

EXPLORING THE THEORETICAL BASE FOR TEACHER PERFORMANCE PAY: A
MICROPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

By

Susan Ansell Hayes

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The Micropolitical Perspective

The study of the politics of education draws from a variety of fields and research traditions to explain and predict individual and organizational behavior in educational contexts. The field is not dominated by one particular theoretical model but rather borrows from other disciplines to analyze behavior patterns (Lichbach, 1997; Scribner, Aleman & Maxcy, 2003). In a recent article, Scribner et al propose that the field of the politics of education rests on an amalgamated theoretical foundation of three specific research traditions: rationalism, culturalism and structuralism (2003). Lichbach argues that the study of the politics of education has not only emanated from these research traditions but is best understood as the “product of an ongoing competition” between them (1997). This competition is derived, he believes, from ‘gaps’ and ‘blind spots’ embedded within each of the traditions which, when identified, are remedied via the application of a competing tradition. In this way, the study of the politics of education is not only typified by a fusion of research traditions but strengthened by it.

One stream of thought within the field of the politics of education characterized by Scribner et al as emerging from this ‘push and pull’ process between the three research traditions is micropolitics or the study of “the interaction and political ideologies of social systems of teachers, administrators and pupils within school buildings” (Innacone, 1975). At the heart of the micropolitical perspective is the concept of power, specifically how individual actors in school settings “acquire and exercise power to promote and protect their interests” (Malen, 1994). The theory of micropolitics evokes aspects of rational, cultural and structural perspectives in its interpretation of the ways in which actors in education settings leverage and exercise power. While leaning heavily on a rationalist perspective, the study of micropolitics moves beyond a pure rationalist paradigm in that it considers human agency within the cultural and structural contexts in which individuals pursue their self-interests.

The theory of teacher motivation, underlying performance-pay initiatives, describes various rational, cultural and structural elements of schooling that can constrain or enhance teachers’ individual power to act in their own self-interest within pay-for-performance programs. It can be argued, therefore, that teacher motivation theory emanates from a micropolitical perspective. As a result, it serves as a useful vehicle for examining how a micropolitical perspective differs from traditional rational, cultural and structural interpretations of individual behavior while, at the same time, how it borrows from these three

research traditions. In addition, exploring teacher motivation theory from a variety of theoretical perspectives illustrates the weaknesses of predicting human and organizational behavior in complicated educational settings through the application of a single theoretical lens. Thus, exploring the theory base for this educational reform shines light on the value of the micropolitical perspective while explaining how rational, cultural and structural elements of schooling interact to shape teacher behavior in pay-for-performance programs.

A Brief History of Teacher Performance Pay

Across the United States, districts and even entire states are experimenting with the concept of linking educator pay with student outcomes in an attempt to bolster teacher, and thus student, performance. Although the model seems straightforward—offer teachers monetary incentives for improving student achievement—the grounded theory underlying the reform draws from a complex mix of the research traditions of rationalism, culturalism and structuralism to explain and predict teacher response to the incentives. A reliance on one of these perspectives, rather than an integration of all three, returns different predictions of the efficacy of performance pay initiatives.

Before delving into the outcomes of the intervention predicted by various political theories, it is important to review the history of the reform and describe its most recent iteration. The current era of academic standards and accountability, ushered in by the No Child Left Behind act of 2001, has focused school leaders' and policymakers' energy on explicitly aligning various aspects of the public education system—i.e. teacher professional development, school finance or school organization—with the goal of improving student achievement. One of the most contentious examples of such an alignment effort is related to teacher compensation. Reform efforts in the past have rewarded effective teachers but evaluating educators via student-based outcomes represents a recent shift in teacher compensation reform (Business Roundtable and National Alliance of Business, 2000; Hassel, 2002; Odden & Kelley, 1996; Stedman & McCallion, 2001).

