discussions about the teacher's individual goals and professional development growth. Campus principals offer teachers appraising data all through the formal appraisal procedure. These procedures have comprised the compulsory pre-observation and post-observation meetings in addition to the walk-through requirements, goal-setting, and professional development conferences (Texas Education Agency, 2016b). The evaluator's final opportunity to collect additional evidence before finalizing the written requirement as part of the T-TESS procedure is at the end-of-year summative meeting between teachers and principals (Texas Education Agency, 2016a).

Principal Feedback

Hattie and Yates (2014) stated, "The vital role that feedback plays in assisting learners in improving their performances has been recognized from the beginnings of behavioral science" (p. 66). The T-TESS process depends on quality feedback to help improve instructional improvement. This feedback is critical during the pre- and post-conference held between the principal and the teacher. The pre-conference is a time for the principal to learn about the lessons being taught. In the post-conference meeting, the principal gives the teacher feedback on areas that were done well and areas for improvement (Teach for Texas, 2022). This feedback is the basis for instructional improvement. Research by Hattie and Yates (2014) stated that there was a direct impact on student achievement when teachers sought feedback on their instructional practices.

Research on feedback reveals practices that improve teacher performance. When teachers are provided with specific performance-based feedback, their instructional practices improve

(Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Feeney, 2007; Weisberg et al., 2009). The idea that appraisals must be practical and valuable is required for appraisers to give reliable and valid feedback on appraisals (Napier & Latham, 1986). When the teacher is questioned in a manner that encourages reflective higher-order cognitive processes, their teaching practices improve (Feeney, 2007; Tang & Chow, 2007). These practices encourage teachers to engage in self-regulating methods that aid in developing skills that enhance their performance in the classroom (Tang & Chow, 2007).

Texas principals have been empowered to increase their instructional leadership role by using the T-TESS appraisal instrument (Templeton et al., 2016). The Texas Education Agency (2016a) asserted that a beneficial and accepted method of supporting educators during goal setting includes engaging teachers through effective feedback to contemplate their instructional practices.

Evaluation Strategies and Practices for Principals

It is the intent that the teacher evaluation process should measure a teacher's strengths and weaknesses through a precise and consistent approach that provides timely and helpful feedback (Callahan & Sadeghi, 2015). In addition, the process should inform instructional strategies and professional development opportunities (Marzano, 2012). To accomplish this, principals should be equipped with strategies and practices to promote positive educational outcomes.

To give applicable feedback, one strategy is to incorporate professional development opportunities. According to Kelley and Maslow (2005), "Teacher evaluation systems ideally should foster improvement in both professional development opportunities and teaching practices" (p. 1). "The key is providing professional development that is timely, relevant, and effectively delivered" (Callahan & Sadeghi, 2015, p. 49). Professional development should be designed specifically for the teacher being evaluated. These trainings should be personalized and founded in professional learning communities and through peer mentoring to be truly effective (Ruppert, 2019). Bickman (2014) reinforced that professional development should also focus on context, content, and product; should include knowledge, relevance, personal impact; and should have practical application to the educator. It is critical for them to be sustainable and ongoing (Callahan & Sadeghi, 2015).

A key strategy in implementing an effective teacher evaluation is quality communication between the principal and the teachers. Communication regarding performance feedback is critical during the evaluation process and must be present to secure teacher growth (Jiang et al., 2015). The quality of communication in the feedback process is a central feature of the evaluation process and has been shown to relate to overall evaluation quality (Kimball & Milanowski, 2009). According to Stiggins and Clark (1988), quality communication includes the way the teacher perceives the "evaluator's credibility, quality of ideas, depth of information, and persuasiveness of rationale for suggested changes, as well as the quality of the relationship between a teacher and an evaluator" (as cited in Donahue & Vogel, 2018, p. 35).

