

AN ANALYSIS OF ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION CANDIDATES' PERCEPTIONS ON THE TEXAS TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEM (T-TESS)

Dr. George P. Wiley

University of Mary Hardin-Baylor

Abstract

Teacher retention among alternative certification candidates is lower than that of candidates who earn certification through traditional teacher certification program. Texas implemented a merit pay program in 2019 as a means to curb teacher attrition. The merit pay system is based upon a combination of teacher performance on their annual evaluation and academic performance of their students. This study analyzed two candidates' perceptions of how they gained knowledge of the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) during their internship year which coincides with their first formal year of teaching. The candidates were interviewed immediately following the completion of their internship year. Findings revealed that the candidates received limited information through their Educator Preparation Program (EPP) or through their district's new teacher orientation about the evaluation process. Most information gained during the year about the evaluation process occurred through interactions with other educators. The study reinforces previous research which indicates that new teachers' assimilation into their professional role is unstructured. Also, the significant impact that principals can have on teachers during their induction phase is highlighted. Findings from this study will allow the EPP to more closely align course content with the T-TESS instrument.

Keywords: Teacher retention; Teacher Evaluation; Alternative Certification; Merit Pay

Background

The state of Texas fully implemented a new teacher evaluation method, the Texas Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS), during the 2016-17 school year. In 2019, Texas initiated a merit pay model that allows local school districts to submit plans to the state that allow for teachers to earn various levels of merit pay. Teacher performance on their annual evaluation is a mandatory component of these merit pay plans. The state of Texas is placing a large emphasis on using teacher evaluation as a lever to promote higher academic achievement. However, research has found that teacher evaluation has a low impact on improving student performance (Hallinger et al., 2014). If the intended focus of the T-TESS and the corresponding merit pay system is to be met, it is essential that teachers have appropriate orientation on the various measurement criteria in the evaluation instrument so that they can both improve student performance and position themselves to earn available merit pay. Providing teachers with the best opportunity to earn merit pay will serve as a means to reduce teacher attrition as well as keep a larger percentage of effective teachers in Texas' classrooms. University Educator Preparation Program (EPP), including course instructors and field supervisors, play a critical role in ensuring that teachers have appropriate knowledge of the components of the state evaluation system.

Performance pay models that have been used within the private sector for many decades are now becoming integrated into public school teaching (Aksoy & Şahin, 2022). The introduction of the

additional compensation aspect of teacher evaluation broadens the scope of evaluation beyond measuring effectiveness and guiding instructional development. In the context of the current labor market where teachers have a multitude of career opportunities outside of the profession, it is imperative that we provide novice teachers with an awareness of the teacher evaluation process so that they have the opportunity to earn performance pay. Performance pay systems have been implemented with the intent of retaining a greater number of teachers and it is plausible that earning, or failing to earn, merit pay will influence teachers' decisions to remain in the profession. This research informs those involved in teacher preparation about the needs of candidates in developing awareness of the expectations of the evaluation process to greater initial success of alternative candidates during the induction phase of their careers.

Theoretical Framework

Neo-institutional theory is the framework to examine the interaction between the bureaucratic elements in implementation and the educators impacted. Scott (2008) found that policy implementation is complex of both conformance and legitimization. He states that in the cultural-cognitive element is where teachers develop the meaning of policy implementation. Adolfsson & Alvunger (2020) discovered that participants at the lowest level of the bureaucracy often struggle with finding the balance between local expectations and those that are at higher levels of the government policy structure. This study will examine how alternative certification candidates internalize the components and personal meaning of the state-adopted teacher evaluation system.

This study also is examined through sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). The theory is based on how context influences people in their construct of organizational meaning. This study will address whether the formal teacher preparation experience or other influences lead to the alternative candidates forming meaning about the teacher evaluation process.

Literature Review

Alternative certification programs appeal to a group of individuals who have a university degree but are not certified to teach (Mulvihill & Martin, 2019). The reduced period of preparation for alternative candidates in comparison to traditional candidates results in programs needing to be more intentional in their design. Furthermore, they recommended that programs consider how they can assist candidates to embracing teaching as a profession rather than simply a job. One of the ways that this can be accomplished is assisting candidates in taking ownership of their professional growth.