Examples of the shift abound. The Denver public school district, considered a pioneer of pay-for-performance reform, compensates educators according to their knowledge and skills, results from a professional evaluation, willingness to work in hard-to-staff schools and measures of student growth

(ProComp). Other districts such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina and Dallas, Texas have implemented similar programs. Activity is also occurring at the state level. According to Education Week's annual Quality Counts report, five states—Arizona, Florida, Iowa, New Mexico and North Carolina—have developed or have encouraged districts to develop programs that compensate teachers for improvements in student achievement (Education Week, 2005).

While pay-for-performance strategies are attracting recent attention, the fact is that most schools and districts abide by the traditional teacher compensation system, the single-salary schedule. Adopted initially in several districts in the 1920s as a response to discriminatory differentiated pay scales, the single-salary system spread to a majority of public schools by the end of World War II. According to data from the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey, more than 96 percent of public school districts currently employ the system (Committee for Economic Development, 2004; Odden & Kelley, 1996; Podgursky, 2003).

The single-salary schedule compensates teachers based on two criteria: years of experience and number of credits or degrees earned. Teachers are often able to earn supplemental income by accepting additional responsibilities such as coaching positions or instructional leadership roles but typically are not rewarded for skills or accomplishments outside these constraints (Committee for Economic Development, 2004; Hassel, 2002; Odden & Kelley, 1996). While the single-salary schedule dominates the teacher compensation system, it has garnered criticism from researchers who point out that the traits or activities it rewards are not directly related to student academic achievement (Committee for Economic Development, 2004; Odden & Kelley, 1996; Podgursky, 2003). In fact, neither teacher experience nor degrees earned have proven to be good predictors of student success and teacher differences based upon the salary schedule do not account for most of the variation in student achievement (Greenwald, Hedges & Lane, 1996; Hanushek, 1997; Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1998; Hassel, 2002; Odden & Kelley, 1996; Wenglinsky, 2000).

Yet despite any concrete linkage between the teacher characteristics rewarded by the single-salary schedule and student performance, the schedule persists. This can be attributed to several factors. One, unions traditionally have been quite vocal in their opposition to the adoption of any alternative compensation models (Business Roundtable and National Alliance of Business, 2000; Malanga, 2001;

Peterson, 2000). In addition, teachers have expressed concerns about the fairness of rewards and unintended consequences of compensation systems based upon teacher or student performance (Hassel, 2002). Some of these concerns are spurred by residual resentment over failed merit pay initiatives of the 1980s.

Merit pay systems, or career ladders, offered 'effective' educators financial awards, both to acknowledge their ability and encourage other teachers to improve their teaching. However, the basis for such rewards—the standards for effective teaching—often were not clearly defined or based upon subjective principal observations and evaluations. Furthermore, teachers were awarded money from a pool of fixed funds, breeding competition within schools and discouraging teacher cooperation and collaboration (Hatry, Greiner & Ashford, 1994; Murnane & Cohen, 1986; Odden & Kelley, 1996; Podgursky, 2003; Southern Regional Education Board, 2000). Lastly, limited research existed to support that merit-pay reward systems achieved intended results (Dee & Keys, 2003).

Perhaps as a result of these problems, merit pay never emerged as an effective tool for identifying or encouraging good teaching. Recent studies confirm this. An analysis of the Tennessee STAR data—valuable due to its random assignment of students to teachers—revealed that the state's career ladder system was only moderately successful at targeting rewards to the teachers whose students made the most significant performance gains (Dee & Keys, 2003). Thus, as educator and union dissatisfaction mounted and research pointing to the benefits of merit pay failed to materialize, the concept largely fell by the wayside (Ballou, 2001; Dee & Keys, 2003; Hatry, Greiner & Ashford, 1994; Murnane & Cohen, 1986; Peterson, 2000; Podgursky, 2003).

