TEACHER EVALUATION, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: THE CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

Evaluación docente, responsabilidad y aprendizaje profesional: la perspectiva canadiense

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Abstract

Traditional conceptions of teacher evaluation are problematic because they largely ignore the complexity of teaching and learning. The evolving conceptions of teacher evaluation in Canada incorporate a much more collegial and collaborative approach to teacher evaluation. While these teacher evaluation models do acknowledge the need for quality assurance, their primary purpose is to encourage professional learning and development within an evaluation framework to guide this learning. Examples from teacher preparation programs and the different provinces highlight the potential for teacher evaluation models to primarily focus on professional growth within a climate of accountability.

Key words: teacher evaluation preparation, professional learning, accountability

Resumen

Las concepciones tradicionales de la evaluación docente son problemáticas porque en gran medida desconocen la complejidad de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje. En Canadá, las concepciones en desarrollo de la evaluación docente incorporan un enfoque mucho más de equipo –entre colegas– y colaborativo para abordarla. Si bien estos modelos de evaluación docente reconocen la necesidad de asegurar la

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calidad, su principal propósito es motivar el aprendizaje y desarrollo profesional dentro de un marco evaluativo que guíe dicho aprendizaje. Ejemplos de programas de preparación docente así como las diversas provincias, destacan el potencial subyacente de los modelos de evaluación docente para enfocarse primordialmente en el crecimiento profesional dentro de un clima de responsabilidad.

Palabras clave: *preparación de la evaluación docente, aprendizaje profesional, responsabilidad*

My oldest daughter will be graduating from high-school later this year. In her 12 years of schooling and one year of Kindergarten, she has been taught by over 40 different teachers. As a former teacher and current associate professor of Education, I have generally kept a respectful distance from my daughter's educational interactions and experiences with her teachers. This includes periodically "biting my tongue" as my daughter relates her experiences at school.

There have been times, however, when I have felt I had no other recourse but to advocate for my daughter. On these occasions I have met with her teachers and questioned, even challenged their teaching practices and perspectives. As I reflect on my educational career and my experiences as a parent, I would argue that many teachers are operating with partial and inadequate understandings of learning and achievement. However, I do not consider these teachers to be incompetent. In fact, I have continually observed that teachers are dedicated professionals, striving to improve their skills. These teachers will listen to and work with parents if the conversation focuses not on particular teacher behaviours but on what is in the best interests of the child.

While the purpose of schooling is to develop the foundational academic, personal and social skills required for future success, the energies of most schools and classroom teachers go primarily towards promoting academic achievement. From decades of research we have learned that hitting even this narrow target is problematic. Learning and achievement in school is a complex phenomena and several factors impact the likelihood of this outcome. For example, a child's gender, individual learning abilities or exceptionalities, the quality of peer relationships, as well as student attitudes towards learning and schooling have all been associated with differences in achievement. A child's family background, including socio-economic status, educational expectations, and family stability, also impacts a child's learning and achievement. The compositional factors of schools, including their academic and disciplinary climate, geographical location, size of enrolment, cultural diversity, and type (e.g., public vs. private) have also been associated with differences in student achievement (e.g., Klinger, Rogers, Anderson, Poth, & Calman, 2006; Ma, Klinger, 2000; Rogers, Ma, Klinger, Dawber, Hellsten, Nowicki, & Tomkowicz, 2006). All of these factors interact to shape students' interactions with teachers and their opportunity to learn.

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What is less clear is the extent to which instructional factors, those actually controlled by the teacher, either hinder or support children's learning. Multilevel statistical models built to understand the power of purposeful instruction typically find that only 10 to 25% of the observed differences in student achievement can be attributed to differences between schools and teachers. Attempts to identify and measure the specific teaching practices accounting for this variability in achievement have met with little success (e.g., Klinger *et al.*, 2006).

And so, a significant dilemma remains. Is it possible to define and measure teacher effectiveness given that different teacher behaviours may be more or less effective depending on how they interact with the factors described above? The best we can say is that effective teachers are better able to support student achievement and success, primarily because they have learned to adapt their instruction and interactions with children based on the individual needs and profiles those children bring to school (Shulman 1988). "How teachers acquire this effectiveness is at the heart of the challenge that schools face in raising student achievement" (Goldstein & Noguera, 2006, p. 31). Perhaps an even more difficult challenge is to determine if teachers have indeed acquired this effectiveness.