Despite the importance of the formal internship experience of alternative teaching candidates, there is less research in this area in comparison to those who have completed traditional teacher certification programs. As more candidates pursue an alternative path for teacher certification, it is necessary to understand the types of supports they need during their internship period ((Wilhelm et al., 2021). Mulvihill and Martin (2019) emphasize that since alternative teacher preparation programs have become a fixture in educator preparation, programs should focus on preparing candidates for all aspects of practice and professionalism needed for success candidates to be successful teachers.

Teacher evaluation continues to play a dual role of both retention, promotion, and tenure decisions as well as a means to guide pursuing improved teaching practices. However, school leaders have historically done a poor job of presenting and managing these two functions (Donaldson & Firestone, 2021). This study provides educator preparation programs with insight into the perceptions of alternative

certification candidates related to their level of knowledge about the formal teacher evaluation process at the conclusion of both their alternative program experience as well as their first year as classroom teachers.

The research on teacher education preparation remains small in comparison to other areas of the profession and there is a vast deficiency in the area of clinical field supervision (Slippery Rock University & Alexander, 2019). Without available research on the needs of teacher candidates during their formal internships, instructors and field supervisors will be unable to adjust their practices to better support candidates during this crucial time of development. Such knowledge is important as faculty expand their scope to provide a sense of community to those candidates whom they serve. It is essential that teachers begin their formal careers with a fundamental knowledge of good teaching practices (“Our Responsibility, Our Promise,” 2012). The quality of the educator preparation program often dictates whether or not a beginning teacher has the knowledge of basic teaching practices and how they will be measured by the systems in which they educate students.

Data does support that teacher attrition among those who fulfilled their certifications through alternative programs is greater than the attrition rate from traditional programs (Mitani et al., 2022). This discrepancy has been found to be linked with teachers who participate in alternative certification programs feeling less prepared than those who progress through traditional routes due to the condensed amount of preparation curriculum and activities. Furthermore, alternative candidates typically begin their careers in high-need schools which likely skews the retention data among this group. Finally, it must be noted that vast differences are present within the structure of various alternative programs and it is likely that some models meet the needs of candidates at higher levels than others.

One of the key ingredients of a high-quality teacher preparation program is a clinically-based approach (“Our Responsibility, Our Promise,” 2012). Such programs strive to provide candidates with information and experiences that are aligned with real-world application. A part of this experience is orienting clinical teachers and internship participants to the process and expectations of the teacher evaluation system. Based on a meta-analysis, Hallinger, et. al. (2014) developed a theory of action underlying most current teacher appraisal systems. Most systems, they claim, attempt to combine aspects of both evaluation (to make employment decisions) and supervision (to provide coaching and feedback), with formative and summative aspects, in one system. The three intended outcomes of these models are to filter out poor performers, improve student outcomes through meaningful instructional feedback, and to develop a results-oriented campus culture. Donaldson & Firestone (2021) state that there is a gap in the literature regarding ways in which teacher evaluation can be used for the formative purpose of improving instruction. The authors advocate for the use of human capital, social capital, and material capital to be leveraged to improve the teacher evaluation process.

Statement of the Problem

Texas EPPs are preparing teachers for a rapidly changing teaching environment. Teachers who enter the field of teaching must feel adequately prepared to resist exploring other career opportunities that are widely available in the present economy. With unemployment rate of 3.7% and real wage growth increasing 5.1 % within the United States economy, school districts are stressed to fill classrooms with certified teachers (Randazzo, 2022). Therefore, new teachers need to be properly oriented on both the elements of the teacher evaluation process and the performance criteria that are associated with approved

merit play plans. Field supervisors and preparation instructors of alternative certification candidates need feedback on the preparation levels of candidates related to the expectations of the state evaluation process.

Methodology

Two alternative certification candidates who were conducting their internships during the 2021-22 school year were the participants in this study. The candidates were fulfilling university coursework as well as completing their first year of teaching in Texas public schools. The candidates participated in interviews related to their perceptions of the teacher evaluation process at the conclusion of their internship. The interviews were conducted in the month of June to ensure a strong recollection of perceptions associated with the first year of teaching. Participants provided responses to questions related to how they were oriented about the evaluation process, the perceived value of the observation pre-conference and post conference, degree in which the process will guide their development entering their second year of teaching, and how the university program prepared them for the observation process. The responses from the interviews were coded into themes which are explored in relation to theoretical frameworks on teachers' perceptions of the evaluation process.