While the push for merit-pay systems or career ladders subsided in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the No Child Left Behind act's emphasis on student achievement has again raised questions about the adequacy of a single-salary schedule. Numerous education stakeholders have voiced concerns over the system's inability to reward 'good' teachers and stimulate gains in student performance and have called instead for compensation linked more directly to teacher qualities associated with improvements in student achievement or actual demonstrated gains (Committee for Economic Development, 2004; Hassel, 2002; Malanga, 2001; Odden & Kelley, 1996; Odden, Kelley, Heneman & Milanowski, 2002; Southern Regional

Education Board, 2000). The question remains, however, whether such reforms will positively impact student performance.

Several types of performance pay have emerged in the wake of merit-pay and career-ladder reforms. Although a myriad of teacher compensation reforms are referred to as performance pay, it is most commonly understood as a program or policy that rewards teachers for classroom-based behaviors or outcomes, not willingness to work in certain schools or in particular subject-areas. Within this narrower definition of performance pay, there are two distinct types of programs: knowledge and skill-based and merit-based (not to be confused with earlier incarnations of merit pay, discussed earlier). These types of programs can target individual teachers, groups of teachers or a hybrid of both. The theory of teacher motivation explored in this piece is based upon performance-pay programs that reward teachers for gains in student achievement. However, it is useful to explain both types of performance pay in order to clearly delineate differences between the two.

Knowledge and skill-based pay rewards individual teachers for demonstrated skills and knowledge, often in increasing amounts aligned with the level of skills and knowledge attained (Harvey-Beavis, 2003). The concept, which originated in the private sector, is designed to improve teaching by encouraging educators to obtain skills or information specifically associated with improving instruction and enhancing student achievement (Malanga, 2001; Odden et al, 2001; Odden & Kelley, 1996). For example, strategically offered rewards can broaden and deepen teachers' content knowledge of core teaching areas or help them attain classroom management or curriculum development skills (Odden & Kelley, 1996). Knowledge and skill-based pay programs also focus teachers on organizational needs and goals (Hassel, 2002). Therefore, unlike the merit pay systems of the past, knowledge and skill-based pay programs do not pit teachers against one another but outline the types of skills an educational entity hopes its entire faculty will acquire. Merit pay and knowledge and skill-based pay also differ in terms of their evaluation component; in knowledge and skill-based programs, evaluations are typically based on clear, definable goals rather than subjective school leader observations or evaluations (Odden & Kelley, 1996).

Merit-based pay rewards individual teachers or groups of teachers on the basis of factors that can include student performance (Harvey-Beavis, 2003). Performance-pay systems that reward teachers for their students' academic achievement focus directly on teacher outcomes rather than inputs such as certain

skills or knowledge. Merit-based performance-pay systems can either be structured around individual awards or offer group-based, often school-based, incentives. A report released by the Progressive Policy Institute in 2002 classified school-based performance awards as the most common type of merit-based pay-for-performance currently operational in the public education school system (Hassel, 2002). Although the school might be the level at which rewards are most commonly distributed, the report also points out that rewards can target specific grade levels (grade-level teacher teams), departmental units or a combination of units. For example, a teacher might be compensated both for his or her individual performance as well as his or her team contribution.

Teacher Performance Pay: A View Through Three Lenses

Performance incentives are designed to motivate teachers to improve their performance in the classroom and thus boost student achievement. The incentive structure seems relatively straightforward—offer teachers monetary rewards for improving student performance and teachers will strive to achieve that goal in order to maximize their own benefits. Yet do the incentives work as intended? How and why do teachers respond to such initiatives? Analyzing the reform through three theoretical lenses returns three different predictions of teacher behavior because each lens frames the power of individuals differently. In addition, each lens possesses certain strengths and weaknesses that either contribute or detract from its predictive power. As a result, none of the three lenses, applied in isolation to the study of teacher response to performance-pay initiatives, offers a clear and decisive picture of whether, how or why teachers will respond to the incentives. Rather, fully understanding the influence of performance pay on teacher behavior and practice requires a blending of the three theories.

