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Teacher Perceptions of Advancement Program on Expected Teacher Tenure in High-Poverty Schools

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research was to determine if teachers perceptions of the four essential elements of the Teacher Advancement System had any influence on teacher expected tenure in education. The four elements are: (a) ongoing applied professional growth, (b) performance-based compensation, (c) instructionally focused accountability, and (d) multiple career pathways. The sample included a maximum of 100 teachers from two elementary schools in a North Central Texas independent school district. In June of 2014, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) collected the data. Participant's anonymously responded to 54 survey questions and multiple sub questions via an electronic survey instrument. The teachers in this study chose one of three choices: (a) Will Stay Longer, (b) Will Stay the Same, and (c) Will Leave Earlier. Consistently, of the 96 teachers who responded to this survey question, 69 teachers (71.9%) indicated that they would stay the same. Although the data did not statistically support an increase in teachers' expected tenures, they did support several key elements that affect the performance of the teachers in the Will Stay the Same tenure group. The data support teachers who experienced success in increasing student achievement through ongoing applied professional growth and instructionally focused accountability elements of the TAP system.

Keywords: TAP, NIET, essential elements, performance-based compensation

1. Introduction

High-poverty schools have higher teacher attrition rates compared to schools in middle to upper class communities (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Additionally, the dropout rate of minority students is 75% higher than that of their majority counterparts (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011). With these alarming statistics, the career expectancy of teachers is shrinking at the fastest rate in history (Keigher & Cross, 2010). Interestingly, the System of Student and Teacher Advancement (TAP) system has experienced some success in increasing teacher retention in various schools (Milken, 2000). Milken (2000) stated that the positive effect on teacher retention stems from the efforts of TAP, which has resulted in increased student achievement. The TAP system includes four essential elements that create one comprehensive system, including (a) ongoing applied professional growth, (b) performance-based compensation, (c) instructionally focused accountability, and (d) multiple career pathways. Individually, the four elements of the TAP system have been explained as reasons why teachers have chosen to stay in the teaching field and return to their schools the following year (Milken, 2000).

The TAP system is a reform model used to help schools with similar problems as those found in Alpha Independent School District (AISD), specifically, low student performance, high teacher attrition, and frequently changing superintendents. School districts implementing TAP with similar demographics to AISD have reported impressive gains amongst their student populations. On average, these schools have made doubled-digit gains in math and reading performance (Milken, 2000). Schacter et al. (2002) stated that districts may consider implementing the TAP system when (a) quality individuals are not entering the teaching profession and when quality people choose to teach (typically within 3 years); (b) principals are filling open teacher vacancies with under-qualified teachers; and (c) although quality teachers is the most important factor in the classroom, other reform models to attract, retain, and motivate these teachers are not a top priority.

Moreover, TAP has been successful in reducing teacher turnover rates, as evidenced in South Carolina schools where turnover rates above 30% per year were reduced to less than 10% per year after implementing the program (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Furthermore, career opportunities and performance bonuses provided by TAP attract outstanding teachers from high-income schools to high-need schools, which reverse the usual flow of effective teachers from lower to higher achieving schools (Milken, 2000). In the midst of

poor academic performance and staff change, in 2007, school administrators at AISD felt that TAP could provide the systemic change required to improve student achievement and teacher retention. In 2008, AISD fully implemented the TAP system on all campuses.

2. Statement of Problem

Because of increased accountability standards assessed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), a demand for school systems to become increasingly innovative and creative and to increase student academic performance remains active. Because of this demand, teacher retention rates have reached their lowest percentage in history (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009). However, Boyd et al. (2009) reported that since the inception of NCLB, American students have become more successful in their academic journeys as seen in increasing high school graduation rates. In spite of increasing student academic performance and graduation rates, many teachers choose alternative career opportunities.

High-poverty schools experience high teacher turnover rates (Muhammad, 2009). This issue is a key factor that has caused poor academic performance and increased disciplinary problems, which leads to students not being adequately prepared for the career force (Muhammad 2009). Schacter et al. (2002) stated that high-poverty schools are plagued with under-qualified first-year teachers. The TAP system is the Milken Foundation's answer to the teacher quality crisis in America (Milken, 2000).

