Received 2 September 2017
Revised 20 January 2018
29 March 2018
15 May 2018
Accepted 17 May 2018

Principals and teacher evaluation

The cognitive, relational, and organizational dimensions of working with low-performing teachers

Morgaen Donaldson
University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut, USA, and
Madeline Mavrogordato
Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how school leaders use high-stakes teacher evaluation to improve and, if necessary, remove low-performing teachers in their schools. It explores how cognitive, relational and organizational factors play a role in shaping the way school leaders implement teacher evaluation.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a database of in-depth interviews with 17 principals and assistant principals, this study uses cross-case comparisons to examine one district's efforts to improve the performance of low-performing teachers through evaluation.

Findings – School leaders' framing of teacher performance and their efforts to improve instruction reveal the cognitive, relational and organizational aspects of working with low-performing teachers and, if necessary, pursuing removal. Notably, this study found that cognitive and relational factors were important in school leaders' teacher improvement efforts, but organizational factors were most salient when attempting to remove teachers.

Research limitations/implications – Because evaluating and developing teachers has become such an important aspect of school leaders' day to day work, this study suggests that school leaders could benefit from more assistance from district personnel and that preparation programs should build in opportunities for aspiring leaders to learn more about their role as evaluators.

Originality/value – The success or failure of teacher evaluation systems largely hinges on school leaders, yet there is scant research on how school leaders make decisions to develop and remove low-performing teachers. This study sheds light on the central role school leaders play in implementing high-stakes teacher evaluation.

Keywords Evaluation, Educational administration, Teacher learning, Educational policy

Paper type Research paper

Spurred on by Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind waiver requirements, most states have overhauled their teacher evaluation systems in the past decade (Steinberg and Donaldson, 2016). One aim of these reforms is to identify low-performing teachers, provide them with tools to improve, and, if needed, remove them. Yet, scant research examines this important facet of teacher evaluation or the prominent role that principals play in it (Kraft and Gilmour, 2016).

Principals and assistant principals are central to teacher evaluation systems and influence their implementation. First, they conduct classroom observations, which often constitute more than half of the overall evaluation score (Donaldson and Papay, 2015). Second, they are responsible for providing feedback and development opportunities to teachers (Goldring *et al.*, 2015). Third, they determine whether to take action to remove teachers who consistently under-perform (Jacob, 2011). Principals also influence teacher evaluation indirectly by shaping relational trust within schools (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Tschannen-Moran, 2014), which helps facilitate the implementation of teacher evaluation policies. The extant literature thus suggests that the success of teacher evaluation systems hinges largely on principals.

Journal of Educational Administration
Vol. 56 No. 6, 2018
pp. 586-601

0957-8234
DOI 10.1108/JEA-08-2017-0100

Our study addresses the gap in research on the critical role principals play in implementing high-stakes teacher evaluation, particularly as it relates to low-performing teachers. Using in-depth interviews with 17 principals and assistant principals, we examine one district's efforts to improve and, if necessary, remove low-performing teachers, as defined by the district's teacher evaluation system. We further characterize how cognitive, relational and organizational factors shape the way principals engage in these activities.

Background

Typified by the Widget Effect (Weisberg *et al.*, 2009), commentators have decried the fact that few teachers received unsatisfactory evaluation ratings and even fewer were terminated for performance. Even teachers unions acknowledged that teacher evaluation systems were not working. Randi Weingarten (2011), president of the American Federation of Teachers, declared "Our aim is to have a comprehensive, fair, transparent and expedient process that identifies, improves and— if necessary—removes ineffective teachers".

A growing literature examines how principals identify low-performing teachers through summative evaluation ratings. Researchers have examined whether principals' ratings of teachers predict their value added scores (e.g. Harris *et al.*, 2014), are similar in high- and low-stakes evaluations (Grissom and Loeb, 2017), and vary across settings (Kraft and Gilmour, 2017). Much less research explores how principals work with low-performing teachers to improve their practice and, if necessary, remove them.

Developing low-performing teachers

Policymakers often justify adopting higher-stakes teacher evaluation policies by arguing that these policies promote teacher professional growth (Kraft and Gilmour, 2016). Based on interviews of 24 principals Kraft and Gilmour (2016) found that principals reported substantial obstacles to using evaluation to help teachers improve. These included concerns about increased demands on their time, lack of comfort providing feedback outside of familiar subject areas or grade levels, and limited training on elements of the evaluation system. Kraft and Gilmour (2016) assert that principals' lack of training and discomfort prompted them to tend to provide reinforcement instead of critical feedback to teachers. Given our study's focus on low-performing teachers, these challenges are critical.

Moreover, in their study of eight schools in New Orleans, Marsh *et al.* (2017) found that organizational conditions could mitigate principals' tendency to shy away from critical feedback in evaluations. The authors found that schools that enlisted teacher leaders and administrators beyond the principal to conduct observations facilitated instructional improvement. They note that "this increased capacity […] granted each evaluator enough time to thoughtfully complete rubric ratings and provide support" (p. 21).

Thus, organizational context and principals' self-efficacy as evaluators appear to mediate principals' ability to use evaluation to develop teachers' practice. Notably, few studies focus on how principals work with low-performing teachers specifically.