Before deconstructing the specific blend of theories used in this teacher motivation model, it is useful to understand how each of the research traditions, applied in isolation, would predict teacher response to performance incentives. In addition, it is important to understand the weaknesses of a single lens prediction. Identifying weaknesses in the application of a single theory helps lay the groundwork for the utility of an integrated theoretical approach and offers support for a micropolitical analysis of teacher behavior within pay-for-performance programs.

The rationalist perspective

Rational choice theory, rooted in the field of economics, characterizes individual behavior as the strategic pursuit of self-interests. Individuals seek to maximize their interests by striking an advantageous balance between rewards wrought by pursuing certain goals and the costs associated with that pursuit. For example, purchasing a new car might give the buyer satisfaction or even increased social status but requires a certain amount of financial sacrifice. According to the theory of rational choice, individuals weigh the costs of pursuing certain goals against the rewards associated with their attainment. Thus, rational choice theory posits, the value of rewards versus that of costs proves to be a useful way of understanding individual behavior and decision making (Scott, 2000).

Applying a strictly rationalist lens to teacher response to performance-pay incentives would characterize the success or failure of an intervention in terms of the effort expended by individual participants. Said another way, whether or not performance-pay incentives resulted in improvements in student achievement would be interpreted as a function of teachers' effort. Assuming that individuals will act in their own self-interest and that attempting to reach program goals would not require an inordinate amount of supplemental effort, rationalism would suggest that teachers will respond to the incentives offered and strive to help students meet specified performance goals. Whether or not teachers are motivated more by the financial benefits associated with achieving program goals or helping students excel is relatively unimportant. Performance-pay programs align extrinsic rewards with what are expected to be teachers' intrinsic goals and thus reinforce teacher buy-in.

The strength of analyzing teacher response through a rationalist lens lies in the agency and power it affords individual actors. Ball posits that the level of control teachers exert over their workplace differentiates schools from typical organizations or bureaucracies and thus weakens the applicability of systems theory (or other models that concentrate influence at higher administrative levels) to the education sector (1987). Consequently, rationalism serves as a useful lens for examining individual teacher response to school-based interventions in that it centers control at the individual level and acknowledges the power that teachers wield over their own practice.

However, rational choice theory's focus on the individual ignores the power that school settings and culture often leverage in influencing teacher behavior. While theorists argue that a teacher exerts more

control over aspects of his or her work environment and processes than a member of a large, bureaucratic organization might, that power could be mitigated by contextual forces at play within the school setting. Assuming teachers respond willingly to the performance incentive, their desire to achieve the goals associated with the incentive could be insufficient to overcome obstacles present in the culture and structure of their school. For example, it is likely that reforms designed to improve student achievement, such as teacher performance-pay, would be initiated in low-performing schools or districts. The culture and structure of such schools could present barriers to teachers striving to boost student performance. The culture of a school plagued by low performance might not serve to enhance teachers' sense of self-efficacy; in fact, it could diminish teachers' perceptions of their own effectiveness. In addition, low-performing schools might not be able to provide the types of resources needed to enact significant change in the school's performance trajectory. Results from the 2002 National Assessment of Education Progress Trial Urban District Assessment revealed large achievement gaps in reading between fourth and eighth graders eligible for free/reduced price lunch and those not eligible. In addition, an analysis of 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey data indicate that teachers in high-poverty schools are less likely than teachers in low-poverty schools to agree that materials such as textbooks, supplies and copy machines are available when needed (Education Week, 2003; Lutkus, Weiner, Daane, & Jin, 2003). Furthermore, research has indicated that such negative working conditions are significantly related to teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2001). This is all to say that teachers in low-performing schools, responding to performance-pay incentives, might lack the psychological or tangible tools necessary for boosting their students' achievement.