Interview questions were designed to gain the perceptions of the candidates on the teacher evaluation process. The two participants were the only two candidates in the EPP who fulfilled their internship experience during the 2021-22 school year.

One of the participants in the study completed her internship at a Central Texas middle school. She was one of six beginning teachers on the campus and 47.2% of the teachers had five or less years of experience. The principal of the campus was in serving in that capacity for the seventh year in the district. The other participant fulfilled her internship at a Central Texas elementary school. She was one of four beginning teachers on the campus and 51% of the teachers had five or less years of experience. The principal of the campus was in her first year in the district.

Both of the candidates in this study were interviewed during June of the month immediately following the conclusion of their internship year which coincided with their first year as classroom teachers. Therefore, the interviews were conducted within two months of the candidates completing their annual summative evaluations that are part of the annual T-TESS cycle. The timing of the interviews was purposeful to allow for sound recall of the events that had occurred throughout the previous year related to their induction into the teacher evaluation process.

The research study was designed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What were the perceptions of alternative certification candidates pertaining to the teacher evaluation process prior to entering their internship?
- 2) How did the alternative certification candidates become aware of the expectations of T-TESS during their internship.
- 3) What were the perceptions of alternative certification candidates pertaining to the teacher evaluation process after completing their internship?

The interview questions and protocol were modified by the researcher from a previous study in which the researcher inquired about the perceptions of the evaluation process among student teachers using a different population. Eleven unique questions related to perceptions of teacher evaluations, including specific references to the T-TESS system, were posed to the participants. The interview questions were evaluated by a panel of experts to ensure construct and content validity.

Findings

In response to the first research question, the following themes emerged as the responses to the interview questions were coded:

Both the EPP and local districts provided limited orientation on the T-TESS process prior to the start of the candidates' internship. Participant 1 shared:

We did not receive a formal orientation prior to the school year. My mentor did help me use the system to submit my goals prior to the due date.

Participant 2 added:

I remember my professors saying 'when you are evaluated' or 'when the principal steps in' but no specific reference to T-TESS.

The candidates did not recall remembering specific information about the state-adopted evaluation systems as part of their coursework prior to beginning their field experiences. They did recall an emphasis being placed on the importance of principal evaluation. Participant 2 revealed:

I recall in August during the two weeks before students arrived being pulled into this meeting with all of the teachers where they were discussing merit pay and how your test scores and evaluation calculated for you to earn merit pay. A lot of the veteran teachers had a lot of questions about the merit pay.

Candidates learned about the process prior to the internship through other experiences such as prior service as an instructional aide or networking with other educators outside of their assigned schools.

Participant 1 stated:

I remember teachers talking about their scores, when they were evaluated, among other things, during the time I was a teacher's aide.

In response to the second research question, the following theme emerged:

Professional networks within the candidates' schools assisted with orientation on the T-TESS process. These networks included guidance provided by administrators, instructional leadership staff, and mentor teachers. Participant 1 recalled:

I felt like my appraiser didn't hold me to the same standard as a five-year or 15-year teachers. My scores were 3's. She praised my student relations at the end of the year.

Participant 2 discussed the impact that her mentor teacher had on her gaining knowledge about the format and expectations of T-TESS:

My mentor gave me a color-coded flip chart in January. In the margins it had a 1.1, 1.2, etc. explaining the terms. When I had my end of the year meeting, I used this and I was much better prepared.

In response to the third research question, the following themes emerged:

The candidates perceived that the evaluation process assisted with their instructional growth during the school year. Participant 1 shared:

A lot of other teachers don't like people in their classrooms but I like the feedback. I felt like I accomplished my two goals for the year. I feel like I am ready to move on to something else next year.

Participant 2 shared how the process guided her development:

In the fall, my target was classroom management. I was very surprised that I had challenges in this area. I had homeschooled my own kids for 18 years and lead a large choir of 120 youth. I had to get this area in order first.