Dismissing low-performing teachers

Rates of teacher dismissal have historically been quite low (Donaldson and Papay, 2015). According to one study, 0.01–0.03 percent of teachers were dismissed annually for performance across 12 large districts (Weisberg *et al.*, 2009). Although some studies suggest that new evaluation systems have increased dismissal (Dee and Wyckoff, 2013), others indicate that rates remain low even when policies make it easier to terminate teachers for performance. Jacob's (2011) examination of the removal of non-tenured teachers in Chicago Public Schools found that while the dismissal of first-year teachers increased 9 percent, on average, after the policy change, more than half of dismissed teachers were subsequently

rehired by other Chicago schools. Moreover, in each year 28 to 46.2 percent of schools, including many that were low-performing, did not dismiss any teachers, despite the lower bar. Jacob concluded that there are substantial barriers to dismissal beyond legal and contractual constraints, including "teacher supply and/or social norms governing employment relations" (p. 430).

Jacob's conclusion that principals consider individual, social and organizational factors when deciding whether to pursue a teacher's dismissal is echoed by other studies. Dismissal of a tenured teacher for performance requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders over time (see, e.g. Bireda, 2010). One legal scholar observed that employee termination is "governed by a complex set of interrelated negotiations among diverse stakeholders" (Zins, 2012, p. 290). Principals play a critical role in implementing teacher evaluation and dismissal proceedings in a professional and legal manner. District leaders are also central; if they fail to support a principal's recommendation for dismissal, this outcome will not be realized. Lastly, union leaders may choose how forcefully to defend a teacher. They may also shape the process through the advice that they provide to teachers. Thus, dismissal is a dynamic process, with many points at which the likelihood for termination may be increased or suppressed.

Teacher dismissals are thus constrained by legal, economic, political and social factors. Studies suggest that principals often lack the will to pursue dismissal, either because they are conflict averse, worried they lack appropriate expertise, or concerned about the negative impact a dismissal could have on morale in their school (Bridges, 1992; Pratt, 1996). Moreover, principals are uncertain about whether their district will support them in their efforts to terminate a teacher (Donaldson, 2013; Van Sciver, 1990).

Conceptual framework

Principals face challenges when implementing teacher evaluation due to its controversial nature and the demand it places on time and resources, and implement evaluation in varied ways (Halverson *et al.*, 2004). Thus, we rely on a conceptual framework that draws on cognitive sensemaking, relational trust and organizational capacity.

Cognitive sensemaking

Individuals interpret policies by placing information into cognitive frameworks that reflect their experiences, local contexts and social interactions (Coburn, 2001; Weick, 1995). Policy implementation is influenced by how stakeholders take in and frame information, and ultimately act on it (Evans, 2007; Ingle *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, this sensemaking process not only prompts stakeholders to act in certain ways, but also precludes them from taking other actions that do not fit within their logics (Coburn, 2006). Principals thus filter policy messages through their worldviews, professional beliefs, and networks (Coburn, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, 2002). For example, research demonstrates that principals draw from their experiences, expertise, professional development and preparation to interpret and enact test-based accountability policy (Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita and Zoltners, 2002), and determine how to incorporate social justice into their leadership (Mavrogordato and White, 2015).

With a policy as controversial and complex as teacher evaluation, principals, as sense-makers, are likely to encounter different and sometimes conflicting ideas about policy implementation. The sense-making process is heightened during times of change (Ingle *et al.*, 2011) and, therefore will be particularly critical when principals implement a high-stakes policy such as teacher evaluation. To our knowledge, no empirical work has investigated how principals' sensemaking influences the way they work with struggling teachers.

Relational trust

In a process as emotionally laden as high-stakes teacher evaluation, relationships that cultivate trust between principals and teachers are central (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Reflected in the social exchanges and interpersonal bonds between individuals, relational trust is widely seen as a precondition for school improvement (Bryk *et al.*, 2010). It is, especially important when individuals have different perspectives.

Principals' work with low-performing teachers arguably reflects their larger efforts to cultivate relational trust. Because principals hold authority, it is up to them to build and sustain trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). While there are multiple facets of building trusting relationships in schools, benevolence is particularly salient in the context of teacher evaluation. Tschannen-Moran (2014) described benevolence as "the confidence that one's well-being or something one cares about will be protected and not harmed by the person in whom one has placed one's trust" and asserts that "principals can promote trust by demonstrating benevolence: showing consideration and sensitivity for employees' needs and interests, acting in a way that protects employees' rights, and refraining from exploiting others from personal gain" (p. 23). For example, principals might signal that they care about low-performing teachers and believe that they are capable of improvement. These efforts may increase trust between principals and teachers, which is the most important factor in predicting fairness in performance evaluations (Fulk *et al.*, 1985). Moreover, teachers who believe their principals will act benevolently towards them have more self-efficacy; therefore, principals' efforts to reduce teachers' sense of vulnerability can improve their performance (Bryk *et al.*, 2010).

Organizational capacity

Principals' work with low-performing teachers likely reflects the organizational capacity of their school and district. Organizational capacity can be defined as "the ability of an organization to fulfill its mission and goals" (Marsh *et al.*, 2017, p. 8). It supports reform efforts and enables organizational change (Cosner, 2009).

In the context of using evaluation with low-performing teachers, organizational capacity includes both human capital, such as instructional coaches, social resources, such as school-wide professional learning communities and technical resources, such as high-quality professional development (Cosner, 2009). Low-performing schools often face barriers to building organizational capacity, such as high teacher turnover (Bryk *et al.*, 2010). Schools with higher levels of organizational capacity are better positioned to use reform efforts, including teacher evaluation, to enhance capacity (Newmann *et al.*, 2000). Principals in low-performing schools thus may have fewer resources to draw on when working with struggling teachers than their counterparts in higher-performing schools.