The types of barriers to teachers' response to performance-pay discussed above assume that teachers would respond willingly to the incentive offered. But research has indicated that elements of a school's culture can actually impact teachers' motivation to participate in performance-pay programs. A survey of performance-pay program participants in the state of Kentucky revealed that teachers who were more likely to withdraw from the program or their school (in order to withdraw from the program) were those who felt as though their school did not have a fair chance of achieving program goals or felt that the bonus program was unfair (Heneman & Milanowski, 1999). It is reasonable to assume that teachers who believed their school did not have a fair chance of meeting program goals worked in low-performing schools. Thus, the culture of a low-performing school might lead to reduced teacher support for

performance pay programs *as well as* present tangible or psychological barriers to those teachers who are motivated by the incentives.

As a result, purely evaluating the outcome of a performance-pay initiative through a rationalist lens ignores the strong contextual factors of schooling that impact a teacher's ability or motivation to act in his or her own self interest. Defining teachers as omnipotent agents of change undermines the important role that working conditions and work culture can play in the way teachers perceive and respond to the initiative. As a result, rational choice theory and the incomplete picture it paints of the forces at play in school settings serves as a weak predictive lens.

The culturalist perspective

The culturalist tradition considers identity and intersubjectivity to be paramount in studies of individual and organizational behavior (Scribner et al, 2003). Identity may be a function of race, gender or sexuality, all of which may be informed by cultural patterns, values, rules and norms. Hence, a culturalist analysis of teacher behavior in school settings draws upon teacher identity as well as school-level norms and values; culture is conceptualized as being both "inside and outside the individual" (Scribner et al, 2003).

Strengths of attempting to predict and explain teacher response to performance-pay initiatives through a culturalist lens include the recognition of the potentially confounding effects of teachers' view of themselves as actors in the intervention as well as of the environment in which they are acting. Instead of assuming that individual agency can surmount any complications posed by the environment in which teachers work (i.e. lack of resources, low workforce morale, lack of support from school leaders, inadequate opportunities for professional development and other training, etc.) a culturalist perspective suggests that those environmental influences can impede teachers' effort to pursue their self-interests and can actually affect how teachers perceive their own ability to pursue those interests. As Marshall explains:

Strongly entrenched values, norms for interactions, and inviolable coalitions may blunt or kill reform efforts, regardless of the offered incentives or alterations of bureaucratic structures (1991).

As a result, culturalism would indicate that the success or failure of an education intervention depends on participants' self-views as well as characteristics of their environment.

While advancing the rational choice model by acknowledging the situated nature of individual action, the culturalist perspective, applied in isolation to the study of performance pay, is limited in its ability to predict teacher response. Although strengthened by its recognition of the potential impact of cultural forces on educational interventions, the tradition fails to provide guidance or concrete methodological tools and frameworks for systematically investigating all such influential factors (Lichbach, 1997). In this way, examining reform through a culturalist lens does not return predictions about intervention success or failure but rather illuminates considerations crucial to an accurate prediction of outcomes.

The low predictive power of a culturalist lens is readily apparent when applied to performance-pay reform. For example, in a school characterized by years of low performance, teachers might suffer from low self-esteem and self-efficacy. As a result, they might not consider an incentive program based upon their own skills appealing. The survey, previously cited, of participating teachers in Kentucky's pay-for-performance plan illustrates this example. Or perhaps the opposite is true—a capable, motivated, engaged workforce lacks the resources needed to actualize the achievement goals rewarded by a performance-pay program. In both cases, teachers' identities and environments can impact on the way the reform is perceived, implemented and realized. Yet a culturalist perspective does not offer guidance about how to understand these influences in relation to one another or to the intervention outcomes. Perhaps a motivated workforce could overcome the lack of school capacity and resources to meet performance goals? Or they could strive to amass their own resources in order to meet goals, thus transforming their work environment? The culturalist perspective fails to account for the dynamic nature of culture, the relative power of aspects of a particular culture, or the ways in which they interact and inform one another. Therefore, culturalism explains everything and nothing at the same time (Scribner et al, 2003).

