New-to-the-School Teachers' Responses to Evaluation Policy

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When teachers are new to a school, they must make sense of policies within a new context. In this horizontal comparative case study, I analyze interview data from three teachers in North Carolina taken at two points in a school year to explore how new teachers make sense of and respond to teacher evaluation policy. Study participants framed the evaluation problem around the extent to which school-level enactment focused on assessment. Teachers demonstrated the following reform typologies in response to their sensemaking around evaluation policy: Assimilation, Adaptation, and Avoidance. When new to a school, teachers are expected to follow the same policies and processes as teachers who have long operated in that school's policy context. So, new-to-the-school teachers must reconcile new-to-them policies with their personal preconceptions of practice in an entirely new context. Teacher evaluation policies outline what is valued in teaching by delineating and measuring those values. So, it is worth considering how teacher perceptions of evaluation may influence their practice and career choices, particularly teachers trying to balance such valuation with their daily work in an unfamiliar context. This case study of three teachers in North Carolina utilizes sensemaking theory and problem framing to explore the question, how do teachers who are new to a school make sense of and respond to teacher evaluation policy?

When a person is exposed to something new, they must rely on their previous experiences, beliefs, and values to make sense of it. Moreover, an individual's sensemaking is also influenced by the collective sensemaking of those around them. Weick explains, "Sensemaking is never solitary because what a person does internally is contingent on others" (1995, p. 40). Not only is sensemaking a collective process, but it is also deeply situated in a group's context (Coburn, 2001). Teachers who are new to a school are individuals entering a space with established group conventions and traditions (Weick, 1995). So, the sensemaking of a new teacher will be influenced by how established faculty make sense of a phenomenon, which manifests in how the policy is enacted at the school level. Individuals and groups both engage in sense-making when they experience dramatic change, termed shocks. Weick explains that shocks are sometimes singular and large events but, more likely, a series of smaller changes interrupting an ongoing flow (1995). The interviews took place after a shock because study participants were working in new schools, and thus, their entire context had changed. Moreover, while all had been evaluated, two teachers had relocated from other states with slightly different policies. At the time of this study, a six-standard evaluation rubric was utilized to assess teachers in North Carolina. The sixth standard included a student growth measure calculated by student test score performance. So, student test performance was closely linked to an individual teacher's evaluation.

Part of sensemaking is problem setting or problem framing. Weick (1995) explains that what he terms as problem setting is necessary for problem-solving, and he contends that in setting a problem:

We select what we will treat as the 'things' of the situation, we set boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence that allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed. (p. 10)

Similarly, Coburn contends that "How a policy problem is framed is important because it assigns responsibility and creates rationales that authorize some policy solutions and not others" (2006, p. 343). As
teachers make sense of policy shocks, they develop a framework for understanding the perceived problems with the policy. This framework limits the options a teacher considers as they develop their response. So, how a teacher framed evaluation policy would limit their possible policy responses. Importantly, new teachers are significantly more likely to perceive evaluation impacting their practice when compared with veteran peers (Frasier, 2023).

Others have used various categories of reform typologies to categorize teacher responses to policies (see Yurkofsky, 2022, for a recent example). A foundational study utilizing typologies categorized strategic responses to classroom policy as acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, or manipulation (Oliver, 1991). Later, Coburn (2004) argues in her study of reading policy implementation that "[T]he relationship between institutional pressures and classrooms was much more interactive and nonlinear than that portrayed by Oliver" (p. 223). As such, Coburn offered five alternative typologies: rejection, decoupling/symbolic response, parallel structures, assimilation, and accommodation (2004). The answers in this study align with Oliver's (1991) avoidance and Coburn's (2004) assimilation and accommodation.

**Methods**

This is a horizontal comparative case study of three high school English teachers from two schools in one district in western North Carolina. Comparative case studies have long been recognized as an important tool for analyzing the intersection of educational policy and practice, and horizontal studies are useful for examining how the same policy unfolds in multiple contexts (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016). Participants were interviewed twice during the 2016-2017 school year (October and March) as part of a more extensive study on teacher perceptions of the relationship between evaluation policy and teaching practice. All three participants were new to their school, and two teachers were new to the state.