Teacher Evaluation in the Context of Educational Accountability

In the face of both expectations for schooling and questions about the allocation and use of public funding, educational jurisdictions are increasingly expected to demonstrate the results of their efforts on important educational outcomes for students. Schools are required to strive for continuous student growth and improvement. One response has been an increasing reliance on the use of large-scale test results to provide assurances about the soundness of our schools, especially on priority outcomes such a literacy and numeracy (e.g., Klinger, DeLuca, & Miller, 2008). A second response to this accountability framework has been the increasing use of teacher evaluation (Alberta Learning, 2003a; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008; United States Federal Government, 2002). As Larsen (2005) observed, teacher testing is one of the fastest growing movements in education in the United States. The belief is that such evaluations help identify, and then remove or retrain ineffective and incompetent teachers, while making explicit the desired high standards for teaching. Teacher evaluation would thus be a very important mechanism if we had reason to believe that many practising teachers were either incompetent or would be willing to receive extensive retraining based on negative evaluations of performance.

As has already argued, however, the actual number of incompetent teachers may actually be very small (Bridges, 1992; *Saskatchewan* School Trustees' Association, 1995; Tucker, 1997) and there is little evidence that school systems are willing to invest

in targeted teacher upgrading. While a few teachers may be removed from the system using these evaluations, the overall impact of such evaluation policies has been to create a climate of tension and fear (Conley & Glasman, 2008; Marshall, 2005). "The result is that teachers may fear that evaluation is less about personal improvement involving professional growth and more of a political hurdle" (Conley & Glasman, p. 66). Equally problematic, there is little evidence these evaluations provide accurate information or feedback (Peterson, 2004) and they may actually "inhibit creativity, flexibility and sensitivity to the contextualised nature of teaching" for the vast majority of teachers (Larsen, 2005, p. 298).

Formal evaluations of teacher performance are often based on one or two observations, typically conducted by the school principal (e.g., Loup, Garland, Ellett, & Rugutt, 1996; Shulman, 1988). Unfortunately, principals often are provided little if any training on how to conduct these evaluations and specifically on how to draw inferences from formal observations (Medley & Coker, 1987; Scriven, 1981). In the absence of this training, principals rely on standardized rating forms that are assumed to ensure fairness and equality (Peterson, 2004; Medley & Coker;, 1987; Shulman, 1988). Unfortunately, such standardized evaluation instruments actively ignore the overwhelming importance of contextual factors and the interactions of these factors with teachers' personal and professional experiences (Gitlin & Smyth, 1990; Saskatchewan School Trustees' Association, 1995). As Larsen concluded, the commonly used methods of teacher evaluation ignore "the complexities and highly contextualised nature of teaching" (p. 298). Hence the resulting reports and evaluations are inaccurate, unreliable, and do little to support professional growth.

If conventional teacher evaluations are problematic as a tool for assuring a skilled professional teacher workforce, how should educational jurisdictions and systems proceed? One alternative is to emphasize the importance of continual professional growth as written in one School Board's policy document, "Each teacher will assume responsibility for assessing his or her own growth needs" (Limestone District Board of Education, 2008.). This more collegial approach to promoting teacher accountability identifies professional learning as its central purpose. In some jurisdictions this approach encourages the participation of teacher associations and unions. When mentorship models are used, they encourage interaction between experienced or expert teachers and those who are inexperienced or have specific identified learning needs. This reorientation to teacher evaluation potentially removes the adversarial tone, fear, and tension that traditional models evoke (Conley & Glasman, 2008).

As an example, the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) process is a strategy for teacher evaluations that involves pairing new teachers with experienced and trained coaches. The coaches conduct the formal personnel evaluations of teachers in the program. Based on the evaluation, the novice teachers develop a personalized professional development

plan directly focused on their strengths and weaknesses. Coaches and participants in the program then work together achieve the goals outlined in the plan. Finally, coaches report on the progress of participating teachers to a district-wide teacher/administrator panel (Goldstein & Noguera, 2006). Goldstein and Noguera concluded that the inclusion of teachers as coaches and reviewers created a more transparent process and contributed to a school district and union partnership.