The candidates will use the feedback they received during the process as part of their self-guided development moving into the subsequent school year. Participant 2 shared how she sees the evaluation process has providing clarification on her role as a teacher:

I understand how the state wants me the TEKS delivered. They want me to connect the TEKS to the students. I have more confidence and am clear on the expectation. Having the anchor of the evaluation system allows me to put my own spin on things.

Discussion

The findings of this research correspond with other findings related to the experiences of alternative certification candidates. Doran (2020) found that these candidates often do not feel as well prepared as those who have completed a traditional certification path. This correlates with the candidates experiences in this study where they became informed about the evaluation process from their mentor, through their observations as teacher aides, and through conversations with their colleagues rather than through formal channels. It was identified in the same previous research that having just one trustworthy colleague on campus can be extremely beneficial for alternative candidates. For the one participant in this study, through being moved to a different grade level due to staffing needs she was assigned to a new mentor. The new mentor became a lifeline for this candidate in understanding the expectations of the evaluation process. This discovery is consistent with the need to select mentors purposefully and provide them with the necessary to support the new teachers whom they serve (Tekir, 2022). Moreover, the importance of school administration cannot be underestimated in the success of beginning teachers. Principals must be self-aware of the important role they play in the induction process and take such actions as supplying mentors time to collaborate with new teachers, organizing other induction activities, and providing basic resources. As evidenced by the findings of this research, the reassurance that the principal provided the second participant that she had mastered her goal for the school year gave her the confidence to set a more ambitious goal going into her second year. The other participant in this study also commented on several occasions during the interview that the principal took the necessary time to thoroughly review her observations results with her which was much appreciated by the candidate.

Limitations

This study was limited to two alternative certification candidates who were performing their internships during the 2021-22 school year. The candidates mentioned that the school year was still being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic to include teacher absenteeism and staff turnover. One participant mentioned how her assimilation to the campus was impacted when she was moved from one grade level to another at the conclusion of the first six weeks. She stated that this actually benefitted her because she perceived her new mentor has more competent and capable of providing her with quality guidance. She also stated that the instructional coach who worked directly with her during the first semester left the campus and it took some time to develop a new rapport with the new coach. The candidates also mentioned that during their college courses during the 2020-21 school year were quickly moved to online delivery due to the pandemic which could have influenced their professor's coverage of T-TESS in their courses.

Implications for EPP

The internship for alternative candidates moves them from the preservice stage of teaching to the actual induction period of teaching which is considered the initial years in the classroom (Smith &

Ingersoll, 2004). The need for continued support of teachers during the time period is generally accepted as a key component of successful transition into the profession as well as a variable in new teachers remaining in the profession. Due to the internship serving as a final step in the preparation process, as well as the first step in the career path of candidates, it is important that preparation programs work in conjunction with school districts to support candidates during this time. (Tekir, 2022) found that if communication between invested stakeholders is not clear and concise during the induction period, confusion and lack of motivation can occur among beginning teachers.

Alternative certification program candidates are more likely to initially be employed in high-needs schools in comparison to those who completed a traditional route to certification. Lee et al., (2021) stated that one of the primary desired outcomes for Texas' TIA is to place high quality teachers in schools that are traditionally difficult to staff. Even though districts have a great degree of flexibility in the design of their TIA plan, all plans must be designed administrative observation of teachers' classrooms and the academic growth of their students. Therefore, it is prudent for Texas EPPs to prepare candidates for the criteria of the state evaluation system as well as introduce them to the performance pay model. Although not currently present in all Texas' school districts, new teachers are likely to experience merit pay plans in most districts in which they are employed.

Curriculum Revisions

It was apparent that the two candidates involved in this study were not directly oriented on how the coursework in their university classes correlated with the state evaluation system. One of the participants commented:

It would have been nice to have had something like the flip chart given to me in my curriculum and instruction class. Also, possibly an assignment where you are shown that you will have to select a goal with your principal.

Although professors may mention to their students that they will be evaluated, they need to give specific orientation on how T-TESS connects with various parts of their teaching responsibilities. For example, when lesson planning and collecting formative data is covered in university coursework, students could be shown how these correlates to Domain I of T-TESS. When the usage of various research-based instructional techniques is covered in class, candidates potentially would be shown how these are expectations within the higher levels of performance outlined in Domain II. When classroom management is emphasized, instructors might show students the connection to Domain III.

