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Aligning Professional Development to an Educator Evaluation System to Support Teachers

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to an Educator Evaluation System to Support Teachers[1]

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ABSTRACT

The professional development (PD) opportunities for teachers in a K-12 district were examined to determine the extent to which they related to, and supported, the teachers' rating on their evaluations. This district addressed teacher evaluation and teacher professional development jointly with their local and state level teachers' unions with the collective "conception of teacher evaluation as part of a teaching and learning system that supports continuous improvement" (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 5).

This mixed-methods study examined the perceived confidence of educators in relation to their PD needs and their evaluation standards utilizing an online questionnaire and a focus group to address the following two research questions: What are the perceived PD needs of K-12 teachers in the following educator evaluation areas: Standard 1: Planning and Preparation, 2: Classroom Environment, 3: Instruction, and 4: Professional Growth and Responsibilities? What is the relationship between the teachers' perceived PD needs and the following demographic variables: grade span, number of years teaching, number of years teaching in current certification area, regular/special education teaching experience, number of hours of PD taken the prior year, and amount of PD taken in the areas of their Student and Professional Growth Goals?

The participants of the focus group (N=8) were a sub-set of the respondents to the online questionnaire (N=602), which was distributed to all of the district's educators. The questionnaire, with open-ended questions and a 5-point Likert scale, indicated the predominate PD needs were in Evaluation Standard Three – Instruction: Explaining the Content (F=10.83, p<.001, η^2=.09) Using a Variety of Discussion Techniques(F=9.83, p<.001, η^2=.08), and Setting Expectations for Learning (F=9.78, p<.001, η^2=.08), all of which indicated the demographic of number of years teaching had the greatest impact on perceived confidence (1-3, 4-6 < 16-20, 20+). The focus group transcripts were theme coded with the dominant theme; job specific content-based PD (63%), supporting the quantitative data.

Several overarching themes were identified for professional development to support educator practice and evaluations which included: a mentor/induction program to assist with supporting new teachers, content specific PD, instructional strategies, job-

embedded PD, expanded length of courses, instructional technologies, and strategies for communicating with parents.

Problem Statement

This district is working collaboratively with their local and state teacher's union to develop a connected and aligned teacher evaluation and professional development system. To determine "results oriented" (Fogarty, 2009/2010, p. 32) professional development, this district has begun to use the data it has collected from their educator evaluation system to determine topics, themes, and content for professional learning in the coming year to support educators.

This district has been collecting data on teacher evaluation ratings in 34 element areas across four standards on a teacher evaluation rubric. To date, these data had not been utilized to make decisions on the professional development opportuniites offered to teachers. Additionally, the teachers had never been surveyed to determine if their professional development needs were being met and if they felt they are getting appropriate professional development to support improving their practice and evaluation ratings. The problem the district now faces is how to redesign the professional development system, without substantially increasing financial impact, utilizing information gathered through the data collection system for teacher evaluation.

The purpose of this study is to use the district teacher evaluation data, along with information gained from the study's needs assessment questionnaire and focus group interview, to guide the development a new professional development program for the educators in this district. This research could also be important for assisting educational leaders in making policy improvement and resource allocation decisions, which will impact programs, both immediately and in the near future.

Research Questions

This district needed to know how to best support teacher professional growth; therefore, this study addressed two research questions:

1. What are the perceived professional development needs of K-12 teachers in the following educator evaluation areas: Standard 1: Planning and Preparation,
2. Standard 2: The Classroom Environment, Standard 3: Instruction, and Standard 4: Professional Growth and Responsibilities?

3. What is the relationship between the teachers' perceived professional development needs and the following demographic variables: grade span, number of years teaching, the number of years teaching in current certification area, regular/special education teaching experience, the number of hours of professional development taken the prior year, and the amount of professional development taken in the areas of their Student Growth Goals and Professional Growth Goals?