It is difficult to conceive of this alternative teacher evaluation systems co-existing with many of the accountability frameworks that pervade public education today. Nonetheless, Canadian models of both school accountability and teacher evaluation tend to promote a collegial growth process aimed at improving education and teaching. Support for this approach may be partially due to the relatively strong teacher unions working in most Canadian jurisdictions. But there is also a general sense that Canadian students are well served by the schools they attend and the professionalism of their teachers. This impression is supported by the generally high levels of achievement for Canadian students on international assessments (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2004, 2007). Given this context, the collegial and growth models of teacher evaluation in Canada are more readily endorsed by teachers and educational administrators and are generally accepted by the public.

The Canadian Approach to Teacher Evaluation

The education of children in Canada falls under provincial/territorial jurisdiction. Each province and territory is responsible for the development of curriculum and the assessment of student achievement within its jurisdiction (Klinger *et al.*, 2008). Nonetheless, the goals of education across the country are similar, focusing on the need to provide students the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to contribute to a prosperous society. Teaching is a valued profession in Canada and teachers are not only well compensated but also generally well respected. Satisfaction surveys report relatively high levels of school satisfaction from principals, teachers, parents, and students (see for example, Alberta Learning 2003b; Boyce, 2008; King & Peart, 1992). The vast majority of teachers work in the public school system, although there is also a publicly funded Catholic school system in some provinces. Most provinces also have a small but significant number of private schools.

Teachers in publicly funded schools all belong to a provincial teaching union or association. Contract negotiations are completed by the union or by local associations at the school district level. School boards and individual schools conduct the hiring process of all teachers within their jurisdiction. School boards are also responsible for the evaluation of the teachers employed in their board or district. Teachers are bound by a code of conduct as outlined by the provincial Ministry of Education or by a provincial

regulatory body. For example, both British Columbian and Ontario have a "College of Teachers" that license teachers as well as regulate and enforce professional standards (e.g., British Columbia College of Teachers, 2008). In all of the other jurisdictions, certification is completed by the provincial/territorial government (see also Crocker & Dibbon, 2008).

Most commonly, teacher preparation in Canada begins with the training of teacher candidates within University Bachelor of Education (B, Ed) programs. There are two dominant university models for teacher preparation in Canada. First, teacher candidates may enter a Bachelor of Education degree program at the completion (or near completion) of an undergraduate degree in a filed of specialization, typically in the humanities, arts, or sciences. These "consecutive" after degree programs typically span one to two years. The second option enables potential teacher candidates to enter a Bachelor of Education program directly out of high-school. These "concurrent" programs typically extend for five years and are commonly linked with a second academic degree in humanities, arts, or science. At the completion of either model, the vast majority of Education graduates have two degrees, the first in a field of specialization and the second in Education (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008). Not surprisingly, the most commonly described function of these education programs is to produce "competent professionals;" however, these programs also identify the need for promoting "professional growth" and life-long learning (Crocker and Dibbon; Queen's University, 2008). These pre-service programs recognize they are only the first step towards developing teacher competence. They work to introduce and expose prospective teachers to the knowledge and skills of a competent teacher. Nevertheless, B.Ed program instructors stress that only through experience and ongoing feedback provided by good mentoring and self-assessment does a novice develop expertise and eventually the label of being a "competent teacher."

There are several steps taken by a university to ensure that candidates entering the teaching profession have the necessary skills and dispositions to become competent teachers. The first is to select those who can demonstrate attributes valued by the profession. Some universities have a more rigorous selection process than others. A few universities base their acceptances entirely on previous academic performance (either in university or in high school for concurrent students). In many institutions, however, potential students are also evaluated on the quality of their previous related experiences, their attitudes, philosophy, and their beliefs about teaching and learning. These are typically assessed through a written statement and/or interview. Admissions to Bachelor of Education programs can be highly competitive. It is not atypical for some Faculties of Education to have a rejection rate of well over 75%.

For students who are fortunate enough to be admitted into a Bachelor of Education program, their second step towards professional practice is to complete both course work and teaching practica. The structure and the length of the practica differ across

universities, but 60 to 70 day practica (12-15 weeks) are commonly found. Several of the Universities in Quebec have a practicum exceeding 120 days (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008). Teacher candidates are evaluated in both their course work and practica. Once again, there is no consistent model found across the country. The evaluation of course work is highly variable, with some universities using a "Pass/Fail" system and others using letter grades or percentages. The evaluation of the teaching practica is more consistent. Teaching performance is typically evaluated on a "Pass/Fail" basis, using a criterion referenced framework (e.g., Queen's University, 2008; University of British Columbia, 2008; University of Lethbridge, 2008).

