

Article

Teacher Evaluation as a Data-Use Intervention: A Frame Analysis

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Abstract

This multi-site ethnographic study focuses on the utility of using student growth data generated from teacher evaluations as a data-use intervention. Findings suggest that teachers developed a common perspective about evaluation but organizational contexts shaped teacher responses at the three sites differently. At two of the schools, teachers were responsible for administering their own assessments, organizing results, and presenting these results to the principal. In both schools, the data-use process was similar. Teachers administered a variety of assessments, chose from among the results, constructed artifacts metrics, and presented these metrics to the principal. At the third school, student achievement was calculated using an externally developed assessment and student growth scores were calculated at the district level. At this school, teachers maintained a unified front that disestablished the link between their performance and their students' assessment results. The teachers maintained this stance in their interactions with colleagues and with the principal.

Keywords: policy implementation; frame analysis; sociology; qualitative research

1. Introduction

While evidence has accumulated about the role of data-use interventions in school improvement, generally, little is known about using the student growth data included in recent teacher evaluation systems as the source of a data-use intervention (Firestone & Donaldson, 2019; Ford et al., 2017; Ford, 2018). In this paper, I use frame analysis theory (Goffman, 1959, 1974) to describe how teachers make sense of and respond to teacher evaluation policy, with a particular focus on the student growth requirement. I draw on data-use intervention research and micro-sociological theory with concepts inductively produced from an ethnographic study. I then construct a theoretical framework that explains teachers' data use in the evaluative context.

The purpose of this paper is to address the following questions:

1. How do teachers in different contexts make sense of and respond to the student growth component of teacher evaluation systems?
2. What do teacher sensemaking and response suggest about teacher evaluation as a data-use intervention?

1.1. Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the literature, sociological theory, and my own field study, I argue that teacher enactment of data-use interventions is shaped by several mutually influencing factors: external demands of state and federal policy; district and school organizational contexts; principal leadership and framing; and teacher perspectives and projections (see Figure 1).



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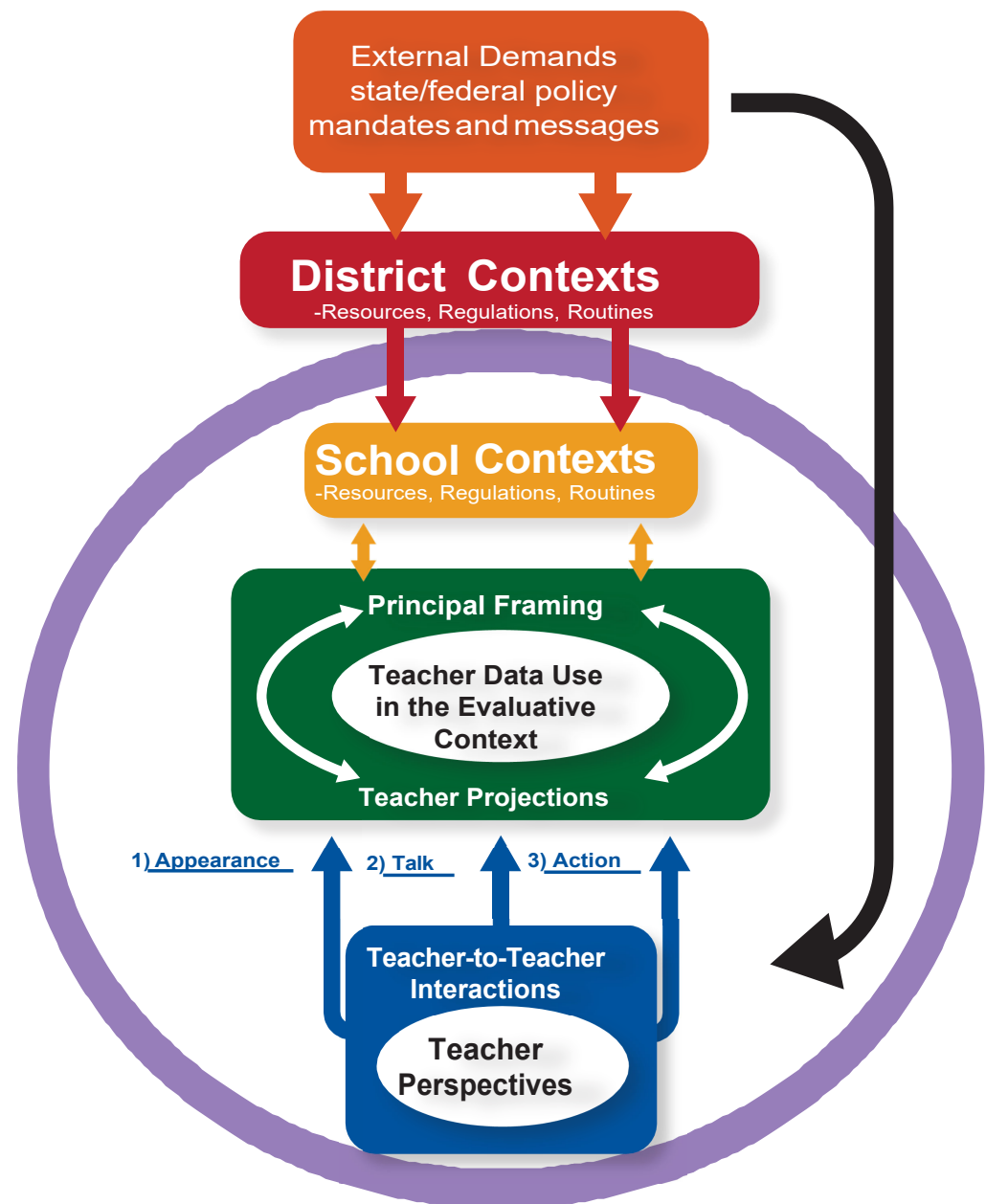


Figure 1. Conceptual model of teacher data use in context.

1.2. State and Federal Policy Mandates

Federal and state accountability and data-focused policies influence leaders at the district level to implement data-use initiatives (Coburn & Talbert, 2006; Park et al., 2013). In the past decade, states have revamped their teacher evaluation systems to include that teachers' demonstrated impact on student achievement (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016).