Equally, Boyd et al. (2009) reported that almost 25% of all public school teachers leave within the first 3 years of their teaching careers. Muhammad (2009) stated that this rate was elevated in schools with high minority student populations and low academic performance; however, teachers are more likely to return to their assigned schools when student achievement increases. Boyd et al. also found that teacher retention and mobility are related to both teacher and student characteristics (2009). White teachers tend to stay in schools where the majority of the student population is White, while minority teachers are the majority at public schools serving high-poverty, high-minority students in urban communities. Minority teachers are likely to be more successful teaching minority students and more motivated to make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged students. Further, African American teachers tend to stay in schools where minorities constitute the majority because they feel a sense of social, moral, and cultural obligation (Ingersoll & May, 2011).

3. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to analyze teachers' perceptions of the four essential elements of the TAP system and the influence of these elements on their expected tenures. The researcher used ex post facto survey data from two district elementary schools collected by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) in June of 2014 as part of an evaluation of the TAP program for the Milken Foundation. While these survey data were part of a specific program evaluation, the results of this study address more than just these two schools. The findings provide additional information about expected teacher tenure in relationship to their perceptions of the elements of the TAP system.

4. Research Questions

According to Blaikie (2000), "The use of research questions is a neglected aspect in the design and conduct of social research" (p. 58). Both Blaikie (2000) and Creswell (2007) agreed that when research questions are created, the researcher is able to solidify research strategies and methods with certainty. They also agreed that developing research questions is the most critical and difficult portion of any research design. Blaikie noted, "A research project is built on its research questions" (p. 58). Accordingly, the research questions for this study were as follows:

- i. Do teachers' perceptions of instructionally focused accountability differ by expected tenure as it relates to the implementation of TAP?
- ii. Do teachers' perceptions of performance-based compensation differ by expected tenure as it relates to the implementation of TAP?
- iii. Do teachers' perceptions of multiple career pathways differ by expected tenure as it relates to the implementation of TAP?
- iv. Do teachers' perceptions of ongoing professional growth differ by expected tenure as it relates to the implementation of TAP?

5. Significance of Study

In high poverty schools, teacher retention is critical to student academic success (Ingersoll & May, 2011). The most recognized standard of student success is the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). The SASS is a system of questionnaires that address the demand of teachers, the common characteristics of principals and teachers, the usual school environment, teachers' and principals' opinions of school problems and climate, the rate of teacher compensation, the effectiveness of teacher recruitment, hiring and retention, and essential demographics of the student population (Schacter et al., 2002). The Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) is a supplement to the SASS used for teachers with less than 4 years of experience. The NCES is the principal and most inclusive data source available and it provides explicit data for elementary education personnel, secondary education personnel, policymakers, and the public. This information communicates the condition of education in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau collects SASS data for the NCES.

Of the 4,750 teachers surveyed in the TFS during the 2008–2009 school year, 1,260 had left the teaching profession (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2010). These teachers were referred to as 'leavers' (DOE, 2010, p. 1). In other words, 27% of the teachers felt it necessary to find employment in a different field. Moreover, 890 of the 4,750 surveyed teachers transferred to another school for various reasons. These teachers were referred to as "movers" (DOE, 2010, p. 1). Furthermore, 65% of teachers who transferred

reported a lack of planning time as a major concern and source of dissatisfaction. Additional data included teacher documentation in which 60% claimed their workload was excessive, 53% reported classroom management was a major concern, and 52% mentioned a lack of influence and buy-in over school policy (DOE, 2010).

Lower-performing majority-minority schools have reported teacher attrition rates of 50% higher than schools considered wealthy or within property-rich districts (Alliance for Excellence Education [AEE], 2005). Ingersoll and May (2011) suggested that teacher retention may affect student learning in several ways. Inexperienced teachers are more likely to be employed in schools with a high percentage of teacher attrition. This means that students may be more likely to have an inexperienced teacher who, on average, is less effective than one who is more experienced. Second, schools with high teacher attrition suffer from unpredictability in continuity. In a TAP school, or any other school attempting to implement reform, this instability could hinder or even halt such efforts. New teachers require training and old mistakes are likely to be repeated because of a lack of consistency among staff. More importantly, high teacher attrition can reduce student achievement, especially if more effective teachers leave the profession.

