Factors that Influence Teacher Perception of Teacher Evaluation Policies: A Mixed-Methods Study

My dissertation research examines teacher perceptions of teacher evaluation systems. This topic warrants study because many states are developing new teacher evaluation policies in response to a push from the federal level. Though teacher evaluation policies are not new, there is a renewed emphasis on them, as seen in federal policy initiatives such as the Race to the Top fund’s focus on teacher evaluation systems. These new evaluation systems have potential benefits such as evaluations that are less cursory and more closely tied to the actual quality of teaching, as well as increased opportunities for teachers to receive feedback and support and thus hopefully improve their practice. However, the policies also face potential pitfalls. Teachers may engage with these policies in a variety of ways, not all of which will be congruent with policymakers’ goals for the new teacher evaluation policies. This engagement with policy stems from the teacher’s perceptions of the policies at hand.

Successful implementation across a variety of organizational and institutional contexts depends upon the “street-level bureaucrats” (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1997), in this case, the teachers. Historically, the implementer’s perceptions of a policy have been crucial for a successful implementation, yet we know little about the factors that influence teachers’ perceptions of evaluation policy and how teachers develop these perceptions. We also know little about different groups of teachers, grouped by age, career stages, or other elements, have different perceptions of teacher evaluation policies. By learning more about the factors that influence teacher perceptions of these policies, as well as the process through which teachers form their perceptions, we can better capitalize on the opportunities presented by these new policies and minimize the potential pitfalls.

Accordingly, my dissertation research answers two research questions: (1) what factors influence teacher perception of accountability-oriented teacher evaluation policies and (2) how do teachers develop their perceptions of accountability-oriented teacher evaluation policies. My research is specifically grounded in three bodies of literature that can give us insight into how teachers perceive these policies. Each body of literature addresses a category of factors that may influence perception: the elements of the evaluation systems, the organizational context in which the teacher is situated, and characteristics about the teacher themselves. Elements of the evaluation system include such things as the purpose of the evaluation system (Stiggens & Duke, 1988; McLaughlin & Pfeifer, 1989), the conception of teaching embedded within the policy (Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin & Berstein, 1985), the perceived validity and reliability of the measures used, and the implementation process. At its heart, a new evaluation policy can be seen as a type of organizational change so factors from the organizational context that might influence perception would be things such as opportunities for the development of shared meaning (Fullan, 2007), fairness (Finnegan & Kelley, 2003), the organizational culture (Schein, 1996), and the alignment between the goals of the organization and the goals of the evaluation system (Iwanicki & Rindone, 1990). Finally, teacher characteristics such as values and motivations (Rosenhotlz & Smylie, 1984), age and career stage (Evans, 1996), and identity (Spillane, 2000) may all influence teacher perception. Of particular interest is the extent to which a teacher matches the “policy image”, policymakers’ idealized perception of teachers, and the extent to which a teacher would have to change to conform to that image (Jansen, 2001; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). It is possible that some teachers who see themselves as part of the accountability reform movement and thus closer to the “policy image” of policymakers, such as Teach for America teachers, may have significantly different perceptions of these policies.
Grounded in these bodies of literature, my study will use a mixed methods approach to provide both a broad comparison of different factors influencing teacher perception and an in-depth look at how individual teachers formulate their perceptions. A survey will be used to collect data on the factors that influence teacher perception. To collect data on how elements of the policy itself influence perception, respondents will be asked about their knowledge of the different elements of the evaluation policy, the perceived validity of the measures used in the evaluations, and the perceived purpose of the new evaluation system. Data on the teacher’s organizational context will also be collected through items that address the level of trust between the teacher and evaluator, the perceived fairness of the new evaluations, and whether that school’s culture is one that supports feedback and inquiry. Finally, the survey will also collect data on teacher characteristics such as career stage, motivations, and other demographic data. Teachers will also be asked about their professional identities and the extent to which they identify as school stakeholders, union members, or members of other groups such as Teach for America, as well as the way they manage multiple identities in their professional lives.

To complement the data collected through the survey, semi-structured individual interviews will also be used. The use of interview data will provide deeper insight into how teachers form their perceptions and the process through which teachers prioritized or minimized the influence of different factors. The quantitative data will allow for regression analysis to better understand which factors might be significantly related to teacher perception. This data will also allow for multivariate analysis regarding the differences amongst groups of teachers, such as whether Teach for America teachers have a significantly different perceptions of these policies. The qualitative data will complement these models by fleshing out the process through which teachers form their perceptions and will ultimately allow for a more nuanced, complete view of how teachers perceive, and may eventually respond to, new evaluation policies.

The site for this study will be the Indianapolis metropolitan region, using a stratified sample of districts with varying income levels. Not only is Indiana in the first year of implementing a statewide teacher evaluation system, it also representative of a broader change in the political landscape. The political context surrounding the formation and implementation of Indiana’s new teacher evaluation policy is characterized by the involvement of many actors that are new to education policy, including advocacy groups and think tanks, as well as traditional actors in education policy such as teachers unions and state-level policymakers. Thus, understanding how teachers develop perceptions of teacher evaluation systems in this context affords us a window into how these political contexts may interact with teacher characteristics and school organizations to ultimately shape how teachers engage with policies developed in this context.

The findings from this study will provide insight for policymakers into how teachers perceive accountability-oriented evaluation policies, and thus what factors might be important to consider when formulating, implementing, or refining evaluation policies. This data can also help to inform school leaders about what factors in their organizations may influence how teachers perceive evaluation policies, and thus what steps may be required for an implementation that has the most positive possible perception on the part of the teachers. Finally, this study can make a contribution to theory by contributing to a typology of factors that influence teacher perceptions of evaluation policies as well as a greater understanding of the process through which teachers develop perceptions.