The structuralist perspective

Instead of supporting the notion that human behavior is driven by individual self-interest, structuralism posits that human action is characterized, in part, by the structure of the organization of which

the individual is a member (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Structuralism emerges from the notion that organizations exist to achieve certain defined goals and that they

work most effectively when environmental turbulence and personal preferences are constrained by norms of rationality (Ibid).

Organizational efficacy thus results from high degrees of coordination and control. Said another way, organizations are most efficient when individuals within them work toward organizational objectives in a coherent, structured way. The structuralist perspective explores the actions of individuals within the larger framework of the structures in which they work and interact. While not discounting the power and influence of individuals, structuralism reframes individual rationality in terms of the structural constraints (or enhancements) provided by the organization of which the individual is a member.

Applying a structuralist lens to performance-pay reform does not necessarily return optimistic or pessimistic outcomes. Rather, it highlights the importance of consistency between individual and institutional goals and suggests that performance-pay reform will not reap desired benefits unless the structure of schooling is aligned with the goals of the program and the preferences of teachers. It is not enough for the school to support the goals of the reform; rather, structuralists would contend that specific aspects of the school (such as curriculum, leadership or perhaps even use of space and time) *must* be aligned with the pursuit of program goals in order for the reform to succeed.

The strength of the structuralist perspective is its acknowledgement of the important role structures, and thus resources, play in determining the success or failure of a particular intervention. Just as the initial Brown v. Board decision did nothing to curb segregationist education practices and had to be reinforced by subsequent legislation, there is a chance that education reform implemented without sufficient structural support will also falter. Similar to a cultural perspective in the weight given organizational and environmental influences, a structuralist perspective of teacher performance-pay indicates that the goal of improved student achievement must be institutionalized at the organizational level in order for change to occur.

However, the structuralist interpretation of teacher behavior under pay-for-performance plans suffers from a major weakness—the lack of agency it affords individual actors. In the rationalist tradition, all power rests with the individual; in the culturalist tradition, this power is mitigated or augmented by the cultural environment in which the intervention is implemented. However, in the structuralist tradition,

individuals are agents of change largely to the extent that their institution directs them and empowers them to be.

None of these three theories entirely captures the confluence of individual agency and environmental influence evident in schools. In order to accurately forecast the potential effects of an education intervention, theories must account for the myriad of factors that will shape its implementation and realization. These influential factors can affect both actors within the intervention as well as the actors' culture and environment. Focusing on the power of individuals to the exclusion of cultural or structural constraints—or vice versa—undermines a theory's predictive power. However, exploring teacher performance pay via a micropolitical perspective allows for a blending of relevant aspects of these three traditions and therefore paints a more complete and comprehensive picture of the educational landscape in which performance-pay plans are situated.

Teacher Motivation Theory: An Integration of Three Research Traditions

Theoretical support for the use of monetary incentives to motivate teachers draws from rationalist, culturalist and structuralist traditions to explain and predict teacher behavior in pay-for-performance plans. While based primarily on the model of rational choice, i.e. teachers will act to advance their own self-interests, teacher motivation theory also integrates culturalist and structuralist perspectives in the importance it affords teachers' school context in determining intervention outcomes. Specifically, the theory of teacher motivation within performance pay programs, developed by researchers at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, suggests that teacher effort expended as a result of school-based incentives is a function of three main factors—teachers' perceptions of the desirability, expectancy and instrumentality of program outcomes (Kelley, Heneman & Milanowski, 2000).

Desirability of outcomes

Teachers' motivation within performance-pay programs, the theory states, is a direct function of the value—either positive or negative—they place in program outcomes (Kelley, Odden, Milanowski & Heneman, 2000). These values might reflect an intrinsic drive to see students achieve or an extrinsic desire to reap the financial rewards of meeting performance goals. While research suggests that teachers are

fueled more by intrinsic than extrinsic rewards, school-based performance programs, in setting goals related to student achievement, often appeal to both (Johnson, 1986; Kelley, 1999).