Highly qualified teachers are more likely to leave the profession sooner than are marginal or less effective teachers (Schacter & Thum, 2005). According to Elmore and Burney (1997), school districts can have a character for permanent attentiveness to school improvement by using a systemic approach that provides meaningful and relevant professional development. The finding of this study may add to the body of research related to TAP and the four elements contained therein.

6. Method of Procedure

The methodology selected for this research project was quantitative in nature using a causal-comparative design. A causal-comparative design is used to determine cause and effect. The researcher alleged that cause and effect had already occurred; therefore, was examined after the fact (Creswell, 2007).

6.1. Selection of Sample

Prior to beginning this study, the researcher obtained initial approval from the NIET to use 2014 survey data from two elementary schools in one school district located within the Region 10 educational service system in North Texas. All schools had implemented TAP since 2008. Teacher participation in the NIET survey was voluntary. The survey is described in detail in the Instrumentation section.

For the purpose of this study, the research site is referred to as the Alpha Independent School District (AISD). Since 2005, the teacher attrition rate at AISD surpassed the state average by double-digit percentage points (Texas Education Agency [TEA], n.d.). The attrition rate at AISD was also among the highest for the position of superintendent. The AISD was under the leadership of three different superintendents within a 4-year timeframe. Poor student academic progress at AISD may be a direct result of the school district staff attrition rate (Ingersoll & May, 2011). According to Children at Risk, AISD was ranked as one of the lowest performing school districts in North Texas.

Design

According to Creswell (2007), it is critical for the research design and research problem to align. Therefore, a causal-comparative design was used to determine whether teachers' perceptions of the four elements of TAP differed by their expected tenures (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Heppner, Kivlighan & Wampold, 1999; Hill, Williams & Thompson, 2005). Based on a survey question related to expected tenure, the researcher defined three comparison groups, which served as the independent variable. Teachers' perceptions on the four essential elements of TAP served as the dependent variable. A casual-comparative design allowed the researcher to make inferences about the differences in teachers' perceptions of the four essential elements of the TAP system.

6.2. Instrumentation

The TAP Attitude Teacher Survey (Schacter et al., 2002) was used to collect the data that were analyzed for this study. The researcher received permission from the NIET to use survey data that were collected in June 2014 as part of a national evaluation of TAP. Survey items included teachers' names and schools; however, this information was removed before the researcher received the data from the NIET. Completion of the survey was strictly voluntary and informed consent was collected before the survey began. Additionally, teachers were informed that their identities would not be shared to assure confidentiality (NIET, 2014).

All questions used to construct the dependent variables were answered on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). A score for teachers' perceptions of instructionally focused accountability (Research Question 1) was computed from Questions 32 through 36, which included 24 subquestions. A score for teachers' perceptions of performance-based compensation (Research Question 2) was computed from Questions 38 through 40, which included 20 sub questions. A score for teachers' perceptions of multiple career pathways (Research Question 3) was computed from Questions 18 through 20, which included six sub questions. A score for teachers' perceptions of ongoing professional growth (Research Question 4) was computed from Questions 21 and 27 through 31, which included 29 sub questions.

The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the survey was .91. Validity was assessed using factor analysis of 2 consecutive years. Five factors were developed, four of which were used in this study. These factors and the percent of explained variance included multiple career pathways (61.6%), professional growth (56.1%), accountability (45.1%), and performance pay (52.1%; Schacter et al., 2002).

