RUNNING HEADER: INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT

Examining the Context of Instruction to Facilitate Student Success

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Identifying effective teachers and teaching practices has driven much educational research over the past century, yet agreement of effectiveness criteria has remained elusive. Teachers differ in effectiveness which in turn has differential influences on achievement (Leigh, 2010; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Cain, 2005). Decades of research has consistently supported a strong relationship between high-quality classroom instruction and student academic success (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). Recent efforts have attempted to reliably measure instructional practices (e.g., Measures of Effective Teaching Project [MET]; Kane & Staiger, 2012). In addition, there is a robust literature that identifies specific instructional strategies proven to be effective but also suggests that teachers vary widely in use and application of these practices (Muñoz & Chang, 2007; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox & Bradley, 2002). Thus, the question remains as to what and how often teachers engage in effective practices (Reddy, Fabiano, Barbarash, & Dudek, 2012).

Due in part to the wide variability of instructional practices and the relatively few psychometrically defensible tools for measuring said practices (Reddy, Fabiano, & Jimerson, 2013), governments have often turned to the use of student test performance as a primary measure of teacher effectiveness (Nicholson-Crotty & Staley, 2012; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). For example, the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) legislation in the United States created test-based accountability that would beget a new evaluation system for teachers based on student test scores (Koretz & Hamilton, 2006; Valli & Buese, 2007). Test scores are now used as a significant determinant within annual teacher evaluations that in turn may lead to variety of job-related outcomes (e.g., promotion, merit pay, dismissal). Devolved educational policy has resulted in the different countries that make up the United Kingdom following slightly different approaches. In England, teacher effectiveness in state-funded schools is primarily assessed

through mandatory inspections, conducted once every three years, by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2015). The organization of schools into 'league tables' based on school-average performance on tests has contributed to a considerable blurring of teacher and school effectiveness with student test performance (Slater, Davies, & Burgess, 2012). These practices have been the subject of intense criticism for creating a culture of performativity in schools, instituting politically motivated judgments over what constitutes teacher effectiveness, and negatively impacting the non-tested curriculum (e.g., Ehren & Visscher, 2006; Hall & Noyes, 2009; Troman, 2008). However, such methods have questionable reliability (Baker et al., 2010) as test performance may be influenced by non-teaching factors (e.g., school attendance, student psychosocial functioning; Corcoran, 2010). The use of high-stakes test performance within educational decisions have also led to unintended consequences such as increased student and teacher stress (Putwain, 2008; von der Embse, Kilgus, Bowler, Solomon, & Curtiss, 2015) and counterproductive teaching practices (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Putwain & Roberts, 2009). Perhaps more fundamentally, these systems conflate *teacher quality* with *teaching quality*.

As noted by Darling-Hammond (2014), *teacher quality* is a combination of personal skills or traits, knowledge of instructional processes and content, and willingness to adapt instruction and collaborate with peers. In contrast, *teaching quality* is instructional practices that facilitates learning by meeting a wide range of student needs and abilities. Importantly, teaching quality consists of teacher quality (e.g., knowledge, skill, and disposition) and the context of instruction (e.g., teacher-student relationships, school climate, curriculum; Darling-Hammond, 2014). Consideration of instructional practices in isolation may result in an incomplete depiction of teacher quality, and be similarly restrictive as test-based teacher evaluation practice. However, contextual variables could provide important insight into what constitutes an effective teacher.

For example, the best trained doctor will not provide the highest quality patient care if he or she is (1) under constant duress and (2) without the necessary equipment or tools. Similarly, "effective" teachers may engage in less than optimal instructional practices when faced with school-level pressures to raise student test scores (Saeki, Pendergast, Segool, & von der Embse, 2015).

Researchers have identified important, non-instructional determinants of student achievement and test performance including supportive classroom environments, strong teacher-student relationships, and emotionally supportive administrators (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, Abry, 2013; den Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2004). However, modern accountability systems have not yet incorporated such contextual variables. Given the importance of student test performance in teacher evaluation, there is a need to examine contextual variables (e.g., teacher stress, self-efficacy, school climate) that may influence the quality of instructional practices. Thus, a primary goal of this special issue is to feature research regarding contextual variables that influence instructional practices and consequently student academic success.

The manuscripts included within this issue address *malleable* factors, such as teacher-student relationships, that are specifically linked to instruction and student achievement. As noted below, these manuscripts include novel conceptualizations of the instructional context and offer insight into how we may best support quality instructional practices.

Articles Featured in This Special Topic Issue

In the first article, Mainhard (2015) examines how perceptions of secondary school teachers along dimensions of agency and communion are related to student achievement goals. The perception of a teacher as strict (high agency and low communion) explained class-average as well as individual student variation in achievement goals. A key feature of Mainhard's study

was to examine how individual student perceptions of a teacher differed from the class average. Critically, those students with a preference for a challenging teacher reported a stronger mastery goal orientation.

In the second article, Katz and Shahar (2015), examine how the beliefs of elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers contribute to their tendency to use autonomous or controlling instructional approaches. Teachers who were themselves autonomously motivated, believed that autonomous motivation was a desirable characteristic for students, and reported using a more autonomous style in their classrooms. These findings provide valuable insights into the reasons *why* some teachers approach instruction differently.

In the third article, Frelin (2015) describes a unique approach for students with disconnected educational paths in the latter stages of secondary education, sometimes described as the 'hard to reach and hard to teach'. These are students at high risk of leaving their education with no formal qualifications leading to social isolation, poor employment opportunities, and poor health outcomes. Results highlight the importance of building trusting supportive relationships to re-connect these students.

In the fourth article, Symes, Putwain, and Remedios (2015) focus on fear appeals used by secondary school teachers prior to high stakes examinations. These are messages that highlight the consequences of failure for one's future life trajectory as a motivational strategy to encourage students to work hard to avoid failure. A primary finding is highly buoyant students (those who believe that they can 'bounce back' from failure) interpret fear appeals in a more positive way, demonstrating the importance of attending to student characteristics when considering the influence of the instructional context.

In the fifth article, von der Embse, Schultz, and Draughn (2015) adopt an experimental approach to compare the use of fear appeals in a higher education context with efficacy appeals (i.e., messages that reinforce the belief that one can reach a desired outcome). Students performed worse on a test when fear appeals were used than when efficacy appeals were used, but this was not attributable to test anxiety. These findings highlight the potentially negative impact of drawing attention to failure by the class instructor, even if well-intentioned.

In the commentary, Pendergast and Kaplan (2015) identify three themes that cut across all five articles in this special edition: relationships, competence, and agency. These are discussed in terms of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems model; how teachers create and maintain facilitative (or otherwise) instructional contexts at micro and exosystem levels. Finally, they highlight the important role that school psychologists have in helping teachers to identify and build facilitative environments and in providing advocacy with administrators and policy makers.

Conclusions

The studies presented in this special issue illustrate the importance of the instructional context for improving student outcomes. What have we learnt from this literature that can assist in our understanding *effective teachers* and *effective teaching*? First, the context in which teachers operate is complex, multi-layered, and involves policy level decisions. Macro-school level influences, as well as micro-level interactions, occur on a routine basis between teachers and students. Employing an ecological model may help conceptualize and better understand different operating influences. Second, despite the diversity of instructional practices that are presented within the present investigations, and in the wider literature, there are commonalities that may simplify group effective practices together. Third, teachers' use of particular

approaches and students' responses to them are to partly idiosyncratic and partly common across classes. There is an important role in understanding how the values and beliefs of both teachers and students frame these interactions. Continuing to examine contextual influences may result in furthering our understanding of effective instructional practices, thus improving educational outcomes.

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