1.3. District and School Organizational Contexts

Districts differ in their capacity for policy implementation (Honig, 2003) and these capacity differences affect how districts respond to and enact data (Honig & Coburn, 2008). As district administrators interpret policy messages, they rely on their personal experiences, beliefs, and knowledge (Spillane, 1998). Thus, all reforms are shaped by ongoing interpretative processes occurring at multiple organizational levels simultaneously (Honig & Coburn, 2008; Spillane, 1996). Specifically, school districts shape the contexts through which principals and teachers make sense of and respond to data-use interven-

tions through the provision of resources, regulation of local compliance, and established routines (Coburn & Turner, 2011; Mandinach, 2012; Spillane, 2012). For data to be used effectively, teachers need resources that assist them in data collection, analysis, and reporting (Mandinach, 2012). Teachers also need resources (e.g., professional development, coaching, technology) to make meaning of data in ways likely to help inform their practice and, by extension, improve student learning (Mandinach, 2012; Marsh, 2012). Districts are essential in establishing these contexts.

Data-use reforms are shaped at the school level as well (Datnow et al., 2012, 2013). Like district administrators, principals and other school leaders communicate expectations, establish routines, provide resources, and regulate activity in ways that may align with or differ from district interpretation and guidance.

1.4. Principal Framing and Leadership

The resources, regulations, and routines at the school level also help shape data-use interventions. Principals can promote data-use interventions by providing resources, regulating and monitoring implementation, and establishing organizational routines. Principals might shape resources, regulations, and routines that originate at the district level or they may create, enhance, or inhibit resources, regulations, and routines in ways that are unique to a school.

Principal leadership might include setting expectations, identifying challenges, creating a data-use rationale, structuring teachers' opportunities to learn, modeling sound data-use practices, providing teachers time to meet, and preparing plans for action (Jimerson, 2014; Kraft & Christian, 2022; Park et al., 2013; Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015; Young, 2006). Principals can "frame" a reform and shape what it becomes in a school (Coburn, 2005; Hashim & Kearney, 2025). However, research suggests that the principal's framing can be contested (Park et al., 2013). Researchers have also noticed that when principals have the ulterior motives of shaming and blaming teachers, data-use interventions function poorly (Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010; Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015).

1.5. Teacher Perspectives of Data-Use Interventions

Policy messages are filtered through organizational levels (Park et al., 2013) and they are also apprehended by teachers more directly (Lane, 2020, 2023). Prior research suggests that teachers are moderately positive about data-use interventions, so long as they perceive that the intervention is primarily about development and growth rather than accountability and punishment (Choi & Bowers, 2024; Jimerson, 2014; Park et al., 2013; Young, 2006). In other words, environmental and organizational regulations (i.e., accountability) influence teacher perceptions and, ultimately, are crucial to reform success. Specifically, teachers in high-pressure accountability settings are more likely to perceive that their schools respond to new policies with a lack of innovation, restriction of information, conservatism of practice, inflexible standardized practices, and centralized decision-making (Daly, 2009). At the classroom level, a dominant regulatory and accountability focus can cause educators to distort the intervention's purpose and focus strictly on improving outcomes by whatever means necessary (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Lane, 2020).

Furthermore, teachers may also disassociate their performance from student test results (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015; Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010; Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015) and some of this reluctance can be influenced by organizational structures and routines. For example, when schools group their student into homogeneous classes, teachers may be less likely to attribute their students' achievement to student characteristics outside their control (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015). Interactions with administrators, instructional coaches and teacher colleagues may also influence teachers' attribution of student re-

sults through the way these colleagues present the data during organizational routines (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015).

Individual and group experiences and backgrounds also play a significant role in teacher perceptions of their locus of control (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015). Bertrand and Marsh (2015) determined that teachers employed one of four mental models to make sense of data and ascribe attribution for results: their own classroom instruction, student understanding, the nature of the test, and student characteristics. Other researchers have also employed sensemaking and an understanding of teacher backgrounds to explain data-use intervention enactment. For instance, Datnow et al. (2013) discovered that despite the general enthusiasm and support of their immediate organizational contexts, many teachers in their study lacked the knowledge and skills to translate data about student achievement into a useable form and the data's utility as valuable and actionable information was therefore limited.

Horn et al. (2015) analyzed the processes of teacher sensemaking and data use through an examination of teachers' data-based instructional conversations during organizational routines. They found that teachers assumed epistemic stances—beliefs about the way things are, why one should value them, and how one knows them to be true—to their collective work that shaped their interactions. Teachers also projected representations of practice through replays in which they detailed classroom interactions and rehearsals in which teachers “acted out” classroom interactions (Horn et al., 2015).

1.6. Enactment of Data-Use Interventions

Data-use intervention rests on the logic that educators will use evidence of student performance to improve their instruction (Young, 2006). However, as described above, enactment of data-use interventions is nested within several mutually influencing contexts including state and federal policy messages; district and school plans for establishing routines, providing resources, and regulating compliance; principal leadership and framing; and the teachers' own perceptions and understanding of policy demands and their interactions with colleagues (see Figure 1). Ideally, districts and schools would provide an optimal blend of resources, regulations, and routines; principals would frame data-use interventions as an opportunity to learn, and teachers would have the necessary skills and experiences that would enable data-use interventions to proceed in a rational and effective way. With this in mind, over the past two decades, several similar but distinct conceptions of idealized data-use cycles have emerged (e.g., Coburn & Turner, 2011; Mandinach, 2012; Marsh, 2012; Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015; Spillane, 2012). These models agree that data use is an interpretative process heavily dependent on educators' background experiences and capacities that also includes access to quality data, data analysis and interpretation, plan construction, and implementation of action. However, despite the usefulness of these models for conceptual understanding, research suggests that teachers are not likely to follow the linear data-use sequence policymakers and reformers envision (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015).

Research on teacher evaluation as a data-use intervention is scant and is not optimistic about the effective use of student growth data created from teacher evaluation systems (Collins, 2014; Hunter & Ege, 2021; Firestone & Donaldson, 2019). Rather, teachers rarely, if ever, perceived student growth data associated with teacher evaluation to be useful (Firestone & Donaldson, 2019).

1.7. Overview of Frame Analysis

To this point, I have treated teacher perceptions as influenced by organizational contexts (e.g., resources, routines, regulations) and individual and groups sensemaking.