6.3. Collection of Data

The researcher obtained permission from NIET to use data collected from the 2013–2014 survey from all TAP schools at one district; however, only data from elementary campuses of that district was used in this study. The survey was electronically stored, and teachers were given an opportunity to complete the survey. Before teachers could participate, they were notified of the survey purpose, benefits of taking the survey, the confidentiality commitment of the researcher, and notice that their participation was strictly voluntary. Furthermore, the names, addresses, telephone numbers, and email addresses of the researchers were given to all participants if they had questions. Participants had to click “I agree” to move forward with completing the survey. The NIET gave the researcher access to the survey results in Excel format. Participants’ names and schools were deleted from the electronic file before being sent to the researcher.

6.4. Treatment of the Data

For every survey digitally returned, data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The researcher computed a variable representing group membership based on responses to Question 44 regarding expected tenure. Teachers who reported an increased expected tenure were designated as Group 1. Those with no expected increase or decrease in tenure were designated as Group 2. Teachers with an expected decrease in tenure in the school were designated as Group 3.

The researcher computed a mean score for each participant on each section of the survey representing the four essential elements of TAP. These scores were used as the dependent variables to answer the research questions. The independent variable was the group designation. Because the researcher anticipated that group sizes would be disparate, the nonparametric alternative to the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), the Kruskal-Wallis, was calculated for each research question (Field, 2013). If results were significant, all possible comparison post hoc tests were computed to assess differences among the three groups using a p value adjusted for the number of comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated for each comparison by dividing the standardized test statistic (z -score) by the square root of the total number of participants in the comparison (Field, 2013).

The researcher applied a post-positivism philosophy. Post-positivism emerged from the established theory of inquiry known as positivism. Both positivism and post-positivism use a scientific methodological approach that allows the researcher to begin with a theory and then test it through the collection of data. Post-positivism differs from positivism because it tests the foundational beliefs of positivism that state an absolute truth of knowledge exists (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) acknowledged that nothing is really absolute, and “researchers using a post-positivist approach to inquiry must also realize they cannot be absolutely positive regarding claims to knowledge when studying the actions and behaviors of human subjects” (p. 20).

7. Selection of Sample

Prior to beginning this study, the researcher obtained initial approval from the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) to use 2014 survey data from two elementary schools in one school district located within the Region 10 educational service system in North Texas. All schools had implemented TAP since 2008. Teacher participation in the NIET survey was voluntary. The survey is described in detail in the Instrumentation section

8. Instrumentation

The TAP Attitude Teacher Survey (Schacter et al., 2002) was used to collect the data that were analyzed for this study. The researcher received permission from the NIET to use survey data collected in June 2014 as part of a national evaluation of TAP. The survey asked for teachers’ names and schools; however, this information was removed before the researcher received the data from the NIET. Completion of the survey was strictly voluntary and informed consent was collected before the survey began. Additionally, teachers were informed that their identities would not be shared to assure confidentiality (NIET, 2007):

IMPORTANT: These questions are about your overall experience of TAP in your school, and are not intended to solicit feedback on specific individuals. For questions that could apply to more than one of the people you work with, please summarize your average experience for all of them instead of characterizing only one. Your responses will not be connected with the identities of others at your school. (p. 2)

The first 17 questions of the survey asked participants background questions regarding years of experience, highest degree earned, and certifications obtained. The researcher accessed these data. Question 44 asked teachers whether the implementation of TAP changed the number of years they expected to teach, with three answer choices: *will stay longer*, *will stay the same*, and *will leave earlier than planned*. Teacher groups in this study were defined by the answer to this question, which was also the independent variable for each research question.

The dependent variables were defined by other survey questions. All questions used to construct dependent variables were answered on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). A score for teachers’ perceptions of instructionally focused accountability (Research Question 1) was computed from Questions 32 through 36, which included 24 sub questions. A score for teachers’ perceptions of performance-based compensation (Research Question 2) was computed from Questions 38 through 40, including 20 sub questions. A score for teachers’ perceptions of multiple career pathways (Research Question 3) was computed from Questions 18 through 20, including six sub questions. A score for teachers’ perceptions of ongoing professional growth (Research Question 4) was computed from Questions 21 and 27 through 31, including 29 sub questions.