Methods

Westford Public Schools (WPS) consists of 45 schools with approximately 1,800 teachers[1]. Over 70 percent of WPS's approximately 20,000 students receive free- or reduced-price lunch and the district generally performs in the bottom 10 percent of the state on achievement tests. Implemented in 2010, the Teacher Evaluation Program (TEP) requires that principals evaluate teachers and assign them ratings, which range from "1" to "5," based on: student progress towards performance growth goals, standards-based observations, and professional conduct. Evaluators observe teachers using a standardized rubric and provide on-going informal feedback to them.

Student performance comprises approximately 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation score[2]. WPS does not use value-added data to evaluate teachers. Instead, each fall, a teacher meets with their evaluator to set two performance goals (Student Learning Objectives or "SLOs") for the academic year. Each goal is based on students' growth in relevant skills.

Based largely on observational evidence, evaluators must identify potential under-performing teachers by early November. These identifications trigger independent observations by evaluators external to the district. These individuals evaluate teachers concurrently but independently of principals. This serves as a process to confirm low ratings. Teachers scored as "1" by internal and external evaluators receive intensive support. If they remain in the "1" category by year's end, these individuals can be dismissed.

Data and sample

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 participants (ten principals and seven assistant principals) in the second and third years of TEP's existence at a purposive sample of ten schools, four high schools and six K-8 schools (see Table I). Half were schools where teachers reported the most positive assessment, on average, of TEP on 2011 district surveys; half were schools where teachers reported the most negative assessment.

Semi-structured interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed. To understand principals' sensemaking, for example, we asked principals about how they thought working with teachers to improve their practice and how to engage in dismissal/non-renewal processes. To gain insight into the role of relational trust in principals' evaluations of teachers, we asked about principals' relationships with teachers, whether TEP had changed them and, if so, how. We probed organizational factors by asking about district and school supports for principals as they carried out teacher evaluation. We followed up with seven participants (three principals, two assistant principals who became principals and two assistant principals) in the fourth year of TEP's implementation. This allowed us to track participants' experiences over time as they worked with struggling teachers and proved particularly important for this analysis.

Analysis

Our analysis entailed procedures to facilitate cross-case comparisons (Miles and Huberman, 1994). After an initial reading of the verbatim transcripts, we engaged in open, axial and theoretical coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The first author open coded all transcript excerpts on ratings, development/improvement of teachers and

Pseudonym	School	TEP assessment
Principal 1	Elementary A	Positive
Principal 2	Elementary B	Negative
Principal 3	Elementary C	Negative
Principal 4	High School A	Positive
Principal 5	High School B	Positive
Principal 6	High School B	Positive
Principal 7	Elementary D	Positive
Principal 8	Elementary E	Negative
Principal 9	High School C	Negative
Principal 10	Elementary F	Positive
AP 1	Elementary C	Negative
AP 2	Elementary E	Negative
AP 3	High School A	Positive
AP 4	Elementary G	Negative
AP 5	High School C	Negative
AP 6	Elementary D	Positive
AP 7	High School B	Positive

Notes: $n = 17$. AP, Assistant Principal. Principal 6 replaced Principal 5 in year 2

Table I.
Sample of principals and assistant principals

dismissal/removal of teachers (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We then coded excerpts with one or more of the theoretical codes (e.g. "cognitive") and then applied additional codes, such as barriers (i.e. "barrier") to dismissal, whether the teacher improved ("improvement"), or ultimately left her position ("removal"). We built matrices to capture how participants described cognitive, relational, and organizational considerations (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). From these matrices, the first author outlined analytical memos on emerging themes across participant experiences and the second author debriefed these memos (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Trustworthiness

To increase this study's trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), we first increased credibility by applying the concept of peer review/peer debriefs; external reviewers and participants from WPS assessed earlier drafts of this paper. Second, we repeatedly reviewed interview transcripts, following Patton's assertion that returning to the data repeatedly to test whether "the constructs, categories, explanations, and interpretations, make sense" is essential (1980, p. 339). Third, we explicitly searched for disconfirming evidence that would suggest that our interpretations were not valid. When we discovered these instances, we adjusted our assertions accordingly. We address transferability here by including sufficient contextual details so the reader may judge whether the findings transfer to other settings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Lastly, we increased dependability by having the second author independently review the first author's coding and analysis to test the validity of conclusions.

Findings

All principals had been involved in pursuing removal of a teacher, whether by formal dismissal/nonrenewal actions or, more frequently, via the informal processes of counseling a teacher out of the district[3]. Their framing of teacher performance and teacher ratings, and their efforts to improve instruction reveal the cognitive, relational and organizational aspects of working with low-performing teachers. We find that the cognitive and relational pieces played an especially important role in improving teachers' practice but that the organizational aspects were critical in principals' efforts to remove teachers.

Improving low-performing teachers' practice

Principals articulated a legal and moral obligation to work diligently with low-performing teachers to improve their practice. One principal described supervising a teacher on a plan of improvement, which was required of principals who had rated a teacher a "1":

> There's a tremendous amount of coaching that's taken place from the very beginning and we've been very carefully documenting all of that […] It's not just a one shot deal where a coach goes in and models your reading [lesson] and then it's done. The coach will model several times and sometimes for a week if we think that it's necessary for the teacher to just sit back and really see how that works over time […] after five sessions, one week the expectation is the teacher will take it on and do a lesson with the coach watching and then giving him feedback and support […]. (Principal 1)

This principal and others took their responsibility to work with struggling teachers seriously. "[M]y feeling is that we need to do our part," commented this principal.