Observations of student teaching by associate teachers and/or faculty liaisons are used to make judgements about teaching performance. In addition, the candidate is often expected to complete a self-evaluation. These evaluations of novice teachers are ongoing and largely formative, intended to help the novice make improvements in their pedagogy. As a set, however, they do have important consequences. The final decision for completion of the program are based on the candidates ability to "Pass" the practicum. In addition, the detailed practicum reports are often used by teacher candidates to support their applications for teaching positions. Students having difficulties during their practicum receive feedback and are coached in ways intended to diminish the observed deficiencies and any impact it might be having on student learning. Failure only occurs if the candidate is unable or unwilling to adequately address the concerns. Generally, failure rates are extremely low, usually less than 1%, although some students may be counselled out of the Bachelor of Education program if they continue to struggle during their program. These low failure rates are consistent with those reported in the literature (e.g., Crocker & Dibbon, 2008; Raths & Lyman, 2003).

The admission and evaluation procedures adopted by a university are in place to identify and begin to prepare those candidates who are considered suitable for the teaching profession (Queen's University, 2008; University of British Columbia, 2008; University of Lethbridge, 2008). Ontario did introduce a further evaluation method for beginning teachers, a standardized teacher qualification test for teacher candidates. However, after an initial pilot in 2002, and one year of implementation, the test was cancelled.

Upon completion of their education program, students are eligible for teacher certification in the province in which they completed their degree. Teacher certification from a Canadian University is recognized in every province; however, some provinces require specific undergraduate courses (e.g., English) before certification is granted. Teacher hiring is completed at the school board level.

Once hired, novice teachers are usually required to participate in some form of teacher evaluation during their early years of teaching. Typically, this involves scheduled observations from the school principal (e.g., Alberta Learning, 2003a). Teachers who

are well established in their careers are largely free of any form of formal evaluation. Two notable exceptions exist in Alberta and in Ontario. Teachers in both of these provinces undergo regular evaluations throughout their careers (Alberta Learning, 2003a; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). The two models incorporate a professional learning component. Alberta combines a traditional teacher observation approach with a requirement for teachers to develop annual learning plans. The *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy* in Alberta "aims to ensure that each teacher's actions, judgments and decisions are in the best educational interests of students and support optimum learning" (Alberta Learning, 2003a). The policy directly places the responsibility for teacher improvement and ongoing professional growth on school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers. The act defines teacher evaluation as the "formal process of gathering and recording information or evidence over a period of time and the application of reasoned professional judgment by a principal in determining whether one or more aspects of the teaching of a teacher exceeds, meets or does not meet the teaching quality standard" (Alberta Learning, 2003a). Teacher evaluations in Ontario (see detailed description below) are distinguished based on the experience of the teachers. The Ontario models also use a developmental framework, combining observational methods with learning plans to promote teacher development and ongoing professional growth throughout one's career.

Teacher Evaluation in Ontario: A Case Example

The Teacher Performance Appraisal System (TPAS) in Ontario is based on the belief that quality teaching is essential to improving student outcomes and reducing gaps in student achievement. The TPAS provides teachers with appraisals that encourage professional learning and growth. The primary purpose of the TPAS is to foster professional development and identify opportunities for additional support as needed. The model is designed to help teachers "achieve their full potential," thus supporting Ontario's goal of achieving high levels of student performance (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). The appraisal system consists of two components, the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b) and the Teacher Performance Appraisal for Experienced Teachers (TPAET; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008c).

NTIP supports the growth and professional development of new teachers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b). All new teachers hired by a school board must complete the NTIP process. School boards must provide new teachers with a year of professional support, including professional orientation, mentoring, and professional development in Literacy and Numeracy, Student Success, classroom management, communication skills, and instructional strategies. New teachers who successfully complete the NTIP, based on two satisfactory ratings on observed teacher performance, receive a Certificate of

Qualification from the Ontario College of Teachers. This form of practical support and mentorship has been promoted as being able to benefit both beginning and established teachers, and improving the overall teaching quality in the system (e.g., Centre for Teaching Quality, 2006; Crocker & Dibbon, 2008).