Faculty Training

It is important for instructors and field supervisors to use the language within the T-TESS evaluation system when discussing various aspects of the job responsibilities that candidates perform as teachers. Field supervisors are required to attend a one-day observation training that is correlated to the three-day T-TESS training that is required for campus appraisers. However, teacher education instructors who are not field supervisors are not required to attend any formal training on the system. Educator preparation programs should establish protocols to orient all faculty in teacher preparation courses on the T-TESS language so that they can correlate various aspects of the courses with the state-recommended evaluation system. This will allow for better alignment of vocabulary between educator preparation courses and the language that will be used when teachers are evaluated in districts in which they are completing their internships.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that the EPP should seek to better align course content with the descriptors found in the T-TESS scoring rubric. Although the candidates in this study were aware that they would be evaluated in their roles as beginning classroom teachers, they had initial difficulty in correlating course content to the evaluation process within their districts. Furthermore, the participants indicated that sharing specific information about the state evaluation instrument in their coursework would have been beneficial.

From a school leadership perspective, this study highlights the impact that a strong relationship with a professional colleague can have on the assimilation of a new teacher to the profession. One of the candidates indicated that her principal fulfilled this role while the other indicated that it was her assigned mentor. These findings support the importance of supporting relationships on the self-efficacy of new teachers and further validate the importance of ensuring that professional supports are available for new teachers as a means to ensure the retention of new teachers within the profession.

References

- Adolfsson, C.H., & Alvunger, D. (2020). Power dynamics and policy actions in the changing landscape of local school governance. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 6(2), 128–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2020.1745621>
- Alexander, M. (2019). Pedagogy, practice, and mentorship: Core elements of connecting theory to practice in teacher educator preparation programs. *Journal of Educational Supervision*, 2(2), 83–103. <https://doi.org/10.31045/jes.2.2.6>
- Aksoy, S., & Şahin, S. (2022). Ways to evaluate teachers' professional performance in the context of performance based payment policies. *Participatory Educational Research*, 9(4), 322–342. <https://doi.org/10.17275/per.22.93.9.4>
- Council of Chief State School Officers (2012). Our responsibility, our promise: Transforming educator preparation and entry into the profession. *Council of Chief State School Officers*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED542758>
- Donaldson, M. L., & Firestone, W. (2021). Rethinking teacher evaluation using human, social, and material capital. *Journal of Educational Change*, 22(4), 501–534. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-020-09405-z>
- Doran, P. (2020). What they didn't teach us: New teachers reflect on their preparation experiences. *The Professional Educator*, 43(1), 59–69.
- Hallinger, P., Heck, R. H., & Murphy, J. (2014). Teacher evaluation and school improvement: An analysis of the evidence. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 26(1), 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-013-9179-5>
- Lee, J., Strong, M., Hamman, D., & Zeng, Y. (2021). Measuring teacher buy-in for the Texas pay for-performance program. *Frontiers in Education*, 6, 729821. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.729821>
- Mitani, H., Fuller, E. J., & Hollingworth, L. (2022). Attrition and turnover among beginning teachers in Texas by preparation program. *Teachers College Record*, 124(4), 3–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681221093011>
- Mulvihill, T. M., & Martin, L. E. (2019). Are alternative certification programs necessary? *Teacher Educator*, 54(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2018.1546759>
- Randazzo, S. (2022, August 16). Schools are looking in unusual places to deal with teacher shortage. *The Wall Street Journal*.
- Scott, W. (2008). *Institutions and Organizations*. Sage.
- Smith, T. & Igersoll, R. (2004), What are the effects of induction and mentoring on beginning teacher turnover? *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(3), 681–714. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041003681>

- Tekir, S. (2022). Teacher induction policies and practices in two different contexts: A comparative study of Turkey and the USA (State of Wisconsin Sample). *Education and Science*, 47(210).
<https://doi.org/10.15390/EB.2021.9831>
- Weick, K.E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage.
- Wilhelm, A. G., Woods, D., & Kara, Y.(2021). Supporting change in novice alternative certification teachers' efficacy. *Psychology in the Schools* 58(10).1902-1918. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22539>