The teachers' and principals' perceptions of the evaluation system are critical. According to Kraft and Gilmour (2016), differing perceptions about the purpose of evaluation among principals, teachers, and the district sometimes undercut the trust and buy-in required for meaningful conversations about instructional improvement (p. 741). The principals need to do what they can to create a positive perception of the evaluation process. Tuytens and Devos (2014) suggested that if principals develop a school climate built on trust, vision, support, and structure as key dimensions, this could influence the teachers' perceptions of their appraisal system. A positive school climate creates buy-in for teachers. Kraft and Gilmour (2016) interviewed principals that recently implemented reforms in their teacher evaluation system; they reported that the principals described how teacher buy-in and investment in the improvement process were essential to its success.

A strategy that principals need is to attend and invest in a training and support program. Mestry (2017) stresses that "principals can make a significant contribution to schools' achieving the

educational goals and improving learner performance, if they are adequately prepared for their leadership role" (p. 8). It is essential to consider that the effective feedback teachers receive due to the evaluation process is highly dependent on school leaders' skills, capacity, and goals (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). This issue brings concern about how principals will accomplish these tasks while fulfilling their other duties. A study conducted by Kraft and Christian (2021) found that "promoting teacher growth through evaluation feedback likely requires evaluators who are instructional experts with the *time and skills necessary* to provide frequent, actionable feedback to teachers and actively involve them in assessing their own practice" (p. 33, emphasis added). Given the multi-tasking that principals experience and the demand that they also serve as successful teacher evaluators who can give effective feedback, it is critical to examine principals' enactment of current evaluation policies (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018).

Methodology

This study addresses Texas rural school principals' experiences and practices related to teacher evaluation and improving instructional practices and student outcomes on their campuses related to their role as principals through a qualitative approach. The experiences of the principal participants are critical in this study because of their unique rural circumstances and demands.

Research Design

A qualitative design was employed in this study. A qualitative design was chosen because of the need to explore the strategies and practices that rural principals use. It is important to know these strategies and to understand why the participants chose them. This design allows for the investigation of *what*, *how,* and *why*. A critical aspect of the study is the rural setting. This setting exhibits distinctive challenges for principals, including the community's continuous access to the principal (Hansen, 2018; Parson et al., 2016), geographic remoteness (Hansen, 2018), and the vast scope of obligations of rural principals (du Plessis, 2017).

Participants

Participants for this study included rural secondary principals who were awarded Principal of the Year honors through the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals (TASSP) for the 2020–2021 school year. These secondary principals of the year were nominated by their teachers and schools for outstanding service in: (a) culture-wellness, (b) culture-equity, (c) culture-student-centeredness, (d) learning-results-orientation, (e) learning-collaborative leadership, and (f) learning-innovation (TASSP, 2022).

The participants were from campuses that the Texas Education Agency awarded the Campuses of Distinction title. Campuses received this award in recognition of their outstanding academic achievement (Texas Education Agency, 2022b). There were three participants in the study, all of whom were assigned pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity and aid in the confidentiality of the data collected during the interview processes. Principal Anderson was a veteran principal in his 17th year in education. At the time of this study, he was the middle school principal and had previously served as a principal at the elementary level. Principal Baker was a veteran principal with 25 years of experience in education. He had served as a high school principal for 11 years. Finally, Principal Clark was serving his fifth year as the principal of a high school and had been in education for a total of 14 years.

Data Collection

Once the participants were determined, and their letters of consent were signed, each participant was sent a pre-questionnaire. The purpose of the pre-questionnaire was to set a foundation for the upcoming interviews. These questions provided information that helped the interviewer become familiar with the participants, and it also gave a background of their educational experience. Demographical information was asked, as well as questions such as:

- What are you passionate about in the field of education?
- Why did you become an educator?

- What is your philosophy on education as a principal?

These questions acted as a springboard for the interviews and provided more information about the participants.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility in the interview. The interview was guided by the study's research question, "What are the strategies and practices rural teacher evaluators in Texas employ in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses?" The literature review and the pre-questionnaires assisted in the development of these questions. Some of the questions that were asked were:

- What advice would you give a first-year principal to ensure that they are effective administrators during the evaluation process?