In what follows, I use frame analysis (Goffman, 1974) to analyze the student growth component of teacher evaluation as a data-use intervention. Frame analysis emphasizes how people understand situations and improve their status through appearance, action, and talk (i.e., “projections”).

Before people can act in socially meaningful ways, they must derive a common understanding of their situation through the application of social frameworks they use to understand their experience (Goffman, 1959, 1974). When encountering a new (but not entirely novel) situation, people must ask themselves, “What is going on here?” To answer this question, people must have some sense of the restrictions, affordances, and meanings of the objects in the physical environment, the roles assumed by other people, and the patterns of social interaction in the current situation. Once this question has been answered, people must further ask, “Given my understanding of the situation, what should I do?”

Thus, frame analysis is an endeavor in understanding how people interpret the meaning of the physical and social objects in their environment and plan for action. Over time, individuals with frequent interaction develop a common understanding of the situation and they can gauge their own and others’ actions against this understanding (Becker et al., 1961). Frameworks, then, provide for socially coordinated and coherent activity as people interact with others and the objects in their environment in the context of broader societal expectations.

1.8. Defining Situations and Maintaining the Frame Through Projections of the Self

Using Frame Analysis, I analyze the perspectives teachers formed surrounding the requirement of including student growth scores in annual teacher evaluations. A perspective is a “coordinated set of ideas and actions a person uses in dealing with some problematic situation” (Becker et al., 1961, p. 34) that represents “a person’s ordinary way of thinking and feeling about and acting in a situation” (Becker et al., 1961, p. 34). The central idea is that perspectives form in response to problematic environments as people learn how to make sense of and respond to the contextual demands. Actions then flow reasonably from one’s perspective.

A perspective has three components (Becker et al., 1968). First, a perspective includes the definition of a situation. People form a definition when they identify the basic problems they face, construct goals that take these problems into account, and recognize the environmental affordances and constraints. Second, perspectives contain a set of appropriate actions/interactions that are sensible given how one has understood the situation. Finally, perspectives include criteria for judgment given the standards of appropriate actions (Becker et al., 1968).

Frame analysis includes, but is not limited to, individual and group perspectives. Goffman (1959) had specific ideas about how social interaction leads to a common definition of a situation required for meaningful social action. As noted above, a person’s primary framework (i.e., how they understand the situation) is typically sufficient and coherent social action is built up over time as people tacitly establish a common definition of the situation in the context of a specific physical environment and broader societal expectations. There is a dual nature to the definition of the situation. People are not defining the situation (even collectively) without influence from others, affordances and restriction of the physical environment, or larger societal expectations for appropriate social conduct. That is, someone cannot dictate the definition of the situation totally to their liking. On the other hand, individuals or groups are not helplessly subservient to situational demands or the current situational definition either.

Once they have a basic understanding of the situation’s current definition and demands, people can and do pursue socially favorable outcomes for themselves. First, people

“project” themselves into desirable roles that are likely to demand particular, even preferential, treatment. In a given situation, people may attempt to project themselves as a knowledgeable expert, a caring and compassionate listener, or a highly regarded practitioner. If successful, these projections are likely to result in increased social prestige that will be accompanied by preferential treatment, greater freedom over one’s own actions, and greater influence over the actions of others. In other words, given the group perspective (i.e., the common definition of the situation), people exert agency through appearance, talk, and actions that they believe will help them maintain or improve their status. Thus, when asking ourselves, “Given my understanding of the situation, what should I do?” we are likely to craft our projections so as to increase the likelihood that our actions will be interpreted favorably and to our social benefit.

Finally, in order to make sense of any social situation, it is essential that one be able to recognize and understand what is being said and done. It is equally important for someone to be able to link words and actions to the particular person who speaks or acts. These links, or connectives as Goffman (1959, 1974) called them, are essential for effective projections.

1.9. Maintaining the Frame as a Collective Activity

While the definition of the situation requires compromise, this does not mean that people are atomized. Rather, social activity typically involves one or more groups of individuals who would like to frame the situation in similar ways. Thus, groups form and then maintain a united group projection through both individual and collective action (Goffman, 1974).

2. Methodology

2.1. Sampling

I sampled three middle schools implementing a new teacher evaluation system that varied in region and location (i.e., rural, suburban, urban), principal leadership, school climate, reform involvement, and, most importantly, district organizational contexts. Within each school I selected focal teachers of various subjects who were involved in other, voluntary reforms. However, my sample extended beyond this set of focal teachers as I held informal conversations with teachers throughout the school at each of the three sites. Nevertheless, my focal sample was likely to be a bit more reform-oriented, on average, than the typical teacher at their school.

2.2. Data Collection

I first collected the data for this study during the 2013–2014 school year, the first year of the official implementation of a new teacher evaluation system. During the school year, I spent roughly 35 full days at each of three middle schools in the same midwestern state—Waller (an urban school), Poe (a suburban school), and Middleton (a rural school). In 2018, I returned to each site and conducted follow-up interviews to see if my conclusions held up over time.

2.3. Role of the Researcher

I assumed the role of a participant observer who approximates the roles of those they study, engaging in their everyday activities and asking them both formally and informally about the meaning behind what they do. In this role, I sat with teachers at meetings, helped them grade papers and prepare materials, listened while they confided in me their major and minor frustrations associated with their work, and the like. Validity was a constant priority and I borrowed from both the constructivist and positivist traditions. First, and in positivist tradition, I “triangulated” findings by collecting data from many

different people and documents through observations, interviews and document analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Second, and in the constructivist tradition, I spent extensive time in the field “sampling” multiple routine social events (Becker, 1970; Creswell & Miller, 2000). This promoted validity because I gained greater certainty that supposedly routine activities and behavior were actually routine and because I observed local actors in naturally occurring, socially constrained activity (Becker, 1970).