The cognitive element: framing low-performance. As they marshaled support for improving teachers' practice, principals varied in how they framed low-performance. In some cases, principals constructed low-performance as resulting from external factors, thus questioning the validity of teachers' low ratings. In other instances, principals located the source of a teacher's underperformance in her own lack of skills or proclivities. Thus, principals constructed notions of "deserving" and "undeserving" low-performing teachers.

The undeserving low-performer. Principals identified some teachers who had been treated—and rated—unfairly by previous principals. These instances often arose when a teacher transferred into the principal's school. Principals questioned the accuracy of teachers' ratings, asserting that they reflected the negative bias of prior principals. For example, one principal described a teacher who transferred into her building with a rating of "1": "[the rating] could have been a personal thing [because] she ended up being a '4' with me. Phenomenal […] the kids were like 85-90% proficient" (Principal 2).

Principals described other teachers as "broken" and the subjects of "mistreatment" by previous principals. They did not question the validity of the teacher's rating, instead locating the blame for these teachers' performance on their previous principals, thereby constructing these teachers as undeserving low-performers. Principal 2 articulated this position:

> [The teacher] never said anything because they had broken her down and that's where I'm fearful that when an administrator doesn't like you we're going to lose terrific teachers […]. Now I'm not talking about the ones who need improvement who need to […] be counseled out to another position, because there are some, but this is somebody who went into the profession, truly loves children, runs a very structured classroom, does terrific things, has strong data, isn't the most organized […] but certainly didn't deserve to receive a "1" and possibly lose her job.

Principals also sometimes framed low performance as a matter of poor fit reflecting a mismatch between a teacher's skills and the demands of her teaching assignment. Again, this argument often surfaced regarding teachers who transferred into a principal's school. For example, Assistant Principal 1 stated:

> We also got one teacher who was evaluated as a "2," she was one year at one school, one year at another school […] she had no help with those schools and they were both Turnaround schools […] I talked to her, "Well, how can we help?" She says, "I can teach here. The kids are good. I can teach here." So, we just have to give her the support.

The deserving low-performer. In drawing distinctions between "deserving" and "undeserving" low performers, principals revealed their criteria for differentiating "true" under-performance from an unfair low rating. For example, Principal 3 stated that "we have a good three to four" teachers whom she viewed as legitimately low-performing. One teacher, "is completely drowning. […] she blames the kids. It's the very particular thing that a teacher who is not good does. She never reflects on what she is doing that might be causing the management issues." For this principal, blaming students and not accepting one's role in classroom management were two markers of "a teacher who is not good."

Similarly, Principal 4 revealed her criterion of lack of commitment to professional growth for determining "deserving" underperformers. She described other teachers' responses when two teachers whom she had rated as a "1" went on a campaign to garner support from colleagues. She recounted, "I think initially people felt sorry for them but I think at the end, they realized these are people who don't deserve to be here. And there weren't too many people, anyone that wanted to be on their side […] it was good in a way. It made them want to be on the side that's getting better and growing." Thus, principals identified "true" underperformers as those teachers who blame students for their struggles and do not want to improve their practice.

Relational aspects of working with low-performing teachers. In addition to the cognitive aspects of working with low-performing teachers, relational aspects also appeared salient. Given the rarity of low evaluation ratings for teachers, the act of assigning a low rating to a teacher is emotionally laden. Principals in our sample reported that a large part of their work with low-performing teachers consisted of demonstrating benevolence in order to build a relationship founded on trust. For example, one principal recounted that a teacher "was so upset by this whole TEP process." She responded by providing an extra year to the teacher

to improve his teaching and helping him work through his fears about TEP: "He ended as a '1.' We gave him another year" (Principal 4).

Building trust was especially important when principals perceived that prior administrators had assigned unfairly low ratings to teachers or mistreated them. This framing allowed principals to engage fully with these teachers to improve their instruction, which often began with efforts to build the teacher's trust in the administrator. One principal recounted that she had begun to coach a low-performing teacher who had transferred into her school: "It's going to take her a while because it's like […] if a teacher has been mistreated or misguided […] It takes them a couple of years to then say, 'Okay, I can do this'" (Principal 3). Similarly, Principal 2 described working with a teacher who had transferred into her building:

> I worked very hard building her confidence again, because she was a wreck last year. Every time I went in [the classroom] she'd say, "I'm not used to this." I would come in, sit down with the kids on the rug and become one of the kids. I didn't come in and script anything, you know. I'd leave the clipboard outside.

By leaving her clipboard outside the classroom and taking the role of a student, Principal 1 attempted to reduce the teacher's vulnerability about evaluation and develop a non-threatening, trusting relationship with this teacher. Over time, these steps resulted in a trusting relationship that allowed her to make progress with the teacher:

> [S]he wasn't organized and I pulled her in and I said, "Get it together, clean up that room," and we have data binders – it has to be maintained in an orderly fashion and I want the most recent thing, but because we have such a good relationship, she trusts me. She knew I wasn't saying do it or you're going to be a "1." I was saying, "I need you to do this."

Organizational aspects of working with low-performing teachers. Principals cited organizational aspects of the improvement process to a lesser degree than cognitive or relational aspects. For example, Assistant Principal 2 discussed the organizational demands of working with teachers to whom she assigned a low rating. She recounted that the district's lack of specificity regarding observation requirements increased the pressure on her:

> Formal [observations] – there's really not a set number, it's just been left up to us, so I feel like, especially for those teachers that I may have put on potential "1" that I need to be in there constantly, so that's another time-consuming issue, spending so much time making sure I'm seeing different aspects of their day, and several of those different aspects because I don't feel comfortable saying, "They are a '1'" and I haven't been in there enough.