- Do principals have a plan that they follow to ensure a productive conversation about the evaluation process in order to improve instruction?

- What strategies and practices would you recommend?

- What type of trainings have you received that you feel were the most helpful?

- What do you do as an administrator to be reflective and supportive during the evaluation process?

- How do you engage the teacher to encourage reflective thought and conversation?

- What do you specifically do in the evaluation process to ensure that the instruction of the teacher is truly improved?

The interviews were conducted virtually to accommodate the participants' schedules and to follow health guidelines due to concerns about COVID-19 at the time of the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis commenced with compiling data. The data included the pre-questionnaire, interview protocols, and interview transcripts. The Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013) was utilized to analyze the data. The first step was transcribing the data.

The researcher used GoToMeeting transcription software to transcribe the interviews verbatim. The second stage consisted of the familiarization by immersing in the data. This stage included reading transcripts and listening to audio recordings multiple times. The third step was coding. Inductive analysis was used by establishing codes from the participants' words and the meaning that is communicated by extended phrases (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Some of the codes that were identified include *willingness*, *ability and skill*, *planned*, *deliberate*, and *organized*. The fourth step included grouping the codes based on similarities or building a "working analytical framework" (Gale et al., 2013, p. 5). A provisional label for each group was formed. In the fifth step, a framework was developed by analyzing the data to find common themes. The next step involved the creation of a matrix to map out the data from the synthesized and coded data. The last step included interpreting the data built on the findings identified in the matrix and any analytical memos logged during the research process.

Findings

The research question focused on rural principals' strategies and practices employed in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses. This study focused on the strategies and practices that principals used during the T-TESS appraisal system. One theme, *communication and relationships*, emerged throughout the interview process among all three participating principals. A second theme, *a deliberate and organized approach to evaluation*, appeared that emphasized developing a deliberate plan and schedule to execute the evaluation process. An organized approach is required because of the time and diligence that effective teacher evaluation requires. A less prominent theme in the study was *T-TESS training, targeted feedback, and calibration*, centered around T-TESS training—a training that all administrators are required to complete before they can evaluate teachers. Targeted feedback and calibration among evaluators on the campus and across the district also appeared to be important for evaluators to improve instructional practices on their campuses.

Theme One: Communication and Relationships

The rural school principals in this study consistently voiced that communication with teachers and the relationship they built with the teachers was pivotal to improving instructional practices on their campuses. They credited their rural setting to the close relationships they had with their teachers. The principal participants mentioned that understanding their communication style and the style of the teacher was important. Building positive relationships with teachers often involved finding the good things that teachers were doing in their instruction and recognizing it. The principal participants agreed that proper questioning technique was essential during all the phases of the appraisal process (pre-conference, post-conference, goal-setting, and professional development phases) and sometimes required scripting questions to invite reflective conversations with teachers. They also discussed that ensuring that the teachers understood that the evaluation process was about growth required clear communication from the evaluator. Finally, they reiterated that maintaining a positive relationship with the teacher allowed for teacher growth.

Principal Anderson was a proponent of understanding his communication style and the communication style of his staff. He emphatically noted,

> You've got to look and feel your communication style and then try to learn everybody else's. I could have the best idea ever, but if I can't communicate it to the 60 to 80 people that I'm responsible for, then my idea is not gonna go anywhere. (Principal Anderson, personal communication, June 8, 2021)

Principal Baker shared the same sentiment in his interview by stating, "Whether it's with the teacher or administration, no one communicates exactly the same. The goal is to build a positive, good rapport with the teachers" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Anderson held communication style in such high regard that he asked his staff to fill out a communication survey at the beginning of the school year to better understand the communication styles of the teachers on his campus. He also

mentioned that this would not happen in an urban campus due to the large size. Principal Anderson utilized the data gained from the communication survey to be more effective in the evaluation.