2.4. Observations

I observed teachers and administrators during routine activities including attending classes, department meetings, staff meetings, professional development sessions, school assemblies, and other school events. While I sometimes participated in activities, I mostly observed the activities of others and took in-the-moment notes that I later elaborated into more detailed fieldnotes each evening. The elaborated notes provided “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), another constructivist safeguard that promotes validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

2.5. Interviews

Interviews included principals, teachers, and students and were of two types—informal and ethnographic. Informal interviews involved me either participating or (more likely) observing people’s activities and then asking them in the moment or shortly thereafter what these activities meant to them. Ethnographic interviews followed the “research paradigm” as outlined by Spradley (1979) and involved asking some questions of all informants, contouring some questions for particular informants, and constructing interviews in such a way that I could generate and test ethnographic hypotheses. Both informal and ethnographic interviews allowed me to check with informants (i.e., member checking) as a key strategy through which I validated, refined, or disregarded emerging conclusions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I audiotaped and transcribed all ethnographic interviews in their entirety.

2.6. Document Analysis

I collected and analyzed the following documents as part of the study: state policy documents, state-approved evaluation tools, district-developed evaluation tools, teacher evaluations, and teacher rebuttals to their evaluation scores (when applicable).

2.7. Data Analysis

Analysis followed the “coding paradigm” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that included open, axial, and selective coding. The open coding phase helped me generate concepts from the data without initial regard to their eventual theoretical significance. Open coding is also a period when “data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). During axial coding I further refined concepts and began developing the interrelations among the most important. During open and axial coding, I wrote concept and theoretical memos. Concept memos focused on a single concept from the coded data and I wrote about the concept’s properties and dimensions. Theoretical codes integrated the codes from a passage and were the beginning of describing what was happening at a conceptual level. As I wrote concept and theoretical memos, I created a code list. This list captured the interrelations among coded concepts, as I organized the list in basic social processes, categories, and subcodes. Finally, with selective coding, I further sensitized all relevant concepts and refined the conceptual framework. While I searched for disconfirming evidence (another strategy to promote validity) through data collection and early analysis, this effort became especially intense during axial coding, during which time I made the final theoretical scheme included in Figure 1.

2.8. Limitations

This is an ethnographic study designed to understand how people in a given context and time made sense of, responded to, and constructed their environments. The data from this study were collected in Michigan over a decade ago and, as such, may not apply to all contexts across all time periods.

3. Findings

The findings are organized by the conceptual framework outlined in Figure 1 and generally move alternatively from the top to the bottom and from the bottom to the top of the framework. As such, the following sections include: external demands of state and federal policy; district organizational contexts; the teacher perspective, school organizational contexts; teacher projections through talk, actions, and interactions; principal framing and leadership; and teacher data-use enactment in the evaluative context.

3.1. External Demands of State and Federal Policy

Michigan's teacher evaluation system demands that student achievement outcomes be included in teachers' final evaluation ratings. However, districts and the schools within them have considerable flexibility in the type of tests considered, the standards used to demonstrate growth, and the calculus used to assign teachers points for student growth.

3.2. District Organizational Contexts

The three study districts (Middleton, Poe, Waller) contrasted sharply in the resources they provided, the regulations they used to monitor student growth, and the organizational routines they established to promote teacher evaluation requirements as a data-use intervention.

3.3. Resources

Each district had several resources that shaped enactment of data use in the context of teacher evaluation. The most notable of these was the wide array of available assessments for teachers to choose from including publisher tests of curricular content; teacher-made unit tests; diagnostic, norm-referenced reading and mathematics assessments; reading and mathematics aptitude tests; and district benchmark assessments. Other potential resources were missing. For instance, none of the three school districts provided opportunities for teachers to learn about effective data use in the context of teacher evaluation. Second, only Waller's district had a centralized data management system capable of analyzing and disseminating results. Even at Waller, this system was limited to those results on the NWEA subject-specific tests (e.g., math, science, reading). At Poe and Middleton, teachers had to score, analyze, record, and organize student assessment results on their own.

3.4. Regulations

Each district's plan for monitoring teacher impact on student outcomes was paramount. Although none of the districts attempted to promote teacher data use, per se, the districts adopted one of two approaches to incorporating student achievement into the teachers' evaluations. Poe and Middleton districts allowed teachers to select from their choice of available assessments, interpret test score results, and report their impact on student scores to their principals. At Waller, teacher impact on student assessments would be determined by the mandated NWEA test and results were factored into the teachers' final evaluation score without the teacher being able to mediate or interpret results.

3.5. Routines

While each of the districts provided teachers time to meet with colleagues, none of the districts directed teachers to use this time to progress through the stages of the data-use cycle or focus on the results of the assessments teachers were using to demonstrate their impact on student test scores.

3.6. Student Achievement Results and Evaluation: The Teacher Perspective

Perspectives both shape and are shaped by local constraints and affordances as one interprets and responds to local contexts (Becker et al., 1961, 1968; Blumer, 1969). Teachers across the sample shared the common perspective that the main purpose of the evaluation is securing a record of high performance, particularly a high relative standing among peers, in order to ensure one's future employment. Teachers expressed elements of the common perspective in hundreds of comments across interviews and the perspective crept in whenever teachers were asked about evaluation. For instance, when asked if evaluation was provoking any anxiety, Mrs. Quincy at Middleton said, "I take comfort in knowing where I fall [in relation to other teachers] and luckily I feel very secure in where I am, but I have had some people tell me, 'so-and-so scored higher.' That's frustrating, too." At Poe, when asked about whether her final evaluation score mattered to her, Mrs. Reid expressed frustration at what she believed was her school's policy of giving everyone similar final ratings:

[My final evaluation score] matters a lot to me. I really. . .like to know I'm doing a good job. . .and I do all these things and I work really hard and then I see other people that are not working hard and don't really care and I'll never be rated any better than them. So I find that super frustrating. . .because I don't want to be that person that could potentially be laid off.

Similarly, when asked about the importance of the student growth component, Mrs. Jackson at Waller said "It is a competition. [Student growth] plays into our evaluation, which then plays into if layoffs came, who gets laid off. In my world it is a competition."

3.7. Elaborating the Perspective: Understanding How Teachers Make Sense of the Student Achievement Requirement

Teachers' elaborated perspective included how they made sense of and responded to the student growth component of evaluation. The elaborated perspective can be stated as follows: The primary purpose of evaluation is to score high relative to peers. Including student performance in evaluation increases teacher vulnerability and potentially threatens teachers' efforts to secure a high score, as student scores are subject to a variety of factors outside a teacher's control.