Interviews of the participants were transcribed and uploaded in NVIVO for analysis. Interviews were coded for examples of sensemaking components: collective process, shocks, and problem framing. These codes were selected due to the literature that had been reviewed on sensemaking, and thus, deductive coding was employed. While completing this deductive coding scheme, memos were created to allow for the creation of summaries of each teacher's interviews and to record merging themes to track teacher reform typologies. The following typologies were iteratively identified by considering those espoused by Oliver (1991) and Coburn (2004) and were coded: assimilation, adaptation, and avoidance (Table 1). Codes were not mutually exclusive, and multiple codes could occur simultaneously. To ensure the reliability of my coding, I recoded each transcript three months after the initial coding and then compared both instances of coding. No discrepancies were identified in my application of the codes. A follow-up contact was made with each participant five years later, in October 2022.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>Agreement with peers and policy: Teacher enacts policy in the same manner as interpreted by the collective and in the way it is implemented.</td>
<td>Policy is enacted similarly across contexts of the school in line with policy intentions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td>Agreement with peers but not policy: Teacher</td>
<td>Policy is enacted similarly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
enacts policy in the same manner as the collective but not in the way it is implemented. across contexts of the school but, to some extent, deviates from policy intentions.

Avoidance Rejection of policy: Teacher rejects the policy entirely by not adhering to the requirements or exiting the system. Individual does not enact the policy or removes themselves from the system.

Results

The Case of Mr. Brown

Mr. Brown taught for one year in Tennessee at a very large high school of 2400 students before moving to his current location at a small, county-wide alternative school for students who were not succeeding in their home high schools. The previous year, he had four formal observations conducted by his administrator. He said his administrator told him, "I'm going to evaluate you tough... you might be kind of low and stuff, but I want to show growth." He still got a "heads up" before evaluations, even those that were supposed to be unannounced, and knowing they were coming increased his anxiety around the visit because he felt there was no way he could do well.

At his previous school, Mr. Brown's post-conference would focus on one strength and one area of improvement as there were "too many other things on the rubric to talk about," so he felt like he "just accepted the scores given and moved on." During the first interview, he was about to be evaluated by his new administrator at the alternative school. He said he wanted to focus on what had been highlighted at the new teacher training he recently had attended rather than what had been emphasized during his previous experiences in Tennessee.

Mr. Brown stated that his previous school was very "test score driven." He taught tested courses and had many after-school data meetings/charts. Students were scheduled for classes based on test scores, so each course was structured around trying to grow kids on a test. In contrast, Mr. Brown felt he could adapt more at his new school. Mr. Brown explained, "I am kind of looking more at how they are in a class, like are they actually engaging in the material?" He gave an example of how he had a student who could barely write, so he had the student submit work verbally. Another example he gave was of a student who did not want to look at a sonnet, so Mr. Brown asked about his favorite music and pulled up song lyrics. "We have that adaptability [at this school]."

In the second interview, Mr. Brown said he had been nervous during his first observation at the alternative school and compared it to when you write your first paper and college and "don't know how [the professor] is going to grade." Now that he had experienced evaluation at the school, he said he felt there were different expectations due to the context of an alternative school and felt like feedback was very encouraging. He also said that the county curriculum coach had observed him, which was "nerve-wracking," but the observer had participated in a lesson on Romeo and Juliet. Mr. Brown said the experience had felt validating.

He explained the "last school I was at was super hard... It seemed like the primary focus was all about getting those [test scores]. So, your whole lesson and everything almost had to be designed with that in mind, especially as you get closer to testing." He described how his last school really wanted students to practice taking tests and opined, "It's miserable for the kids, and it's miserable
for the teacher." At his current school, Mr. Brown said of testing, "It's such a low priority from what's actually happening. Some of these kids are between homes and stuff… That's just really far down the ladder of where we operate day-to-day." He stated he had many students with low reading abilities who struggled to read the four-hour-long standardized test and that he had started training for a program in Foundational Reading to help his current students gain literacy skills. In a follow-up five years after data collection, Mr. Brown was still working at the same school.