In addition, she needed to document the support she provided to these teachers, which consumed additional time in her schedule. She chose to complete this paperwork at home in the evenings and weekends because, in her words, "If I were to actually sit and do all the paperwork here, I'd be missing out on instruction and time with the kids." As a result, she felt that she was "sacrificing my whole life" to carry out TEP while attending to her other job responsibilities.

Observing and reporting was especially difficult for Assistant Principal 2 because she completed these tasks on her own. In a different school, Principal 1 felt that she had resources at her school to work with struggling teachers:

> We've got tremendous people here and the staff at our school works very collaboratively with one another and their team. Team members meet regularly and support each other. We're also fortunately that we have coaching staff. We have a Math coach and two literacy coaches in the building. We've got the assistant principal and myself. So, we have a lot of very strong curriculum people to support teachers in the classroom.

Other principals described investing their own professional resources in improving low-performing teachers' practice while also attending to the legal requirements for supporting teachers with performance problems. Principal 2 said that consistency and follow-through were critical to working with teachers on plans of improvement:

> It's about doing your homework, getting in there, providing feedback in a timely manner, and I mean turn it around in 24-48 hours, they deserve that, and then offering them PD. I have one now who's on a plan of improvement. I'm doing I think too much, I'm purchasing books for her, we have ongoing sessions every two weeks where we discuss what's going on, I'm helping her get organized, I've set up visitations to other buildings, special ed teachers with a focus on autism […] if you say it, do it. That's where people fall short. You can't write up this plan and not do it.

Thus, principals had varying access to resources and organizational capacity to observe and coach low-performing teachers.

Removing persistently low-performing teachers

Cognitive, relational and organizational considerations again featured prominently in principals' decisions regarding whether to pursue the removal of a teacher. Organizational factors seemed especially salient.

Cognitive and relational aspects of removing low-performing teachers. Principals must ultimately decide whether to recommend that a teacher be dismissed. Principals offered varied rationales for choosing not to pursue this outcome in some cases while working to remove teachers in others. Often these logics emphasized the principal's relationship with the teacher and their desire to preserve trust with the teacher and others in the school.

Logics for pursuing dismissal. Almost all principals reported that they interacted with at least a few teachers who were struggling to a degree that warranted their removal. As one principal said, "I love children and I love my profession and I know what is possible in terms of learning for kids and how elevated it could be and I will settle for nothing less than that." He added, "you either get better or you go" (Principal 5). Other principals voiced less strident positions but maintained student success as their criterion for retaining teachers:

> When it comes to a person who comes in at "1" or "2," who clearly needs some intensive support, we want to make sure that we provide that in a friendly manner, in a non-threatening manner and a very supportive manner and we always let the teachers know that the goal is – it's nothing to be taken personally, because the goal is to help the children succeed. (Principal 1)

As suggested above, principals often recognized the relational aspects of dismissal. By expressing a desire to provide support in a "non-threatening" and "friendly" style, this principal attempts to reduce the teacher's vulnerability, thus recognizing the importance of the relational aspects of removing low-performing teachers. Another principal recounted saying to a teacher in her school, "[I]t's time for you to retire or I am going to have to give you a '1,' you'll be gone." She reasoned that this conversation gave "him the opportunity to retire with some dignity." When a principal decides to recommend a teacher be dismissed, they cannot reduce the teacher's vulnerability. By offering the teacher the choice to retire, this principal considered his feelings about losing his job and attempted to act with benevolence and caring to preserve the teacher's pride. Principals also considered how dismissing a teacher might affect their relationships with other teachers in the school. Principal 6 commented, "[T]he teaching staff really liked him, but they saw that he wasn't an effective teacher anymore […] nobody was up in arms about the fact that he was retiring, this was not seen as some terrible thing. It was sort of like, yes, it was time, so there was not a lot of pushback on that" (Principal 6). This principal was aware that dismissing a teacher might reduce other teachers' trust in her. Instead, she recounted, other teachers viewed him

as ineffective and therefore accepted her decision to counsel him to retire early and trust between the principal and other teachers remained intact.

Lastly, this example reflects a common commitment among principals to fair implementation of teacher evaluation, which is related to trust (Fulk *et al.*, 1985). Assistant Principal 5 asserted that one of TEP's benefits was it allowed administrators to "get out staff who shouldn't be teaching [but] in a fair way." TEP's perceived fairness enabled principals to remove struggling teachers while preserving trust with their colleagues who remained in the schools.

Logics for not pursuing dismissal. Principals also articulated rationales for not pursuing these outcomes. These rationales were frequently grounded in their commitment to improving teachers. For example, one principal said, "[W]e've not had anyone who has lost their job because of that process and that's certainly not our goal in this. Our goal is to make sure that we're giving teachers as much support as we can to make them better teachers" (Principal 1). By framing the goals of TEP to teachers in this way, many principals sought to build trust with teachers and ease their sense of vulnerability. However, if principals were too attached to this idea it could interfere with their willingness to pursue dismissal.

A second logic was rooted in principals' belief that it was important to provide teachers with "a second chance," which echoes the notion of principals' benevolence and care for teachers. For example, one assistant principal who initially wanted to remove a teacher stated that she was "glad [the teacher] has another chance somewhere […] this just wasn't the right setting for her" (Assistant Principal 4). Sometimes this argument was coupled with the assertion that teachers were analogous to students:

> It is sort of like when a child comes to a teacher. You have to meet that child where that child is […] support that child and catch that child up as much as possible in the time that you have them. I always view a school as like a very large classroom full of students […] we're all students in our own way and we're all on a learning curve. And there are some of us that are really good at some things and some of us are really better than others and we all have our strengths and weaknesses. (Principal 1)

Here, the principal takes a benevolent stance towards teachers, caring for them much as she would students. However, likening teachers to students could suppress a principal's willingness to remove a teacher.