Teachers across the sample expressed elements of this elaborated perspective whenever asked about the student growth component. For example, teachers believed that student achievement was subject to unpredictable fluctuations, as Mrs. Monahan at Poe explained:

[Basing a teacher's evaluation on student achievement] is very difficult, because if the student takes the STAR [reading comprehension] test four times throughout the year, I have noticed that a student might start off say at 8.0, which is eighth grade, they might drop a little bit to a 7.9, but then they might score a 10.9 and then they might drop again. Why is that fluctuating like that? If you look at that, it doesn't look like my student is growing very much. It could be a bad testing day, who knows what?

Mrs. Monahan went on to say that students might simply test poorly because they lack the effort to take the test seriously:

A lot of students come in and take the [annual state standardized assessment], and they don't care. They will draw pictures using the bubble sheets. . . We can't force a student to perform well on a test. . . [So] it is not an accurate measure.

Teachers across schools believed that student effort on exams waned, especially when these exams were not linked to grades. Furthermore, teachers believed that student performance was sometimes outside of either teacher or student control. For example, Ms. Stickle at Waller believed that difficult home situations made student performance unpredictable:

We have no control over what parents were fighting the night before and kept their kids up; we have no control whose power was shut off. We have no control over who did not get food or sleep, or any of those things.

3.8. Establishing Projections Through Talk, Actions, and Interactions

How people attempt to establish and maintain projections will reflect the group perspective that emerges through interaction and the way that, given this perspective, they understand their own particular situation (Becker et al., 1961). Thus, despite the universal group perspective, different responses to the perspective emerged across sites as teachers at Middleton, Poe, and Waller faced a different set of conditions.

Typically, people “project” themselves into particular roles (e.g., highly effective teacher) that ultimately demand certain treatment from others (e.g., earning a high relative evaluation score) through their appearance, talk, and actions. In order for a projection to have its intended effect, people must connect people (both themselves and others) with actions. Otherwise, projections go unnoticed and have no influence on how people maintain or improve their status. Projections imply favorable connectives, as people seek to shape the situation.

If others fail to make the connectives that people are trying to achieve through their projections, they may become more direct in establishing the link in others' minds. Indeed, when it came to ensuring a highly effective rating on the student growth component of evaluation, teachers relied primarily on establishing direct connectives. At Middleton, Poe, and Waller, teachers made direct connectives when they were allowed to organize and report their student scores to the principal. In other instances, teachers tried to disestablish unwanted connectives that had been imposed upon them. For instance, because Waller's district had a more complex regulatory system for determining teachers' student growth scores, teachers attempted to undermine the connectives regardless of whether their students performed well or poorly.

3.9. School Contexts

School contexts were influenced by the larger contexts of their districts and the way in which each of the principals framed the data requirements of the new teacher evaluation policy. As will be described below, principals drew upon the resources, regulations, and routines of their districts but they also shaped these elements and attempted to interpret their use for teachers.

3.10. Principal Leadership and Framing

At Waller, teachers had assessment resources (NWEA), regulations (external calculation of results), and routines (common planning time designated for discussing assessment results). Of the three principals in the study, only Waller's principal, Ms. Shriver, attempted to frame the student achievement component of teacher evaluation as a school improvement opportunity. She also carefully balanced support for teachers with accountability expectations for results. For instance, because she felt that teachers were frustrated when their students failed to attain a proficient score on the NWEA and that they subsequently

distanced themselves from student results, in her conversations with teachers, Ms. Shriver emphasized continuous improvement:

I'm trying to keep the teachers invested and "Ok. What can we control, guys? How can we keep getting better? How can we streamline our processes in the building to recognize when students aren't getting what they need to and intervene. . . within your classroom?"

She also hoped that teachers would work collaboratively during common planning time to understand their impact on student growth and improve their instruction, particularly if a teacher was struggling. Of one such teacher, Ms. Shriver said:

Last year I think 40% of his kids met the target. His colleague—who supposedly they plan together and talk together and work together—70% of her students met target growth. So after the fact he was like "what did she do different than I did?" She is a relatively newer teacher. He is a more veteran teacher. So that whole idea what I'm doing matters.

Nevertheless, over time, the teachers' perspective seemed to influence Ms. Shriver's framing of student data more than her framing influenced the teachers' perspective, as the following excerpt indicates:

It is hard as a teacher. You're working your butt off trying to improve and have students learn and improve and because a kid didn't test well one day while they were on a computer click, click, clicking [not taking the test seriously].

At both Middleton and Poe, the situation differed sharply. Middleton and Poe teachers had an abundance of assessment resources that they used to undermine the student growth component of teacher evaluation. Middleton and Poe teachers also faced lax regulations and no expectations for embedding student growth discussions into their organizational routines. Many of the differences can be traced to principal leadership and framing. At Middleton, Mrs. Novak set no expectations that the student growth component of teacher evaluation would be a part of school improvement. In fact, she framed the student growth requirement as an easy way for teachers to earn free "points" toward their evaluation. She told teachers that student growth would be an all-or-nothing endeavor with a very low threshold for success:

If a teacher can show me on a spreadsheet or hand printed data that this is where [students] were and this is where [students] are then you get your 20 points. It is all of nothing. I have never given anybody nothing. . . Most teachers have used pretest posttest either unit or summative. I have allowed them to do whatever they want.

Meanwhile, Mr. Delancey was in his first year as principal at Poe and was attempting to establish himself as an instructional leader. He spent most of his evaluation-related energy on conducting walkthroughs and wordsmithing feedback to teachers. Like Mrs. Novak, Mr. Delancey allowed teachers to use any of the assessment resources available to them to demonstrate growth. Consequently, at both Middleton and Poe, the points for the student growth component were very easy to secure.

3.11. Teacher Projections: Establishing Connectives at Poe and Middleton

Teachers at Middleton and Poe employed a variety of related strategies to buffer themselves from what they perceived to be the fickle nature of student academic growth. Specifically, teachers organized and presented their student growth data in a way that guaranteed that they would receive a highly effective designation on the student growth

component. Teachers distorted their students' achievement results through any combination of the following strategies: administering pre- and post-tests, picking and choosing from a variety of assessments, focusing on average class achievement (rather than on individual student achievement), and setting modest and easily achieved student growth goals.