Literature Review

Societal Changes Driving Educational Reforms

Society is demanding schools update their structure and practices to meet the needs of the 21st century (Houle & Cobb, 2011). Times have changed but schools have remained organizationally very similar to decades past. Schools need to change (Hart, 2006) and; therefore, teachers need to change. A new teacher evaluation process, supported by professional development, may be one initiative that engages teachers in the change process. In this age of accountability, there is a nationwide push to institute education reforms (Hart, 2006) and teacher evaluations (Danielson & McGreal, 2000) to rate effectiveness of our teachers and schools. States where reform strategies were not linked to improving teaching were less successful than states that invested in developing teaching standards, ongoing professional development, and intensive supervision (Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1997). There are a variety of teacher evaluation models being adopted by districts; however the question is, does a teacher evaluation tool motivate and inform teachers to change their practice to meet the needs of the 21st century student? Additionally, are districts providing aligned support to teachers to assist them in improving their practice?

State Regulations

This state's "educator evaluation effort is based on the belief that implementing fair, accurate, and meaningful educator evaluations will help improve teaching and learning" (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2014). Additionally, both the state's Department of Education and a Senate bill require that all teachers receive written, detailed feedback that informs, and makes recommendations for, professional growth (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2012). The state also specifies that evaluation systems be

designed to provide "agreement between the evaluation analysis and the identified goals and improvement expectations that inform professional development" (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2011, p. 27) for all teachers.

Educator Evaluation

Educator evaluation can "provide a way for school and district leaders to answer questions about the impact of their work, provide insight into what is working and what is not, and provide information for making decisions about policy and practice" (Killion, 2008, p. 1). "The two principal purposes of teacher evaluation are quality assurance and professional development" (Danielson & McGreal, 2000, p. 8). Therefore, an evaluation system should generate data that can be used by educational leaders to inform professional development needs to support both teaching and learning, thus aligning the two programs within the district.

It is essential that districts link "both formal professional development and job-embedded learning opportunities to the evaluation system" in order to ensure "professional learning be high-quality, sustained, and focused" (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 100). This can be attained through data analysis of teacher evaluation ratings, as well as, a professional development needs assessment. "It is important to make teacher voice integral in shaping both the evaluation process and the types of supports that accompany evaluations" (Wiener, 2014, p. 14) such as, professional development opportunities.

"Evaluation data helps program stakeholders know what happened and why, so they can make educated design modifications" (Killion, 2008, p. 26) to support teacher needs. District leaders must put procedures in place to "meet teachers where they are and, through a series of supports, help them all move forward" (Jackson, 2013, p. 6). Using data from the needs assessment will assist this district in "implementing evaluation as a natural component of its staff development programs" (Killion, 2008, p. 2).

Teacher evaluations may have the potential to influence an educator's professional practice by identifying teaching behaviors and strategies that increase student achievement and drive reform efforts within the schools (Borman, 2005). In order to do so, educational leaders must recognize that teaching encompasses "a sophisticated

and interlocking set of decisions, all of which have a profound effect on students. We need an evaluation approach that considers the thinking and the underlying principles that drive the teachers' decisions and subsequent classroom behaviors" (Jackson, 2013, pp. 24-25) which can be observed, evaluated, and given feedback in response. Killion (2008) explained that the evaluation is increasingly important for reforming schools as they can provide a way for school and district leaders to answer questions about the impact of their work, provide insight into what is working and what is not, and can provide information for making decisions about policy and practice.

Professional Development

"Powerful evaluations occur when they are tightly aligned with comprehensive planning of the staff development program" (Killion, 2008, p. 139). "Having teachers planning their continued growth, and targeting new areas in which to promote student learning, is exactly what it an effective evaluation system should accomplish." (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 49). It truly is a new era as technological advances and Common Core State Standards have raised the bar for both students and teachers. Now, "organizing teaching around understanding, inquiry, and complex problem solving, challenges the way teachers teach, the way their jobs are constructed, and the set of work rules surrounding them" (Kerchner, 1998, p. 22). Teachers must be "given the tools necessary to accomplish the new goals, including time for collaboration and resources to engage in ongoing professional development focused on instructional strategies" (Odden & Kelley, 2002, p. 82). In order to support teachers in these new challenges, the alignment of professional development must be an integral part of a district's overall evaluation system.