This component of teacher motivation theory relies heavily on a rationalist perspective, mainly that teachers will act in their own self-interest. As the theory indicates, teachers might be interested in monetary rewards associated with the program, helping their students achieve performance goals or both. The underlying motivation is less important than the notion that one (or a combination of both) will appeal to teachers and, thus, they will strive to maximize program benefits.

Expectancy

The expectancy concept suggests that teachers' motivation to pursue offered incentives is also a function of the degree to which they believe their extra effort will result in meeting program goals. Several factors are thought to help foster greater expectancy perceptions, factors that borrow from the research traditions of rationalism, culturalism and structuralism to explain teachers' power in the workplace. First, the theory suggests that clear and specific objectives focus teachers to a greater extent than goals that are unclear or unspecified (Kelley, et al, 2000; Kelley, Odden, Milanowski & Heneman, 2000). Thus, if program goals are specific and presented to teachers in a clear manner, teachers will be more likely to believe they can meet those goals and strive for success in the program. The importance placed on the clarity and specificity of performance goals suggests a structuralist perspective. Structuralism acknowledges the influence that structures, such as classroom layout, type of school schedule or even curriculum, can have on teachers' behavior. Lack of clarity in mission and purpose often results in members of an organization "shaping their roles to fit their personal needs rather than to further organizational goals" (Bolman & Deal, 1991). The theory of teacher motivation implies that intangible structures within a school, in this case, the degree to which performance goals are clear and specific, will impact the ways in which teachers respond to performance incentives. Thus, even if teachers are highly motivated to participate in a performance-pay program, structural constraints such as ambiguous or unspecified program goals might hinder their ability to reach program goals.

In addition to clarity and specificity of program goals, the theory posits that enabling conditions within a school including curricular resources, professional development opportunities and principal

support may strengthen teachers' expectancy perceptions (Kelley, Heneman & Milanowski, 2000; Kelley, Odden, Milanowski & Heneman, 2000). Attention paid to these types of support evokes a culturalist perspective. While the formation and presentation of program goals are structural components of a performance-pay initiative, support from school leaders and opportunities for teachers to improve their own practice are aspects of the culture of an institution. A school environment characterized by support for its teachers will foster different values in its staff than a school lacking such support systems. According to the theory of teacher motivation, such school-level cultural norms and values will impact how teachers respond to performance-pay incentives in that they influence teachers' capacity to meet program goals.

Institutional norms and values, according to a culturalist paradigm, can also influence teachers' perceptions of themselves and their professional identity. As Scribner et al point out, culture is both inside and outside the individual (2003). Thus, the third factor that enhances or reduces teachers' expectancy of goal attainment—the faith teachers have in their own skills and knowledge, relevant to the goal of boosting student achievement—also emanates from a culturalist perspective (Kelley, Heneman & Milanowski, 2000; Kelley, Odden, Milanowski & Heneman, 2000).

To summarize, the degree to which teachers expect to reach program goals stems from the clarity and specificity of those program goals as well as how well the culture of their school supports their practice and view of their own abilities. In this way, expectancy theory, one of three components of teacher motivation theory, employs structuralist and culturalist perspectives to predict teacher behavior to performance-pay interventions.

Instrumentality

Finally, teachers participating in school-based performance incentive programs are influenced, researchers believe, by the instrumentality of the incentive program. Specifically, teachers are more likely to be motivated by incentives if they trust that meeting specified goals will lead to promised outcomes (i.e. receiving a bonus). In other words, teachers' "buy-in" to the program depends on their faith in the system operating the program as intended. Researchers believe that teachers' faith in the system can be strengthened by "institutionalizing a consistent source of funding and a commitment to paying the bonus when it is earned" (Kelley, Odden, Milanowski & Heneman, 2000).