First, many teachers gave the students a difficult pretest over content for which the students were almost assuredly unprepared. Mrs. Reid, a teacher at Poe, explained her strategy to ensure a highly effective score for student growth:

We can fudge the data. . .my pre-assessments exactly aligned with the state standards, and I know that these kids don't know [the content]. So they never do well on the pre-assessment. . .So I can always show growth even if it is from a zero to a 45.

Mrs. Quincy at Middleton said that she, too, used pre- and post-tests to demonstrate student growth and that she combined this strategy with administering and selecting from a multitude of tests and time points to guarantee evidence of growth for all students:

I have no problem [demonstrating student growth] because it's pre-test, post-test. They always show growth, even if they became attendance issues or had been suspended for the end of a certain marking period.

Mrs. Herman, a reading specialist and instructional coach at Middleton who advised teachers about student growth and helped them prepare the proper documentation, explained that typically a single strategy of using multiple exams worked well for teachers:

This year [the spreadsheet used to demonstrate student growth] still has [Reading Comprehension Test #1] on it, but if a student that doesn't show growth on [Reading Comprehension Test #1] there are two more columns, and I try to put scores from [Reading Comprehension Test #2] on there. I have scores from multiple reading comprehension tests to look at.

Teachers at Poe also employed this "multiple tests" strategy, as Mrs. Cunningham reported:

For kids it is just. . .about how motivated they were that day. So that is why I don't go by the STAR test alone. It is going to reflect [student's attitude toward the test] "I don't like this test. This is boring."

Mrs. Cunningham also explained that Mr. Delancey told her and her colleagues that they could use each student's lowest score during the year and then compare this score with the student's highest score:

What we have been told [by Mr. Delancey] when we use the STAR is that we can use the lowest point: what they came in with, their first test, to the highest, wherever it is in the year. So they can do okay on the first test, bomb the second test, do awesome on the third, bomb the fourth test, and you can use the first and the third for your growth.

Yet another possibility was to set modest annual learning growth targets that the students could easily meet using one or more of the strategies listed above. Mrs. Cunningham further described how she combined modest goals with class averages that would obscure individual students' learning difficulties:

I've got a reading intervention class and we have a reading assessment that gives me data in Lexile [reading achievement] scores and so then we would go through and each month the kids would take the benchmark tests, I would record the data, and. . .we got to make the goals. So I got to set my scale of how many Lexile points made "highly effective."

In sum, then, rather than using student growth as a source for instructional improvement, at both Middleton and Poe, teachers manipulated the information they forwarded to principals to improve their evaluation rating. This was possible because of the resources the districts provided (e.g., multiple assessments) and the lack of regulation and routines at either the district or the school level. All focal teachers reported securing a high evaluation score in this way and they clearly believed that all teachers in their school had a nearly identical set of strategies. For instance, when asked if she believed her colleagues adopted a similar approach to reporting their student achievement scores, Mrs. Reid said bluntly, “You would have to be an absolute idiot to not make sure that your student growth in your evaluation wasn’t going to guarantee that you’d be highly effective.”

In contrast, Waller teachers were highly concerned about the portion of student growth as determined by the externally constructed and scored NWEA test and teachers thus fabricated or undermined connectives between their performance and their students’ achievement.

3.12. *Fabricating Connectives at Waller*

Distortion is its own type of fabrication, but here fabrication has to do with teachers providing students answers to the test in order to improve performance. Such fabrication was simply unnecessary at Middleton or Poe. While my field notes and interviews provide no direct evidence of teacher cheating at Waller, teachers were often suspicious of their colleagues. For instance, Ms. Stickle explained, “When someone scores really high, the first thing you think is, ‘I wonder if they cheated.’” Mrs. Jackson, who also taught at Waller, reported that peers accused her of cheating when it became known that her students performed well:

I didn’t tell anybody about my scores when they came out because I knew what the effects were going to be, and then the first things that came out were “You cheated somehow.” This is a standardized test. There is no way I could. I don’t even test my kids. They are in different classrooms testing. I am literally out of it.

The degree to which teachers falsified the connectives through cheating is unknown but given the fact that teachers commiserated about having their evaluations tied to student achievement and the fact that teachers’ impact on student achievement fluctuated from one year to the next, falsification was likely not widespread.

3.13. *Teacher Projections: Undermining Connectives at Waller*

Teachers across the sample held the same perspective toward evaluation and shared a common belief that basing teacher evaluation ratings on student achievement threatened teachers’ chances of scoring well on evaluations because student achievement was unpredictable and lay outside of teachers’ control. Waller teachers in particular pointed to a variety of sources that undermined the validity of student achievement scores, most notably disinterested students, difficult home situations, a misaligned curriculum, and biased tests. While all teachers shared this belief about faulty connectives, Waller teachers rarely, if ever, discussed these issues with their colleagues in interpersonal or small group settings. Interaction around student achievement results was difficult to find, despite organizational routines designed to promote teacher collaboration (including discussion of student assessment results) and my own theoretical sampling for instances of teacher collaboration around student achievement results.

3.14. *Summary: Controlling Projections Through Connectives*

While all focal teachers held a common perspective about using student growth in their annual evaluations, differing organizational conditions and principal framing at the

three schools shaped teachers' actions and interactions. Poe and Middleton teachers made connectives directly when they organized and reported their student growth scores to principals and indicated the rating they deserved on the student growth portion of the evaluation. In contrast, teachers at Waller could not connect their actions with student achievement in exclusively favorable ways, as the connective calculations were determined at the district level. In this instance, teachers actively undermined the connective through challenging the validity of the connection between their performance and student results, and they upheld this common perspective in limited public interactions with colleagues that centered on the student growth component of the evaluation.

3.15. Consequences of Controlling Connectives at Middleton, Poe, and Waller

To explain the consequences of attaching student outcomes to teacher evaluation, one must remember that teachers believed that evaluation is primarily about earning a high score relative to one's peers and that student achievement lies outside teachers' control. This perspective influenced teachers to carefully control the connectives between their performance and student outcomes, and consequences for teacher collaboration stemmed from, and extended beyond, this perspective and the actions that teachers took to secure a high score for themselves. Namely, at Poe, Middleton, and Waller, teachers reported rarely or never interacting with their colleagues regarding student achievement results. However, the rationale for the infrequency of interaction differed between Middleton and Poe, on the one hand, and Waller, on the other.