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9. Collection of Data

The researcher obtained permission from NIET to use data collected from the 2013–2014 survey from all TAP schools at one district; however, only data from elementary campuses of that district were used in this study. The survey was electronically stored and teachers were given an opportunity to complete the survey. Before teachers could participate, they were notified of the survey purpose, benefits of taking the survey, the confidentiality commitment of the researcher, and notice that their participation was strictly voluntary. Furthermore, the names, addresses, telephone numbers, and email addresses of the researchers were given to all participants if they had questions. Participants had to click "I agree" to move forward with completing the survey. The NIET gave the researcher access to the survey results in Excel format. Participants' names and schools were deleted from the electronic file before being sent to the researcher.

10. Treatment of the Data

For every survey digitally returned, data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Based on responses to question 44 regarding expected tenure, a variable representing group membership was computed. Teachers who reported an increased expected tenure were designated as Group 1. Those with no expected increase or decrease in tenure were designated as Group 2. Teachers with an expected decrease in tenure in the school were designated as Group 3.

The researcher computed a mean score for each participant on each section of the survey representing the four essential elements of TAP. These scores were used as the dependent variables to answer the research questions. The independent variable was group designation. Because the researcher anticipated that group sizes would be disparate, the nonparametric alternative to the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), the Kruskal-Wallis, was calculated for each research question (Field, 2013). If results were significant, all possible comparison post hoc tests were computed to assess differences among the three groups using a p value adjusted for the number of comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated for each comparison by dividing the standardized test statistic (z -score) by the square root of the total number of participants in the comparison (Field, 2013).

10.1. Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, do teachers' perceptions of instructionally focused accountability differ by expected tenure as it relates to the implementation of TAP? This question was answered by computing a Kruskal-Wallis test of differences between several independent groups with the mean scores for instructionally focused accountability as the dependent variable and tenure group as the independent variable. If the result was significant, all possible comparison post hoc tests were computed to assess differences among the three groups using a p value adjusted for the number of comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated for each comparison by dividing the standardized test statistic (z -score) by the square root of the total number of participants in the comparison (Field, 2013).

10.2. Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asks, do teachers' perceptions of performance-based compensation differ by expected tenure as it relates to the implementation of TAP? This question was answered by computing a Kruskal-Wallis test of differences between several independent groups with the mean score for performance-based compensation as the dependent variable and tenure groups as the independent variable. If the result was significant, all possible comparison post hoc tests were computed to assess differences among the three groups using a p value adjusted for the number of comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated for each comparison by dividing the standardized test statistic (z -score) by the square root of the total number of participants in the comparison (Field, 2013).

10.3. Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asks, Do teachers' perceptions of multiple career pathways differ by expected tenure as it relates to the implementation of TAP? This question was answered by computing a Kruskal-Wallis test of differences between several independent groups with the mean score for multiple career pathways as the dependent variable and tenure groups as the independent variable. If the result was significant, all possible comparison post hoc tests were computed to assess differences among the three groups using a p value adjusted for the number of comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated for each comparison by dividing the standardized test statistic (z -score) by the square root of the total number of participants in the comparison (Field, 2013).

10.4. Research Question 4

Research Question 4 asks, Do teachers' perceptions of ongoing professional development differ by expected tenure as it relates to the implementation of TAP? This question was answered by computing a Kruskal-Wallis test of differences between several independent groups with the mean score for ongoing professional development as the dependent variable and tenure groups as the independent variable. If the result was significant, all possible comparison post hoc tests were computed to assess differences among the three groups using a p value adjusted for the number of comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated for each comparison by dividing the standardized test statistic (z -score) by the square root of the total number of participants in the comparison (Field, 2013).

11. Summary

Ninety-six teachers responded to the survey. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test for main effects between the three tenure groups. Teacher's responses to the instructionally focused accountability by tenure group yielded statistical significance. Their responses were different for the three tenure groups. For this first research question, statistically significant differences were found between the Will Stay Longer and Will Leave Earlier groups; however, there was no a statistical significant difference between the Will Stay the Same and Will Leave Earlier groups.

The second research question addressed teacher's responses to the performance-based compensation survey questions by tenure group. Their responses were different for the three tenure groups. The Will Stay the Same and Will Leave Earlier groups demonstrated statistically significant differences. The Will Stay Longer and Will Leave Earlier groups also showed statistical significance.