The TPAET continues to foster teacher development, providing evaluations that encourage professional learning and growth for more experienced teachers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008c). School boards are expected to manage the TPAET. The appraisal is based on the set of competency statements published by the Ontario College of Teachers (2008). The evaluations occur every five years and combine multiple components including appraisal meetings to promote professional dialogue between the principal and teacher prior to and after classroom observations, and a summative report based on the performance appraisal. The summative report describes strengths as well as areas for growth and is used by the teacher to develop her/his Annual Learning Plan (ALP). The ALP identifies strategies and a plan for professional development for the teacher's evaluation year. The plan is also updated annually in the years between performance appraisals. The principal is required to evaluate the teacher as either being satisfactory or satisfactory. Teachers with an unsatisfactory report are given opportunities and processes to obtain additional support to address the concerns and deficiencies.

Evolving Conceptions of Teacher Evaluation

The primary function of teacher evaluation must always be to help ensure students are receiving effective educational experiences (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 2009). However, it is rare to find an accompanying definition of "effective." Attempts to establish such definitions are vehemently contested by teachers' unions and associations. In many cases this is for good reason. As we described above, the opportunity to demonstrate effectiveness may be significantly shaped by the context within which both the evaluation and the teaching are occurring. It is one thing to structure evaluations on teacher competencies—it is quite another to identify professional competence in action. These issues are further compounded by questions of who is responsible for conducting evaluations and what are the consequences of poor evaluations.

Few would disagree that ineffective teachers should be allowed to teach students. Nevertheless, there are currently no definitive, standardized models for teacher evaluation for making consistent and valid interpretations of teaching performance. *The Personnel Evaluation Standards* (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 2008) do provide 27 standards for evaluating educators within the four essential attributes of propriety, utility, feasibility, and accuracy. Nonetheless, the purpose of these standards

is not to identify methods for teacher evaluation. Rather, they to help provide an evaluative framework organizations develop and assess their own personal evaluation procedures.

The *Personnel Evaluation Standards* (The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 2009) provide a judicious guide for formally documenting and judging the quality of teaching performance. They emphasize how essential it is for organizations to have a clear purpose for doing and evaluation of personnel and to gather evidence that the procedures they wish to employ can actually serve this purpose. These standards, approved by the American National standards Association, act as valid criteria for structuring both the process and outcomes of the evaluation. Another strength of this resource is that it can also serve as a guide for more informal, collegial, and supportive methods of professional growth and evaluation.

This second use of the standards is becoming increasingly important. Partner-based/collaborative evaluations focused on individualized professional learning are being promoted as being better able to render more valid interpretations of teacher performance compared with the traditionally used standardized, accountability evaluation models. While acknowledging that teacher evaluations serve the public's interest for accountability and quality assurance in education, Duke (1995) recognised that teacher evaluations should also serve the ongoing professional development needs of teachers. The Canadian education system provides an opportunity to examine models of teacher evaluations that blend accountability demands and teachers' ongoing professional development and growth. Professional learning is considered especially important and it is fostered not only during initial teacher training but also throughout a teacher's career. There is also recognition of the differing professional needs of both beginning and experienced teachers, and of differing professional needs due to the context in which a teacher is working. The increasingly self-directed and collaborative nature of these evaluation models further illustrates the importance of ongoing attempts to use teacher evaluation to foster individualized professional learning.

It is no longer acceptable to judge teaching ability according to a set of standardized criteria. Nor is it acceptable for evaluation to only serve the needs of accountability and quality assurance. Contemporary notions of schooling and teaching cannot co-exist with early twentieth-century models of teacher evaluation (Shulman, 1988). Teacher evaluations that serve both formative and summative purpose must be incorporated into evaluation methods, and the responsibility for evaluation must be shared by teachers and evaluators (i.e., administrators or experienced teachers). However, moving towards a more collegial and supportive model of teacher evaluation requires trust. The public must have trust in the education system, and teachers must have trust that evaluations will be used primarily to help them further their own skills as educators meeting the needs of children.

Teachers differ in their teaching skills, professional knowledge, and experience. It is lilely that many of my daughter's teachers have benefited from evaluations that were conducted collaboratively and with a focus on developing a deeper understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning. As my daughter now completes her applications for university admission, I can visualize the many teachers who have had a hand in helping her become a successful learner. Throughout the seven different schools in three diverse provinces across Canada, her teachers have been competent and professional. I continue to trust our public education system in Canada as do the majority of Canadian parents. It appears that attention to the learning needs of teachers is one way to assure that the learning needs of students will be addressed.

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