**The Case of Ms. Ranier**

Ms. Ranier was in her 22nd year and transferred to her current school from the alternative position Mr. Brown now occupies. Ms. Ranier felt a bit out of her "element" as she was now teaching Honors classes for the first time in six years. She said she had been happy at the alternative school but had left the position in hopes of having a better work-life balance because she had recently adopted a child. Ms. Ranier described herself as a "child of poverty" and a first-generation college student. She described her motivation as:

My students. My client. I love them and want them to do well, and I'm someone whose education transformed my life. I would still be living on a farm, picking green beans, canning them, asking my grandmother if she thought what I was gonna make for lunch was an appropriate choice, and I wouldn't be doing my own thinking.

One thing Ms. Ranier appreciated at her new school was that the A.P. and Honors courses were open enrollment because she believed "students like her" could benefit from those courses.

Early in her career, Ms. Ranier was at a school where the principal did lots of drop-ins, and she had a shared planning period with English teachers. In that context, she felt that her administration knew what was happening in classes. At the alternative school, she described the same conditions as Mr. Brown, with frequent, supportive interaction with the administration and the district coach. However, she had not seen much of the administrator at her current school and said she "did not know them." The principal had not been in her classroom until her first observation, which occurred immediately before our first interview. Ms. Ranier described how she was confident that she would not see her administrator in her classroom again until an observation next semester. Unlike the alternative school, she saw administration and curriculum coaches constantly in the hallway and classes.

For her observation, Ms. Ranier taught a lesson designed by another teacher because "being the new person on the team, I want to make sure I'm not the easy teacher. I wanted to make sure I'm a team player." She stated that she was following the "lead teacher" on what to use for tests and that writing was assessed using common rubrics across the department. She was upset because she described how she had two kids who were being very "disrespectful" during her observation. She described the anticipation for this evaluation as "very nerve-wracking, and it's made me anxious, and I didn't sleep." She said that she felt "so demoralized" that day by her observation and joked about needing to drink after work.

We spoke for some time about state testing and how those scores played into evaluation ratings. In North Carolina, teacher effectiveness ratings were recorded online at the state level. Ms. Ranier stated that she knew her composite score online was "red" because of her record at the alternative school where students traditionally had very low test scores. She said the big difference at this school versus her old one was that it was predictable what students had been taught, "If
teachers are on the same page, you know where to pick up with students."

Ms. Ranier spoke often of her child throughout both interviews. She stated that she was only going to have one child, as she had "two miscarriages and he's adopted… I want to spend time with that child. I don't want to go to professional meetings, I don't want to lead a committee, I don't want to do any of that." She said she usually works 50-60 hours a week. "I am [evaluated on] things that I do not feel are the reasons I became a teacher and do not reflect my performance and abilities as a teacher." She adds, "I think they're trying to force me to change school culture, to use my expertise and experience to mold new teachers to be like me. But I don't think that's okay. They should give me that choice." She said this year, she had been given an accordion file folder to document her effectiveness. Ms. Ranier said evaluations are much more than what can be seen in the classroom. She lists, "Do you help hire new teachers? Are you part of a professional organization?" and stated that she did not personally have the time or money to do these things. Of her 22 years in education and teacher evaluation, she said, "If I am not really darn good at this, someone should have told me before now to get a new career path."

Ms. Ranier reflected more on her new school context in her second interview. She said her post-conference for her first observation was a relief, but her principal had not been in her classroom since. She described feeling slightly more "claustrophobic and stifled" about what she needs to teach instead of the alternative school. Again, she focused on the time constraints of the job, saying she had worked five extra hours grading the previous night and had gone someplace with other teachers to do it, highlighting that working five hours "after work" was an acceptable practice at her current school. She said her son was sick, and a sub had not picked up the job, so other teachers had to lose their planning to cover her. She had come in during planning to be verbally reprimanded about putting in for a sub late. She said she had to take days off to grade and felt like there were so many meetings. She had a parent conference every day last week after school.