Principals Baker and Clark repeatedly spoke about the importance of building positive relationships with their teachers. Principal Baker stated, "I try to give feedback on the initial walk-through that tells them they are doing something well. That way, the teacher walks into the first meeting about their feedback, knowing that they are doing well" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Baker emphasized the significance of putting an encouraging perspective on all his feedback, "Everything that we do, how do we put a positive spin on it? How can we get a better outcome in a positive way?" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Baker affirmed later in the interview when asked about how his evaluation practices have changed, when he stated, "I think the key part is, once you have a positive relationship with the teacher, the evaluation turns to, I'm here to help you. How can I make it better?" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Clark liked to build relationships with his teachers in a similar manner. He stated,

> Hopefully, the culture where my time and energy are going to go is in recognizing the job they're doing and tying it to instruction toward their student achievement. Let's celebrate those successes; let's recognize it. I want the culture to celebrate their success in the classroom, tied to pedagogy and student achievement. (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021)

Theme Two: A Deliberate and Organized Approach to Evaluation

The rural school principals in the study all expressed the importance of utilizing a methodical process regarding the evaluation process. Principals face many trying circumstances when it comes to maintaining reliability in implementing the T-TESS timeline and required components. These requirements expect the rural school principal to manage their time wisely and make appropriate

choices regarding each evaluation. Each principal provided several examples of approaching these pressures and cited the value of following the T-TESS method. Principal Clark specified that the planning process needs to start early. He stated,

> Well, I think the first thing I'll say is it needs to be planned. You have to lay out an evaluation calendar at the start of the year. Otherwise, it's not done in a timely manner. You'll look up, and it'll be April. And you're trying to cram in all your observations, and I know, because I've done that before. (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021)

Principal Clark also referred to applying scripted questions to the evaluation procedure that tied back to the T-TESS rubric, "We have some scripted questions that we are working through in the planning domain. We always follow the T-TESS post-conference structure plan that allows for reinforcement and refinement of the teacher's plan of action" (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021). Principal Anderson reflected on the evaluation follow-up organization:

> I think the biggest thing that we miss out on as administrators is really having a good, solid follow-up time. I think it's unfair to just say, 'Hey, go do this and get better and then not really have a plan to follow up.' (Principal Anderson, personal communication, June 8, 2021)

Principal Anderson described how he approached different needs with teachers. A quick follow-up would be applied to something that needed to be addressed in the classroom urgently while a longer time could be allowed to follow up with less pressing needs.

Principal Baker held himself and his administrators to a high standard regarding classroom walk-throughs. When Principal Baker was asked about the strategies and practices he recommended for teacher evaluation, he responded, "Be in the classroom. Just the presence makes a big difference. We do walk-throughs that are not on T-TESS. We're in the classroom for every single teacher five times a week" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal

Clark summarized the importance of planning and how it applies to teacher growth,

> So, at a minimum four periods, which is half of our day, I'm going to be spend working with one of our teachers. It forces you to spend time if you're going to be an instructional leader. As a principal, there's no shortcuts to that. You have to spend that time with them. And so, it really forces us to do that and to spend time in instructional leadership. (Principal Clark, personal communication June 23, 2021)

Theme Three: T-TESS Training, Targeted Feedback, and Calibration

All three rural school principals emphasized the T-TESS training process for principals. While they may have expressed some consternation about using T-TESS initially, the three principals changed their thoughts about T-TESS and agreed that there was inherent value in the training process concerning improving instructional practices on their campuses. Targeted feedback that is tied to the T-TESS allowed the principals to cite precise areas for improvement for teachers in their practices. The principals talked about the importance of calibration among all the evaluators in their district. To clarify this point, they explained that calibration was when different evaluators across the district yielded similar results. This was possible by their district training and keeping in mind that their evaluations were focused on campus and district goals, visions, and mission statements. The principals considered calibration a strong training tool and validation process for the principals. The participants stressed that their personal goals were continual improvement of the evaluation process and, thus, instructional practices.

All three principals agreed that the T-TESS training was a necessity for performing effective teacher evaluations to improve instructional practices. An interesting extension of the training was how valuable calibration among different evaluators was to the rural school principals. Principal Clark remarked,

> This wasn't formal training, but as a district, we want to ensure our calibration across administrators and evaluators on our campus.