Many schools and districts consider professional learning to be part of a teacher's evaluation (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). Professional development needs to be reflective of the many instructional strategies, used by teachers, which have been identified as best practices for improving teaching and learning. Districts recognize that "there are many specific teaching practices that influence student achievement and they are related to what teachers have the opportunity to learn" (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 15). Obviously, strong content knowledge and time spent with colleagues to discuss their practices are important aspects to consider. Yet there are

many strategies that have proven to enhance teacher effectiveness such as formative assessment (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2012), questioning strategies (Beck & Hamilton, 1997), 21st Century Skills (Partnership For 21st Century Skills, 2011), technology and online learning (Collins, 2009), and collaborative/common planning (Collinson, 2009) or teaming, just to name a few. These topics are often offered as professional development sessions with the intent of improving teacher practice.

 Darling-Hammond & Ball (1997) describe effective approaches for professional development programs as including theory and practice; developing professional conversations centered on problems of practice; providing content-based professional development; and learning from an analysis of practice. They clearly state that effective professional development can make a difference in teacher practice. In addition, they acknowledge that professional development programs must recognize several factors: what teachers know and have experienced affects how and what they teach; learning to teach to new criteria is time intensive; content knowledge is critical; knowledge of how students' learn is important when teaching for understanding, and teachers need opportunities to reflect and analyze their practice (Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1997).

School district leaders around the country have been working to roll out effective teacher evaluation tools that include training in using the tool (for evaluators and teachers), professional development to support good practices, and to "give teachers effective feedback and support to improve, an essential component of a quality process" (von Frank, 2011, p. 3). In the district in which this study was conducted, the teacher evaluation system is in its fourth year of implementation. The evaluation system includes professional goal setting, establishing student learning objectives, classroom observations by the evaluator, conferencing and feedback from the evaluator, data collection and analysis, and teacher reflection. To support teachers, this district is planning to expand its professional development offerings, aligning them with the evaluation system. The goal is that the evaluation model will reform educational practices, drive district change, inform professional development choices, and as a result, improve student achievement.

Societal, legislative, state, and local mandates have driven educator reform efforts including teacher evaluation. This district's administrators and union leaders

collaborated to design a new system, and continue to work together to make decisions on issues related to the evaluation process and supportive professional development. The collaborative decisions the district is preparing to make regarding the alignment of evaluation and professional development, take into consideration: novice versus veteran educator needs, teacher self-efficacy, job-embedded versus workshop based professional development, and the impact of professional development on student achievement.

Methodology

This research study utilized an explanatory, sequential, mixed method design (Creswell, 2011, p. 71) beginning with a quantitative online questionnaire to address Research Questions 1 and 2, followed by a qualitative focus group to also address the two research questions. Each aspect was piloted before data was collected. The online needs assessment questionnaire was sent to all educators $N = 967$ in the district, with those that responded ($N = 602$) constituting the sample. The second research question was further addressed with the focus group ($N = 8$), selected from those who volunteered their contact information via the online questionnaire. Content validity of the questionnaire items was supported through literature review (Danielson, 2007; Gall, 2003; McCoach, Gable, & Madura, 2013) and an expert review to ensure "relevant content is assessed and reflected in the items written for the instrument" (McCoach, Gable, Madura, 2013, p. 105).

The analysis generated information from both quantitative data, in the form of descriptive and inferential statistics from the questionnaire, and qualitative data from the focus group questions. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and qualitative data from the focus group were analyzed using a long table approach for theme coding. The data from the questionnaire and the focus group were analyzed to determine core consistencies between the two data sources in order to answer both research questions. Comparisons were made between the demographic information gathered and the educator's perceived self-efficacy with regard to the standards and elements contained in their evaluation tool.

Data Collection

Research questions 1 and 2 were assessed quantitatively through an online questionnaire, which was site specific for this district, their educator evaluation rubric, and their professional development program. The invitation to participate in the focus group was extended to those who volunteered contact information through the questionnaire. The focus group participants were chosen so the focus group was a representative sampling of a grade level span (ex. K-6, 7-8, 9-12). Basic demographic data was collected in both phases.

Data Analysis

The analysis generated information from both quantitative data from the questionnaire and qualitative data from the focus group questions. For Research Question 1, the quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive and inferential statistics (i.e., frequencies, percents, means and standard deviations). Based on the means, the standards and the elements within the standards were ranked for optimal interpretation. These data were used to determine if there was a relationship of perceived needs by grade level, years of service, years in current certification, special/regular education teachers, novice/veteran teachers, and to determine which evaluation elements teachers perceive they need more professional development.