3.16. Teacher Collaboration Around Student Achievement Data at Middleton and Poe

At Middleton and Poe, teacher interaction about student achievement was a consequence of the way teachers organized and presented their student growth scores to their principals. Since teachers used various strategies (e.g., multiple tests, multiple administrations, pre- and post-tests) that ensured they achieved full points toward their final rating, teachers at the two schools worried about neither securing full points toward their evaluation nor competing with colleagues. However, teachers' general distaste for connecting their performance to student outcomes inhibited teacher interaction about student achievement data. When asked if she ever talked with colleagues about data she used to demonstrate student growth, Mrs. Reid at Poe said:

No, because those are completely for me—Totally meaningless for me. They're just something that I can slap a percentage on and I can guarantee that the kids are going to do well. . .so I don't have any conversations about the stuff I use for my student growth.

Other teachers at Middleton and Poe concurred that student performance on the assessments was simply not something they discussed often with their peers. Even on rare occasions when teachers did interact about evaluation-specific student achievement, these conversations did not center on the implications for teacher performance. For instance, Mrs. Quincy at Middleton acknowledged that she and her team sometimes discussed student achievement, but these discussions focused on particular problem students and the potential sources of these students' difficulties rather than on the teachers' instruction and how it might be improved. She explained:

We do have discussions about [student test performance], but. . .it's usually struggling students that get our attention. . .[and] unless it's an issue it's not brought up. You know, if everyone's going well and you're not worried about it. If there is no issue—then it's not something that's brought up in a team meeting. So, it's just as needed.

This quote and others like it suggest that teacher collaborative discussions reinforced the connection between student-specific difficulties and student achievement outcomes rather than student achievement outcomes and teacher performance. In sum, then, because of the way Poe and Middleton organized the collection and reporting of teachers' student achievement ratings, a teacher's impact on student growth was not contested territory and would neither help nor hinder a teacher's pursuit of the common perspective, which prioritized securing a high rating.

3.17. Teacher Collaboration Around Student Achievement Data at Waller

Because competition for high evaluation ratings extended into the student growth component of evaluation at Waller, teachers were cautious about how they interacted with their peers concerning their student growth score rating. In public forums (e.g., PLCs, staff meetings), private interpersonal conversations with peers, and during interviews, teachers at Waller undermined connectives between their performance and student outcomes and they intentionally kept discussions about student performance out of the public sphere whenever possible. This trend held for teachers regardless of their experience, academic specialty, or whether their students performed well or poorly.

Returning to the framework in Figure 1, undermining connectives was a group effort to maintain the frame that teacher performance was and should be divorced from student achievement outcomes. There are two complementary reasons for this phenomenon. First, teachers believed that student achievement was unstable and likely to shift dramatically from one year to the next, independent of the teachers' efforts. If a teacher did not need to disassociate from student outcomes one year, he or she might the next. For example, Mr. Bridges explained that he kept an even stance toward his students' success:

I remember the year I was out on medical [leave], they were like, "You did awesome! You're the best. ..." I think I had the second best data [in the school]. I was like, "ok."

Second, teachers collectively undermined the connectives between their performance and student outcomes for social reasons. For instance, Mrs. Jackson believed that her high student growth scores had ostracized her from her veteran colleagues. She said:

[Student growth scores] are all public. But all that that did was piss people off. . . Now nobody wants to share anything with me because I could take their job.

In another instance, despite her own students' high achievement, Mrs. Hall expressed the group perspective in her feelings of ambivalence and concern for her colleagues:

This year I'm going to have highly effective [student growth score]. . . [and] part of me feels bad about it. I feel good about it as a teacher, but I feel bad about it when it comes to my colleagues because a lot of us have feelings about the NWEA because it is not a good test to determine or to be used for evaluation.

Teachers at Waller, then, undermined the connectives between their performance and student outcomes as a way to collectively maintain this frame, which allowed them to weather the personal ebbs and flows of student achievement and maintain good relations with their colleagues. In fact, undermining the connective became the primary means of repairing potentially hurt feelings when student growth scores were released. When Ms. Stickle's students performed well, she suggested the only course of action was consoling Mr. Bridges when his students scored the lowest in the department. She did this through questioning the test's validity:

You look at Mr. Bridges' data and I immediately look at it with him and say, 'listen, we had the emergency drill in the middle of the only hour that tanked.

Your scores are right with ours if you don't have that [issue]. . . You don't know which three students had the heart racing, because they didn't know it was a drill. Again, that is beyond our control.

When pressed about what might happen if she acknowledged her students' high scores and suggested that her own efforts had resulted in high student scores, Ms. Stickle said:

That would do nothing to help you. It actually hurts you in a building. Your colleagues aren't going to be as supportive in helping you. You did better than they did. They're going to cut off sharing every assignment. Now you're rubbing it in their face that you did better than they did with your assessments. It's socially not acceptable to brag.

Teachers at Waller often felt conflicted about how to handle themselves when their students performed well. They were unsure about when to offer condolences and when to keep to themselves, as Mrs. Curtis's quote makes clear:

A teacher came [to me] and said 'I only got effective, because the math data was low. My [observation] was highly effective, but the math data was low.' But I got highly effective. So did I want to say that I got highly effective? No. I did not. I did not want to say anything. Because I felt bad. Because it's not fair the way we're evaluated [based on student performance], in my opinion, . . . so I just don't say anything.

Discussing one's high scores and publicly espousing the link between teacher performance and student achievement would surface tension and inhibit collaboration. Thus, in order to keep the peace and continue in their collective work and positive relations, teachers only infrequently discussed their student growth scores. Even so, teachers reported only discussing the topic to console a very close colleague or when infrequently compelled to by administration. Whenever the topic was introduced, teachers across the performance spectrum reinforced the perspective that student achievement was divorced from teacher performance for a wide variety of commonly accepted reasons.

In sum, teachers across the three schools rarely talked about student achievement outcomes, albeit for two very different reasons. Teachers at Poe and Middleton were disinterested in discussing student outcomes as they related to teacher evaluation because their high rating was fully guaranteed, the results teachers generated obscured students' actual performance, and the tests they used were specific to each teacher. At Waller, teachers were not disinterested in student results, but they purposefully avoided talking about their students' performance as a way to deal with the unpredictability of student achievement and as a way to maintain harmonious relationships with their colleagues. When teachers did discuss student achievement, without exception, their discussions undermined the connections between teacher performance and student outcomes.