So, I'm with an elementary principal and a middle school principal and a curriculum director, special education director, and other people who evaluate. We went through several classrooms and evaluated and discussed, and that was very powerful. (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021)

Principal Baker shared, "Besides the T-TESS training, of course, we calibrate as a district" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Baker added that he would perform about 30 walk-throughs with a new administrator to calibrate before he permits them to submit feedback to a teacher. Both Principals Baker and Clark referred to the calibration practices within their districts as an informal extension of the T-TESS training that all teacher evaluators are required to complete prior to performing teacher evaluations.

The rural school principals felt that T-TESS allowed them to provide specific feedback to improve instructional practices. When asked about how his practices have changed since the inception of T-TESS, Principal Baker responded, "I actually believe it's made us more aware as principals of more specific details as far as the individual features and how the teachers are teaching" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Baker gave targeted feedback; he stated, "When I give immediate, targeted feedback in a walk-through I want to sit down and go through the feedback with them" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Anderson shared a similar sentiment,

> T-TESS having the number of structures that it has, allows you to point out with evidence and the language out of the rubric and tie it back directly to the instruction that the teachers are doing. It's good for me to point, specifically, within the rubric and be able to say, "here are the targeted things that you need to work on." (Principal Anderson, personal communication, June 8, 2021)

Principal Clark enhanced his targeted feedback by recording the evaluation of each class period on his computer with audio and video because he felt like he was missing crucial pieces of the evaluation process due to scripting the evaluation. Principal Clark revealed,

> And so, what I've gone to recently is adding video recordings to everything. And so, everything is on video, so what I write down is different, you know, when I'm scripting. I can pause it, catch stuff. The teacher gets a copy of the video. I had a teacher this year tell me that was one of the most powerful things in her career in professional growth was watching herself teach because it looked different to her from a third-person view. I'm able to show what I'm seeing on video, and ask questions directly related to the rubric. (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021)

Discussion

Being a school principal is a difficult, demanding, and complicated role that requires leaders to be focused on student success. Consequently, school leaders and scholars seek ways to increase student performance by developing teachers with the evaluation process (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). The study aimed to add to the body of research by addressing the strategies and practices that rural principals use in the evaluation process to improve teacher instruction.

Weick (1995) introduced the idea of sensemaking in organizational studies to move away from a focus on traditional decision-making toward an emphasis on activities that indicate the meaning of the decisions enacted in the behavior (Mendez, 2020). The processes of the sensemaking theory were evident throughout the interviews as the principals reflected on their experiences with the implementation of the T-TESS. While principals determined their strategies for the evaluation process, they were "situated precisely at the accountability nexus between education policy and practice" (Magno, 2013, p. 179). The T-TESS presents several challenges for principals as they attempt to successfully implement the evaluation policies of the school while mastering their role as instructional leaders and campus managers. Empirical and theoretical research proposes that school leaders, such as principals, often engage in sensemaking to understand their role and

responsibilities better (Bengston et al., 2013; Cottrell & James, 2016).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the strategies and practices teacher evaluators employ in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses. This study relates specifically to award-winning rural principals of secondary public schools in Texas. This study intended to gain a greater understanding of how these rural school principals in Texas utilized the T-TESS to improve instructional practices on their campuses.

Through the data analysis of the responses, three main themes emerged: (a) communication and relationships, (b) a deliberate, organized approach to evaluation, and (c) T-TESS training, targeted feedback, and calibration. The theme, *communication and relationships*, encompassed all the aspects of communication in the evaluation process and building positive relationships with campus teachers. Forming positive relationships and communicating clearly with teachers required the principals to understand both how they communicate and how individual teachers communicate. The principals also relied on pre-scripted questions to spur teachers' reflective thinking and ensure that proper questioning technique was utilized.