The qualitative data provided rich descriptive detail to the quantitative data. The qualitative data analysis of the focus group transcripts provided secondary descriptive data, which were sorted into themes using the long table approach (Patton, 2002) and were analyzed, coded, to corroborate the quantitative data extrapolated from the questionnaire results. Figure 1 illustrates the progression of the research study.
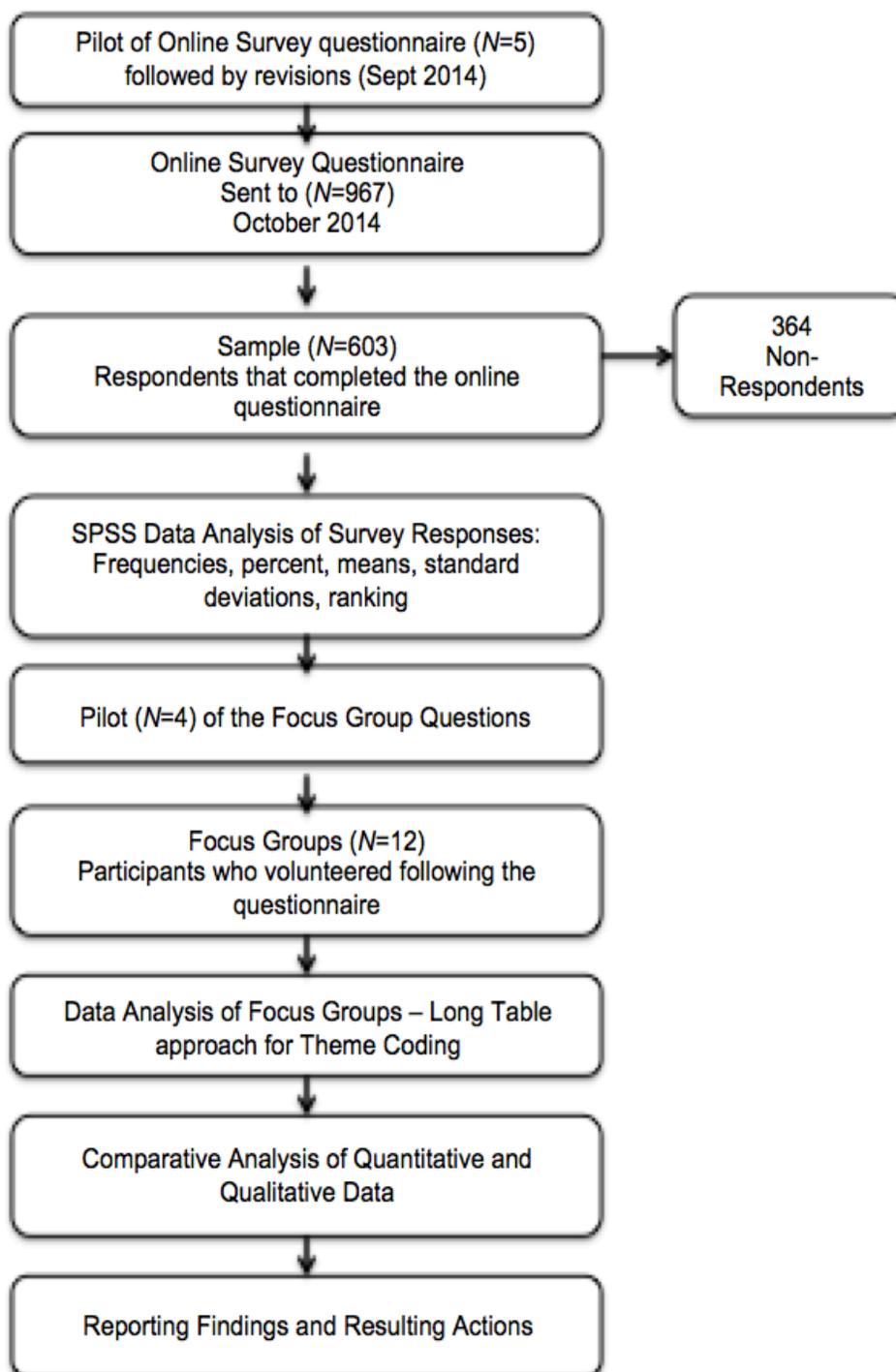
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│   Pilot of Online Survey questionnaire (N=5) │
│      followed by revisions (Sept 2014)    │
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│        Online Survey Questionnaire        │
│           Sent to (N=967)                 │
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│           Sample (N=603)                  │ ───────▶ │     364      │
│   Respondents that completed the online   │          │    Non-      │
│            questionnaire                   │          │ Respondents  │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  SPSS Data Analysis of Survey Responses:  │
│  Frequencies, percent, means, standard    │
│           deviations, ranking             │
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│     Pilot (N=4) of the Focus Group Questions │
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│           Focus Groups (N=12)             │
│   Participants who volunteered following the │
│            questionnaire                   │
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│  Data Analysis of Focus Groups – Long Table │
│         approach for Theme Coding          │
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│  Comparative Analysis of Quantitative and │
│            Qualitative Data               │
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│    Reporting Findings and Resulting Actions │
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Figure 1. Outline of Study Components