4. Discussion

This section considers the findings in reference to data-use intervention models (Coburn & Turner, 2011; Marsh, 2012; Spillane, 2012). I discuss the political and organizational contexts of teacher evaluation and data use, the characteristics and resources of teacher evaluation, and the processes of data use in teacher evaluation systems. Each of these elements helps better clarify the center of the conceptual model (Figure 1): Teacher data use in the evaluative context.

4.1. Organizational and Political Contexts of Teacher Evaluation

Organizational and political contexts were important. In Poe's and Middleton's districts, teachers were allowed to construct and present their own evidence on their impact

on student achievement. This decision had profound implications for the processes of data use. While teachers shared the same group perspective as teachers at Waller that student achievement was unpredictable and outside of their control, district and school contexts (as expressed through resources, regulations and routines) made teacher projections highly effective in terms of securing positive student achievement gains in a simple and easy.

In contrast, in Waller's district, teachers' impact on student achievement was externally determined. Given the group perspective, this arrangement exposed teachers' vulnerability and limited their opportunities to secure a high evaluation rating through controlling projections. However, while any given teacher could not control her projection, by working together, teachers could maintain the frame (i.e., reinforce a commonly held definition of the situation) that teacher performance should not be linked to student achievement. Teachers then resisted any effort to establish this link, as Ms. Shriver (a highly respected and well-liked principal) found out when she attempted to focus department meetings on the implications of student achievement for teachers' instructional practices. When forced to discuss student achievement as measured by the NWEA, teachers instead reinforced the frame that student achievement was out of their control. In Spillane's (2012) language, the ostensive (apparent) and performative (actual) aspects of the organizational routines at Waller contrasted sharply.

At all three schools, discussion about the data generated as part of the teacher evaluation system never became part of organizational routines. The first reason for this was universal—regardless of the political and organizational context, teachers disassociated from student performance. Teachers across schools believed that attempting to make this connection during interaction with colleagues was likely to invite accusations of presumed superiority.

The second reason was specific to Poe and Middleton. At these two schools, there was very little, if anything, to discuss because teachers used different assessments from which they selected only the most favorable data. This hindered any comparison across classrooms even if teachers wanted to have substantive conversations linking instruction and student achievement.

4.2. Characteristics and Resources of Teacher Evaluation as a Data Use Intervention

Marsh (2012) described three characteristics of successful data-use interventions: (1) understandable data; (2) focus on school-wide improvements and promotion of feelings of safety for teachers; and (3) development of clear norms for interaction surrounding data.

4.3. Understandable Data

The politically charged nature of the data made understandability a moot point. Teachers at Poe and Middleton understood the data they used but the districts' decision to allow for teachers to select the data they would use allowed teachers to select from among their own readily available assessments and to combine their results in ways that assured the teachers' own high performance. At Waller, teachers' understanding of their students' performance was more limited and there was genuine confusion about how student growth was calculated and what implications could be drawn from the data. However, since the group perspective emphasized the importance of obtaining a high relative score and attaching student performance to teacher evaluation was viewed as a threat, teachers focused on disestablishing connectives rather than on better understanding the data. No teacher reported devoting time or effort to examining their students' results or discerning implications from assessments for their instructional practice.

4.4. School-Wide Focus and “Safe” Data

Because of high-stakes teacher evaluation, data use was not safe or focused on school-wide improvement. Rather, data were treated politically, and I could find no evidence that teachers at any of the three schools used student achievement data to adjust their instruction.

4.5. Norms for Interaction Surrounding Data

Norms, then, formed in response to the political nature of evaluation, the teachers’ group perspective, and the subsequent actions and interactions. Poe and Middleton teachers constructed student achievement evidence that assured their own high performance and they assumed that their colleagues were doing likewise. That is, the student achievement requirement of evaluation was a private matter for teachers to work out on their own. Consequently, teachers rarely, if ever, discussed their students’ results.

At Waller, powerful norms regarding interaction surrounding the data-use intervention developed in response to the structural conditions. Namely, it was commonly understood that teachers should publicly disavow their connection to student achievement and, when needed, console their colleagues and maintain the collective understanding of the situation.

4.6. Teacher Evaluation and the Processes of Data Use

Common conceptualizations of the data-use processes (e.g., Coburn & Turner, 2011; Marsh, 2012) also contrasted sharply with the processes observed at the three schools in this study. Generally, prior conceptions suggest a sequence in which: (1) teachers access data; (2) teachers interpret data; (3) teachers construct implications and plan for action; and (4) teachers evaluate the consequences of accessing, interpreting, and responding.

At Poe and Middleton, teachers progressed through the stages of data use in similar ways. This process can best be captured as follows: (1) teachers assessed students with a variety of tests; (2) teachers selected from among these tests to represent their students’ achievement as favorably as possible; (3) teachers constructed artifacts that represented their students’ high achievement; (4) teachers presented this achievement to the principal; and (5) teachers secured a high rating. As noted above, this sequence did not require that teachers reflect on the link between their performance and student achievement either privately or in conversations with their colleagues.

At Waller, the sequence of data use also reflected the organizational and political conditions, although it differed greatly from the process at Middleton and Poe. Specifically, the sequence can be described in the following steps: (1) teachers administered the NWEA test at the beginning and near the end of the year; (2) the district calculated the teachers’ results, placing them in one of four performance bands; (3) high-scoring teachers kept their high performance private and, when the occasion demanded it, consoled their lower-performing colleagues; and (4) when pressed into public discussion during formal organizational routines, teachers reinforced the frame that disassociated teacher performance from student achievement.

5. Conclusions

The analysis presented here suggests that using data from teacher evaluations as an effective data-use intervention would require more than a few minor modifications. Evaluation is a political endeavor in which teachers seek to establish their excellent performance through either securing positive scores for themselves individually or controlling the frame collectively. Given this group perspective, evaluation and the data that accompanies it

cannot be easily repurposed into something with which teachers consistently use to inform their instructional improvement.

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