The second theme, *a deliberate and organized approach to evaluation*, referred to laying out a schedule at the beginning of the school year regarding the evaluations process and following through with it. The principalship can be chaotic. A school administrator can start the day with a clear calendar and not get anything accomplished because of various things that occur and require immediate attention. Scheduling teacher observations, conferences, and walk-throughs required deliberate planning and a willingness to follow through with the commitment. Prioritizing the teacher evaluation process in the principal's calendar ensures that a complete and thoughtful evaluation transpires. The principals advocated for following scripted questions and the T-TESS rubric to guide questions and conversations with teachers to stimulate reflective thoughts on their teaching practices.

The third theme was *T-TESS training, targeted feedback, and calibration*. All three principal participants valued the T-TESS teacher evaluator training process. While many aspects were addressed during the T-TESS evaluator process, targeted feedback and calibration arose as strong points of the initial training and less formal training that followed in the principals' respective districts. Targeted feedback was touted as a strong point of the T-TESS as was allowing principals to isolate specific skills that teachers may be directed to improve. Calibration was a form of district training where a group of principals evaluated a teacher. After the evaluation, the principals met to discuss the teacher's ratings and come to a consensus. Calibration helped hone the principals' skills and made them feel more confident in their abilities.

Conclusions

The principals in this study were complimentary of T-TESS and clearly learned to apply it to improve instructional practices on their campuses (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Mastering the art of conversation and thoughtful questioning was considered a necessary skill by the principals to improve teacher instructional practices, an idea cited in the literature (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015) . In addition, the principals cited a constant desire to improve communication skills that would increase the effectiveness of their feedback to engage teachers in instructional practices. This sentiment was also shared in the literature by Stringer and Hourani (2016), who highlighted the need for professional development for teacher appraisal and feedback conversations.

As noted in previous research (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Feeney, 2007; Weisberg et al., 2009), this study found performance-based feedback to teachers about their instructional practices and questions that prompt reflection from teachers is a critical practice for improving instruction in the classroom. In addition, the principals in this study found that encouraging teachers to contemplate their teaching methods in the evaluation process buoyed the development of proficiencies that

improved instructional practices, an idea cited in the literature by Tang and Chow (2007).

Principals have gained the prospect of increasing their instructional leadership roles by employing T-TESS (Templeton et al., 2016). T-TESS has determined that principals are their campuses' primary instructional leadership coaches. The Texas Education Agency (2016a) included comparable language by asserting that T-TESS evaluators asking teachers to contemplate their instructional practices is a beneficial and accepted method to support educators during the goal-setting progression.

Strengths and Limitations

The principals in this study were selected as principal of the year finalists for their respective educational regions in Texas due to their campus successes. This fact yields merit to the responses of the principals and their expertise in the evaluation process.

Limitations existed in this study. The first limitation was the small sample size of three participants. However, when the criteria for participants required award-winning principals in rural schools, the pool of candidates for inclusion in the study was small.

An added limitation in the research was trying to conduct a study in the heart of a global pandemic. Due to COVID-19, the interviews were not able to be conducted in person. This limited the interviewer's ability to monitor the nonverbal behaviors of the interviewees.

The timing of the study presented a third limitation. COVID-19 presented challenges to scheduling due to quarantines, illness, and other issues that arose from the pandemic. After soliciting several participants, only three participants followed up with an interview which caused a decrease in the depth of the study. All interviews occurred after the conclusion of the school year for these districts.

Implications

Results from this research yield important implications that could aid campus and district-level school leaders in the pursuit of greater learning outcomes for students in Texas public schools. This study offers educational regional service centers, principal preparation programs, and district leaders' awareness of the needs and support of rural principals. Developers of teacher evaluation systems can employ findings from the research as well. While the research focused on Texas principals, the results from this study will benefit school leaders beyond Texas as well. Managers trusted with developing people in their charge will benefit from the generalizability of this study. While educators are a highly specific group, the findings of this research can be applied to a variety of organizations and practitioners of employee growth. Teachers could benefit from school leaders that are more skillful in their leadership practice. Finally, students could be the benefactors of improved educational outcomes because of the pursuit of enhanced teaching methods that effective school leadership can provide.

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