A third argument, invoked the importance of fit between a teacher's skills and the teaching assignment's demands as a rationale for keeping a struggling teacher. For example, Assistant Principal 1 said, "We had one teacher who was teaching the first grade. She went to sixth grade and it was a whole new teacher." By offering teachers an opportunity to improve, principals signaled their consideration of teachers' feelings and their benevolence. For example, Principal 3 recounted:

> After two years of me trying – she started crying, said she really wants to do this job, but she is terrified of kids. So I said, "Let's figure out how you won't get terrified of kids." We started working. We gave her the tools she needed. She's one of my best teachers now. She is really good.

Lastly, principals sometimes factored in teachers' personal challenges when they decided not to pursue dismissal. For example, Principal 4 recounted one instance when she decided not to pursue dismissal because of a teacher's personal life: "He went to a very difficult year personally. He went through a divorce, lost his home so he came to me honestly and said, 'Principal, I have nothing left but this job. I need to get better.' And I said, 'Yeah, we have tons of people who will work with you.' And he's like a different person" (Principal 4). Here, the principal considered the teachers' well-being and drew on her relationship with the teacher to increase trust and motivate the teacher to improve. Cognitive and relational

dimensions in the form of principals' beliefs and relationships thus shaped their willingness to remove teachers.

Organizational aspects of removing low-performing teachers. Principals also identified organizational influences on dismissal.

Union support. TEP's status as a joint union-management venture shaped efforts to remove teachers in Westford. Principals reported that in some cases union support helped them remove under-performing teachers. For example, Principal 4 reported,

> [T]he union has explicitly told them, "We helped develop this. This is good for our profession." […] my one teacher that fought all year […] the union was wonderful with him, too. I watched them trying to help him but they told him, "It's your last chance. You're not going to have the job." Before, 10-year teachers never believed it could happen.

Interestingly, principals rarely cited the union as a barrier to dismissal.

Unqualified external raters. Before a teacher can be removed, TEP requires that she must receive a score of "1" from both her supervisor and an external, independent rater. Principals in our sample recounted instances when the independent rater's assessment differed from their own, thereby negating their case for removing a teacher. This caused frustration for principals:

> I followed the rules […] but there's an external rater who I think should be fired who gave [the teacher] 3s repeatedly […] [but] he had a file, he'd been moved from school to school because he had been so bad and had done very egregious things. So, I had that and I was screaming for a hearing […]. (Principal 4)

Similarly, Principal 9 described a situation where she had rated a teacher as a "1" and the independent rater's observation score was much higher than her own, "One of the external raters came in and I read the evaluation. I'm like, 'Oh my God, this sounds like a teacher who is a 5.' " As with Principal 4, this discrepancy in ratings meant that the teacher continued to teach in Principal 9's school despite her attempts to remove the teacher.

Lack of district support. In some ways, district norms undermined principals' efforts to dismiss teachers. Principals described situations that revealed that the district endorsed the importance of fit and provided second chances to teachers based on this notion. Principal 7 recounted accepting a transferring teacher who was on the verge of dismissal:

> [S]he was made a "1" and really asked to leave the district. So she was going to be fired […] And I received a phone call from somebody […] they said, "We'll hire her back if you take a chance with her." I had her come in and we interviewed her, and I thought she was good. She looked strong and she had a baby last year. She lost some time with the principal at the school.

A district administrator orchestrated this second chance by asking Principal 7 to accept this teacher, thus indicating that the central office also endorsed this practice.

A larger barrier to the removal of teachers stemmed from principals' perception that the district might fail to back up their efforts to remove teachers. Some principals had pursued dismissal only to have the district fail to support their case and the teacher returned to their school. This experience confirmed the predictions of Assistant Principal 3: "I remember saying to my [principal], '[I]f this doesn't work we're going to lose credibility.' We've done all this work. If the teachers we recommend they're still a '1' and it doesn't work, we're going to lose credibility."

This hypothetical came to pass in some instances. For example, one principal initiated the process to rate a teacher as "1" and remove the teacher in two successive school years, but district leaders had refused to push the teacher to resign:

> [T]hat's a heavy-hearted decision to tell somebody you're going, you might lose your job, that's very hard to do. Then we get the courage to do that. We go for it and then you send them right back

> to the building and it minimizes your impact and your effectiveness and the message because [teachers] all talk and tell each other.

As a result of this experience, the principal resolved not to pursue dismissal for other teachers in the future: "Guess what we learned? We're not rating anybody a '1' anymore because that was a lot of work. We rated them a '1'. We put them on a plan. We rated them and the external rater decides that no, I don't think they're a '1' and so that just pits the teachers against the administrator […] the District didn't support us enough in getting rid of a teacher who clearly isn't effective, didn't support us at all" (Principal 8).