The third research question addressing multiple career pathways survey questions by tenure group demonstrated statistical significance. Their responses were different for the three tenure groups. A statistically significant difference existed between the Will Stay Longer and Will Leave Earlier tenure groups. In addition, the Will Stay the Same and the Will Leave Earlier tenure groups showed a statistically difference.

The final research question addressed ongoing professional development by tenure group. Their responses were different for the three tenure groups. A statistically significant difference occurred between the Will Stay Longer and Will Leave Earlier tenure groups. Also, the Will Stay the Same and Will Leave Earlier tenure groups demonstrated a statistically significant difference.

12. Conclusions

The findings of this study provide insight into how teachers perceive the TAP system and its influence in their expected tenures. The teachers in this study chose one of three choices: (a) Will Stay Longer, (b) Will Stay the Same, and (c) Will Leave Earlier. Consistently, of the 96 teachers who responded to this survey question, 69 teachers (71.9%) indicated that they would stay the same and, consequently, these participants became the Will Stay the Same tenure group.

Although the data did not statistically support an increase in teachers' expected tenures, they did support several key elements that affect the performance of the teachers in the Will Stay the Same tenure group. The data support teachers who experienced success in increasing student achievement through ongoing applied professional growth and instructionally focused accountability elements of the TAP system.

Teachers in the Will Stay Longer Group appreciated the instructional conversations, feedback, and accountability often discussed in the cluster meetings. Cluster meetings provide research-based strategies such as modeling instructional best practices, strategies on implementing academic vocabulary within the classroom, and collaborative thinking strategies. As it relates to meeting individual needs of students, cluster meetings help teachers individualize lessons to increase instructional rigor and allow for more a challenging environment for students. These meetings encourage teachers to learn about their students at an individual level rather than as a whole group. By attending cluster meetings, teachers have the opportunity to increase or add differentiation to their plans based on assessment data. Typically, teachers who chose the Will Leave Earlier were not willing to be open to the conversations of accountability held in cluster meetings.

The data suggest that teachers in the Will Leave Earlier Tenure Group may not have had the support of their master and mentor teachers. Milken (2000) suggested that teachers' attitudes toward professional development play a key role in their implementation of new learning. He also suggested that previous research only focused on teachers' attitudes of professional development rather than the actual content of the sessions. Edmonds (1983) stated that effective schools share a climate where all personnel, including teachers, are instructionally effective. The teachers in the Will Leave Earlier tenure group may benefit from more intense professional development from their master teachers. When used appropriately, professional development is critical to the success of teachers (City et al., 2009; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Marzano et al., 2001). Edmonds (1983) and Lezotte (1991), supported this finding by stating that for all teachers to become instructional leaders, the vision must be shared.

12.1. Ongoing Applied Professional Growth

The TAP system uses cluster meetings as a delivery mechanism for professional development. According to City et al. (2009), effective professional development should be timely, relevant, and collaborative. The research implies that cluster meetings provide teachers with all of the tools listed in City et al. (2009). Teachers that chose Will Stay Longer and Will Stay the Same felt strongly about the effectiveness of cluster meetings. Specifically, participants rated collaboration amongst teachers higher than any other answer choice. Furthermore, these groups agreed that their collaboration continued outside of the cluster meetings. With such a high value of the collaborative setting in cluster, these teachers were able to gain ideas and support for their daily instruction, which led them to believe that their instructional practices yielded increased academic gains for their students.

12.2. Instructionally Focused Accountability

Schools that implement the TAP system clearly define TAP instructional rubrics. These rubrics are used anytime a teacher is evaluated by a mentor teacher, master teacher, or campus administrator. Roberts (2002) noted that teachers are more successful when performance expectations are clearly communicated. Teachers who understand what is expected are most often higher performing (Sunderman et al., 2005). Given their ratings of student academic success, the findings of this research suggest that teachers in the Will Stay Longer Group not only understood the instructional rubrics but they embraced them.

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