Major Findings

Research Question 1: What are the perceived professional development needs of K-12 teachers in the following educator evaluation areas: Standard 1: Planning and Preparation, Standard 2: The Classroom Environment, Standard 3: Instruction, Standard 4: Professional Growth and Responsibilities?

- Averaging the top two rating category percentages by standard, indicated an overall perceived confidence level in performing tasks within in Standard One - Planning and Preparation of 92%, Standard Two – Classroom Environment of 95%, Standard Three – Instruction of 88%, and Standard Four – Professional Growth and Responsibilities of 91%. **This indicates that professional development is most needed in Standard Three – Instruction.**

- Comparing the above with data with the district's online database for educator evaluation ratings indicates similar trends, in that the majority of educators were rated Effective or Highly Effective. The average combined performance ratings (Effective and Highly Effective) on this database were calculated. **This indicates the area of professional development that needs to be addressed is Standard Two – Classroom Environment (77%) followed closely by Standard Three – Instruction (82%).**

- Within **Standard One: Planning and Preparation**, (Appendix G1) the educators indicated the lowest confidence level with the element *Designing Student Assessment* **(44%).** Therefore, Designing Student Assessment is element area for focused professional development.

- For **Standard Two: Classroom Environment**, (Appendix G2), the lowest confidence level in this standard was for the element *Managing Instructional Groups (50%),* indicating that Managing Instructional Groups is an area for targeted professional development.

- In the area of **Standard Three: Instruction**, (Appendix G3) the lowest perceived confidence level in this element was *Using Instructional Materials and Technology (42%).* Using Instructional Technology is also the professional development topic most requested by the participants, which was supported by the online survey data, the focus group, and the district's evaluation database.

- For **Standard Four: Professional Growth and Responsibilities**, (Appendix G4) the lowest perceived confidence level was in the element ***Communicating with Families (58%)***. Communicating with Families was an area identified as a professional development need on the questionnaire, district evaluation database, and from the focus group participants.

- For three out of four evaluation standards, the district PD needs associated with the lowest confidence levels, matched the areas identified by the district's online database as the lowest actual evaluation ratings: Standard One – *Designing Student Assessment* (formative assessment strategies), Standard Three – *Instructional Materials and Technologies*, and Standard Four – *Communicating with Families*.

- Generally, across all four evaluation standards, the online survey indicated that novice teachers (those with 1 – 3 years teaching) have a lower perceived confidence level than those with 16 or more years of teaching experience.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between the teachers' perceived professional development needs and the following demographic variables: grade span, number of years teaching, number of years teaching in current certification area, regular versus special education experience, number of hours of professional development taken the prior year, and the amount of professional development taken in the areas of their Student Growth Goals (SLOs) and Professional Growth Goals (PGGs)?

- The analyses of variance (ANVOAs) determined that among four demographic areas, there was a significant relationship between level of perceived confidence and the following elements within the evaluation standards: the number of years teaching, the number of years teaching in a certification area, the number of hours of professional development educators participated in during the 2013-2014 school year, and the number of hours of professional development the educators participated in related to their Professional Growth Goal (PGG).

- In the demographic area regarding the number of years teaching compared to confidence level in Standard Three – Instruction (Table 1), the data indicate that more years teaching increases perceived confidence levels. However, as noted