I asked her why she had so many meetings, and she described it as "CYA," a commonly used acronym meant to emphasize that she was responsible for documenting to protect herself and the school from criticism, punishment, or even legal action. She said, "They want me to do CYA and prove that I've done my job in a number of ways. Can't I just have one high-stakes evaluation… I think there is a conspiracy to exhaust us." She also talked of the importance of having an administration like her as a teacher, "My job is so big I could still not do enough of it to get fired… tenure isn't going to save you if your administrator hates you." She ended by describing how she wondered if the DMV was hiring last week and how much of a pay cut it would be, adding, "I don't hate my job. I just wish it weren't so complex." Ms. Ranier expressed frustration that she had "been doing this too long to give up" but felt that evaluation policy, in particular, had impacted her family life negatively to the point that she may "have to do something drastic." Despite continuing to struggle with work-life balance, at a five-year follow-up, Ms. Ranier was still teaching at the same school and is retiring after the current year.

The Case of Mr. Eagle

Mr. Eagle was in his fourth year of teaching. He had taught three years at the same high school from which he had graduated in Mississippi and was now at the same school where Ms. Ranier was teaching. He said he had a different observing administrator every year he taught. He said his first administrator was "the best" as she wrote paragraphs of feedback. He described that her critiques were actually in the form of
questions like, "What would have happened if you had done X instead of y?" and so this pushed him to be more reflective. For the next two years, he described being observed by people outside his content area who appreciated his classroom control and rapport with students but could not comment on his teaching. Despite varying utility, he said he had been "unbothered" by the way evaluation had been conducted in his previous school.

Like Mr. Brown, Mr. Eagle was switching from a larger school to a smaller one, so he was surprised that his new administrator stayed to observe his class for an entire 90-minute period. However, his new administrator was also impressed with his classroom management ability and rapport-building. Mr. Eagle stated he received very high marks on his evaluation and said that felt good, "but I don't feel like I'm getting anything out of it... I'm wanting growth-enabling conversations because I want to grow as a professional." Mr. Eagle had not had the opportunity to work with a curriculum coach at his previous school because those were only allotted to teachers with lower evaluation scores. As a high scorer, that resource was denied to him. At his new school, a coach had met with Mr. Eagle several times, and he had been encouraged to conduct peer walks in other teacher's classrooms.

The first time Mr. Eagle's principal came to observe, she happened to show up on a day when he did a Socratic Seminar on Black Lives Matter. Mr. Eagle described how that was lucky, as another day might have been devoted to something less impactful, like facilitating students using the computer lab. "It's gonna leave me with a good first impression," he stated, "the image that [my administrator] has of me in her head will be of that Socratic, where she said she left with chills because of the conversation the students had. I can't buy that kind of impression again." He summed, "That doesn't even seem equitable in some way."

Mr. Eagle was teaching an elective course and two courses of senior English. So, his experience with testing was different than Ms. Ranier's. Mr. Eagle could rely more on formative assessments that he made and administered because his courses were not subjected to state End-of-course exams but a district-mandated senior project and a research paper. Mr. Eagle said he felt the senior project was a more authentic assessment than the standardized test that was the end objective in other English courses. Mr. Eagle spoke of the role in tradition for the graduation project, which required a research paper, mentored volunteer experience, and a presentation to community members. He said he would ask about changing parts of how the project went or the procedures in which he was expected to follow and was told everything was "a county decision." So, he felt bound by county restrictions and the expectations of the curriculum coach. He stated that the experience was demoralizing to the point where he began to look up other jobs, "And I love teaching. I've never felt that way before this."

In our second interview, Mr. Eagle described his second observation, which occurred on the first day of his Journalism class, where he reviewed the syllabus and groundwork for the class. He said his third observation was when he facilitated his computer lab class. He said that her impressions from the first observation and the Socratic Seminar influenced subsequent evaluations, "I haven't received any critical feedback... I have heard that she's given critical feedback to other new teachers, so I'm thankful that she's enjoyed my class periods." However, he said that his administrator had approached him about becoming a permanent teacher in the course that was tested for the EOCs due to his high evaluation scores. This was a prospect that worried Mr. Eagle.