Similarly, an assistant principal described being in a state of limbo with a teacher who was rated as a "1" but district leaders' position on the teacher was ambiguous. This assistant principal had followed procedure and the external rater confirmed her assessment of the teacher's instruction. However, the district chose not to remove this teacher, and the assistant principal was uncertain whether the teacher would remain in her school or not: "I had everything covered […] It was very systematic and fair, but [the teacher] just didn't see it that way. I don't know what's going to happen." Looking forward, the assistant principal was unsure about the future with a district supervisor who "is concerned, but also new" and reluctant to push hard to remove a teacher right away. As a result, the assistant principal said, "we are giving [the teacher] the benefit of process and doubt." In the meantime, the assistant principal was faced with a teacher whose instruction had worsened since going through the external rating process. She concluded, "It was very difficult and it's very tangled for me and was really very destructive to the teaching." She added that rating the teacher a "1" "sort of like backfired and I'm not sure what the outcome may be, which is not good" (Assistant principal 6).

Discussion

Our findings illustrate that the improvement and removal of low-performing teachers in Westford was far from the linear, unidirectional processes that some might assume. Instead, these processes were dynamic and prompted principals to consider the teacher, the school as an organization and district norms and procedures.

From the cognitive perspective, principals constructed varied logics regarding low-performing teachers, distinguished between "deserving" and "undeserving" low-performers, and calibrated their work with these teachers accordingly. Moreover, principals constructed varied logics that argued for or against removing a teacher. Thus, principals' sensemaking was central to their work with low-performing teachers as prior research would suggest (Coburn, 2006).

Relational trust also shaped how principals engaged with improvement and removal activities. All principals in the sample reported approaching low-performing teachers with benevolence (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), even when they attempted to remove a teacher when their performance remained sub-standard. Instead, principals often invoked benevolence to confirm a decision they had made to provide a teacher with a second chance to improve.

Finally, organizational considerations were most prominent when principals concluded that they ought to remove a teacher from their school and, potentially, the district. Unsurprisingly, the teachers union and school district were more central in principals' decision-making regarding removing a teacher as opposed to improving their practice. Organizational capacity at the district and school level thus played a role in principals' efforts to support and remove low-performers (Cosner, 2009).

Implications

New teacher evaluation policies aim in part to help low-performing teachers improve, or prompt them to exit their positions. Principals are at the center of implementing these policies.

Our study indicates that the way principals work with low-performing teachers varies considerably, arguably shaping the policy's potential to improve instruction in their respective schools and suggesting implications for practice and theory.

Implications for practice. Our findings indicate that principals need more assistance as they work with low-performing teachers. Several principals were reticent to pursue dismissal because they believed central office would not support them, thereby undermining their credibility and trust in their buildings. District leaders could communicate more clearly with principals throughout the process. For example, district leaders might check in with principals routinely to see how low-performing teachers are progressing and come to consensus about whether to pursue dismissal. District leaders could also be more explicit with principals about the conditions under which they would support dismissal. Principals are on the front lines of teacher evaluation; if district leaders are not willing to support principals' decisions regarding dismissal, it does not make sense to push principals to expend their energy in this way.

Our study also has implications for principal preparation. Because evaluating teachers is an important aspect of principals' work, programs should provide more opportunities to learn about evaluation. Aspiring principals should receive opportunities to practice providing high-quality feedback to struggling teachers, documenting a low-performing teacher's progress, and working with central office to remove a teacher who is not improving.

Theoretical contributions. Our study demonstrates that principals' approach to working with low-performing teachers reflects a different thought process than their decision to pursue dismissal of a low-performer. When deciding how to develop a "low-performing" teacher, principals use cognitive sensemaking to divide teachers into those who are deserving and undeserving of this designation, thus distinguishing between teachers' evaluation rating and their true performance. Principals frequently explained their decision to give teachers a second chance as a means of demonstrating benevolence and building relational trust.

Conversely, principals' decision to dismiss low-performing teachers reflected their organizational context. This conclusion reflected their judgment about whether or not district-level personnel would support them. Given low rates of teacher dismissal in Westford and elsewhere, principals viewed pursuing dismissal as inherently risk-laden. Thus, organizational backing and resources played the most prominent role in principals' decision to engage in an uncertain and potentially perilous dismissal process.

Conclusion

There is much to be learned about improving low-performing teachers' instruction and working to remove underperforming teachers. Although the media trumpets these levers to improve schools and student outcomes, surprisingly little empirical research describes how principals engage in these processes.

More research is needed on how principals enact teacher evaluation and pursue evaluation's goals of development and accountability. It is important to continue to examine how the cognitive, relational and organizational dynamics shape this process in different settings, for example unionized and non-unionized districts. Subsequent research could look more closely at the process of working with low-performing teachers from the perspective of district leaders, teachers, and union representatives. Future work could also use quantitative methods to measure what leadership practices improve low-performing teachers' performance. As districts and schools face pressure to work with and on occasion remove low-performing teachers, the need for sound research will only increase.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the school district for partnering with us on this research project. The authors also wish to recognize and thank the anonymous participants in our study for taking the time to speak with us.

Funding: this research was supported through a grant from the Spencer Foundation.

Authors' note: all opinions expressed in this paper represent those of the authors and not necessarily the institutions with which the authors are affiliated. All errors in this paper are solely the responsibility of the authors.

Notes

1. All proper names are replaced with pseudonyms.
2. The exact weight varies based on teachers' scores on the other components of TEP.
3. We refer to principals and assistant principals as "principals."

References

Bireda, S. (2010), *Devil in the Details: An Analysis of State Teacher Dismissal Laws*, Center for American Progress, Washington, DC.

Bridges, E.M. (1992), *The Incompetent Teacher: Managerial Responses*, The Falmer Press, Philadelphia, PA.

Bryk, A.S., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S. and Easton, J.Q. (2010), *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Coburn, C.E. (2001), "Collective sensemaking about reading: how teachers mediate reading policy in their professional communities", *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 145-170.