Both of these concrete examples—securing and committing funding to the program—represent a structuralist view of the intervention. Similar to the importance awarded clarity and specificity of goals, the need for secure and consistent funding can be categorized as a structural need of the program. The structuralist tradition holds that the agency of individual actors is informed by the structure of the environments in which they reside. Consequently, the theory suggests, teachers will strive to reach program goals if the structure in which they work is conducive to such action. The notion of instrumentality implies that teachers' faith in available funding for performance-pay initiatives will encourage them to participate in the program and strive to meet its goals.

Conclusion

According to teacher motivation theory, teacher response to performance-pay is interpreted largely from a rationalist perspective—teachers will respond to the incentive structure if they value the goals it rewards—but is hypothesized to be constrained or enhanced by certain cultural and structural factors, including professional development support and teachers' own sense of self-efficacy. Said another way, the power teachers exert to pursue their own self-interests, whether intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, is conditioned by the cultural and structural characteristics of the school environment. Consequently, the theory of teacher motivation, developed by researchers at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, represents a micropolitical analysis of teacher behavior in performance-pay programs. The theory explores the power of teachers to navigate a performance-pay intervention within the confines of a school context marked by certain cultural and structural constraints. Analyses of teacher response to performance-pay programs that fail to acknowledge cultural and structural elements of the educational environment in which reforms are implemented or that rely too heavily on the interpretation of one research tradition will provide an incomplete picture of the reality of school settings and thus suffer from low predictive power. Similarly, program designers and implementers must recognize the complicated nature of such reforms and devote attention to the issues raised by the perspective of the three research traditions. Avoiding a strict interpretation of human and organizational behavior and embracing the strengths inherent in a variety of perspectives improves the predictive power of political education theories and better informs those charged with program design and implementation.

A multi-dimensional evaluative lens suggests yet another shift in the assessment of performance-pay programs. Analyses of merit pay initiatives of the 1980s seem to focus on the impact of the reforms on teacher morale and cooperation/collaboration. For example, analysts often attributed the failure of past merit-pay initiatives to competition they bred between teachers and the degradation of school environments marked by staff cooperation and cohesion (Hatry, Greiner & Ashford, 1994; Murnane & Cohen, 1986; Odden & Kelley, 1996; Podgursky, 2003; Southern Regional Education Board, 2000). Framing the dissolution of the merit pay programs in terms of the negative impact to teachers and the work culture of schools suggests a strong culturalist approach to program evaluation.

In contrast, one could argue that the current iteration of teacher performance pay reforms are being evaluated almost exclusively through a rationalist lens (i.e. do the incentives motivate teachers to improve student achievement?) This shift in the evaluative nature of performance pay represents a shift in the type of lens applied to program outcomes—arguably, from culturalist to rationalist. As teacher motivation theory illustrates, recognizing teachers as rational players at the center of this reform movement is not problematic in and of itself. The incentives target teachers with the expectation that they have the most potential to improve student achievement. However, attempting to understand the success or failure of performance-pay initiatives solely in terms of teacher effort or teacher response to incentives ignores other important factors that can either constrain or enhance the impact of the reform. As outlined by the theory of teacher motivation, teachers draw strength, power and resolve not only from within—their own desire to achieve program goals and reap the psychological and monetary rewards—but from the culture and available resources of the school. It is precisely these factors that can also detract from the impact of a performance-pay program. Choosing to frame the success or failure of performance pay initiatives in relation to teachers, independent of the culture or the structure of the contexts in which the reform was implemented, will lead to incomplete conclusions. Analyzing the effects of such a multi-dimensional reform without employing a multi-dimensional research lens omits factors, and thus explanatory variables, that are crucial to a full understanding of program impact. The three-pronged approach embedded within teacher motivation theory suggests that issues of culture and structure are not only important to think about when developing and implementing performance-pay programs but are possibly related to observed outcomes.

Moving beyond a strictly culturally or rationally driven approach to understanding the effects of teacher performance pay and embracing a more multi-dimensional strategy will help move performance-pay research beyond answering the question of whether or to what degree it improves student achievement to questioning how the benefits of such initiatives can be maximized in the particular cultural and structural context in which they are situated.

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