Mr. Eagle said he often heard from more veteran teachers at the school that they
were unhappy with how it was run since the current administrator started four years prior. "There's a very large contingent that still exists from the old days… there's a general feeling that people are being watched in [meetings] and during class periods." He described the presence of an "invisible list" that he was omitted because the administrator had the impression that he was a good teacher. Overall, Mr. Eagle's description of the school policy context matched his colleague Ms. Ranier's description of "CYA." At a five-year follow-up, Mr. Eagle said he had left teaching at the end of the study year.

**Discussion**

Despite having different backgrounds and experiences, the participants responded similarly when their sensemaking process resulted in similar problem frames (Table 2).

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Problem Framed</th>
<th>Response</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brown</td>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Teaching centered on high-stakes evaluation.</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>Value of assessment replaced with other values.</td>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

In the case of Mr. Brown, his first year of teaching in Tennessee was at a very assessment-driven school. This resulted in avoidance, and he left the school to take a job in North Carolina. Notably, Tennessee's evaluation model at the time was similar to North Carolina's, as both required a student growth measure (NCTQ, 2015). However, the alternative school where Mr. Brown spent his second year prioritized other values (such as those presented at the new teacher training) due to the school's unique context. As such, Mr. Brown was able to adapt his practice where he met the requirements of the evaluation policy, but it did not substantially impact his practice or career choices.

Ms. Ranier had left the position occupied by Mr. Brown, and she described a similar adaptation response to evaluation policy when she taught at the alternative school. Ms. Ranier ultimately left the school for reasons unrelated to evaluation and found that her new school was very assessment-driven. Ms. Ranier assimilated into the school culture. She taught lessons and used assessments designed by other teachers. Ms. Ranier's assimilation response may be related to her unique circumstances. Unlike Mr. Brown and Mr. Eagle, Ms. Ranier had over 20 years of classroom experience and was the only study participant with a child. Ms. Ranier did not seem happy with her teaching situation, particularly concerning the evaluation. She talked about exiting the
system but ultimately reminded herself she was "five years from retirement." As such, Ms. Ranier chose to assimilate and stayed until retirement.

When Mr. Eagle was a teacher in Mississippi, there was no student growth component to teacher evaluation, and he could easily adapt practices at his school (NCTQ, 2015). However, for personal reasons, he transferred to the same school as Ms. Ranier, which was very assessment-driven. Additionally, unlike Mississippi, North Carolina had a growth component in the evaluation rubric (NCTQ, 2015). Mr. Eagle's dissatisfaction with the evaluation contributed to his decision to leave the profession altogether (avoidance).

Overall, when evaluation was framed as a problem, and teaching was centered on high-stakes evaluation, Mr. Brown and Mr. Eagle responded with avoidance. Ms. Rainier considered avoidance but stated that she would remain teaching in that context due to her proximity to retirement. So, Ms. Ranier responded to the problem by assimilation. In contrast, when the context allowed teachers to focus on other values rather than assessment, all three teachers responded by adaptation.

**Conclusion**

All three teachers acknowledged how evaluation policy impacted decisions around classroom practice, but the policy can also impact a teacher's career decisions. When teachers have negative experiences with evaluation policy or feel it cannot be reconciled with their personal expectations for practice, they may try to exit a system (avoidance). The sample is limited by the parameters of a single district context and is too small to draw far-reaching conclusions on teacher retention. However, all three participants at least considered avoidance by exit when faced with contexts where teaching focused on high-stakes testing. Finally, both newer teachers left schools due to how the evaluation policy was implemented. Therefore, it is worth trying to understand the processes behind how individuals come to make sense of policies, particularly for new teachers.

So, teacher sensemaking of evaluation and how they frame the potential problems within can influence not just the choices they make in the classroom but may also impact whether or not they stay to teach at all. Future work on how evaluation policy impacts teacher practice and career decisions should be conducted, particularly since the inclusion of student growth has been in place in many states for several years. Studies conducted with a larger sample and in different contexts could yield more generalizable results.

**References**


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