Coburn, C.E. (2006), "Framing the problem of reading instruction: using frame analysis to uncover the microprocesses of policy implementation", *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 43 No. 3, pp. 343-349.

Cosner, S. (2009), "Building organizational capacity through trust", *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 45 No. 2, pp. 248-291.

Dee, T. and Wyckoff, J. (2013), "Incentives, selection, and teacher performance: evidence from IMPACT", working paper, The National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, October.

Donaldson, M.L. (2013), "Principals' approaches to cultivating teacher effectiveness: constraints and opportunities in hiring, assigning, evaluating, and developing teachers", *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 49 No. 5, pp. 838-882.

Donaldson, M.L. and Papay, J.P. (2015), "An idea whose time had come: negotiating teacher evaluation reform in New Haven, Connecticut", *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 122 No. 1, pp. 39-70.

Evans, A.E. (2007), "School leaders and their sensemaking about race and demographic change", *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 43 No. 2, pp. 159-188.

Fulk, J., Brief, A.P. and Barr, S.H. (1985), "Trust-in-supervisor and perceived fairness and accuracy of performance evaluations", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 301-313.

Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Aldine, Chicago, IL.

Goldring, E., Grissom, J.A., Rubin, M., Neumerski, C.M., Cannata, M., Drake, T. and Schuermann, P. (2015), "Make room value added: principals' human capital decisions and the emergence of teacher observation data", *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 96-104.

Grissom, J.A. and Loeb, S. (2017), "Assessing principals' assessments: subjective evaluations of teacher effectiveness in low- and high-stakes environments", *Education Finance and Policy*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 369-395.

Halverson, R., Kelley, C. and Kimball, S. (2004), "Implementing teacher evaluation systems: how principals make sense of complex artifacts to shape local instructional practice", in Hoy, W.K. and Miskel, C.G. (Eds), *Educational Administration, Policy, and Reform: Research and Measurement*, Information Age, Charlotte, NC, pp. 153-188.

Harris, D.N., Ingle, W.K. and Rutledge, S.A. (2014), "How teacher evaluation methods matter for accountability: a comparative analysis of teacher effectiveness ratings by principals and teacher value-added measures", *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 51 No. 1, pp. 73-112.

Ingle, K., Rutledge, S. and Bishop, J. (2011), "Context matters: principals' sensemaking of teacher hiring and on-the-job performance", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 49 No. 5, pp. 579-610.

Jacob, B.A. (2011), "Do principals fire the worst teachers?", *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 33 No. 4, pp. 403-434.

Kraft, M.A. and Gilmour, A.F. (2016), "Can principals promote teacher development as evaluators? A case study of principals' views and experiences", *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 52 No. 5, pp. 711-753.

Kraft, M.A. and Gilmour, A.F. (2017), "Revisiting *The Widget Effect*: teacher evaluation reforms and the distribution of teacher effectiveness", *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 46 No. 5, pp. 234-249.

Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S. and Wahlstrom, K. (2004), "How leadership influences student learning".

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Vol. 75, Sage.

Marsh, J.A., Bush-Mecenas, S., Strunk, K.O., Lincove, J.A. and Huguet, A. (2017), "Evaluating teachers in the big easy: how organizational context shapes policy responses in New Orleans", *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 39 No. 4, pp. 539-570.

Mavrogordato, M. and White, R. (2015), "Leaders as local policy implementers: how school leaders influence the opportunity to learn for ELLs", paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, San Diego, CA, November.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994), *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Newmann, F.M., King, M.B. and Youngs, P. (2000), "Professional development that addresses school capacity: lessons from urban elementary schools", *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 108 No. 4, pp. 259-299.

Pratt, F. (1996), "The ethical principal and teacher nonretention", *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 29-36.

Spillane, J.P., Reiser, B.J. and Reimer, T. (2002), "Policy implementation and cognition: reframing and refocusing implementation research", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 72 No. 3, pp. 387-431.

Spillane, J.P., Diamond, J.B., Burch, P., Hallett, T., Jita, L. and Zoltners, J. (2002), "Managing in the middle: school leaders and the enactment of accountability policy", *Educational Policy*, Vol. 16 No. 5, pp. 731-762.

Steinberg, M.P. and Donaldson, M.L. (2016), "The new educational accountability: understanding the landscape of teacher evaluation in the post-NCLB era", *Education Finance and Policy*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 340-359.

Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J.M. (1990), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014), *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Van Sciver, J.H. (1990), "A few tips on teacher dismissals", *The School Administrator*, Vol. 10 No. 47, p. 41.

Weick, K.E. (1995), *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Weingarten, R. (2011), "Toward a true development and evaluation system", February 25, 2014, available at: www.aft.org/pdfs/press/sp_weingarten022411.pdf (accessed February 24, 2011).

Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J. and Keeling, D. (2009), *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*, The New Teacher Project, New York, NY.

Zins, D. (2012), "Managing the exit: negotiating an employment termination", *Harvard Negotiation Law Review*, Vol. 17 No. 289, pp. 289-310.

About the authors

Morgaen Donaldson is Associate Professor and Director of the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the University of Connecticut. Her research focuses on teacher and principal evaluation and policies and practices related to educator quality more broadly. Morgaen Donaldson is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: Morgaen.donaldson@uconn.edu

Madeline Mavrogordato is Assistant Professor of K-12 educational administration in the College of Education at Michigan State University. She utilizes mixed methods to investigate how district, state and federal policies and school leadership practices impact educational outcomes for underserved students.