Written in a distinctive and conversational tone, Dr. Popham provides a clear and thoughtful overview of the major themes and issues associated with ongoing efforts to assess teachers by means of student achievement data and other evidence of teaching quality. Popham aims to reach three audiences: policymakers, educational administrators, and teachers. He strikes an effective balance between presenting the level of technical detail required for readers to become informed stakeholders and not alienating interested parties who may be largely new to these issues and who have sought out this book as a primer.

There are nine chapters in this concise (176 page) book that was, to me, a quick and engaging read. Each chapter ends with Popham’s description of what he considers to be the implications of the chapter’s content for each of the three segments of his intended audience. The book is also accompanied by study questions made available via the publisher’s website. Despite that resource, the book will not satisfy readers who are seeking a robust reference list or catalog of work in this area since Popham’s sources account for only two pages of the volume.

In Chapter 1, Popham discusses the federal educational context (i.e., NCLB, Race to the Top) that has
set the stage for the current state-, district-, and school-based work to develop systems to evaluate teachers according to their students’ academic achievement and a host of other factors. At the core is the shared belief that students learn more from effective teachers than ineffective ones. Popham previews several critiques of the use of student achievement data in this chapter that he revisits throughout the rest of the book. For example, he challenges the value of using student achievement data to draw valid inferences about teacher quality since these tests were not designed for that purpose.

While there is general consensus that using multiple evidence types is preferable to using just one, systems that aim to depict teacher quality by drawing on multiple data points can (and do) differ substantially in how these factors are weighted to generate an overall assessment. Popham argues that evidence should be weighted according to its “evaluative persuasiveness”. By this standard, Popham does not mince his words when he states, “Yes, I believe that the dominant factor to be employed in appraising a teacher should be a teacher’s effectiveness in promoting worthwhile learning in students (p. 29).”

Chapters 2 and 3 provide specific guidelines about the steps involved in developing a teacher evaluation system. Specifically, Popham describes a common framework for these systems. First, evaluative criteria are selected. Second, a decision about which sources of evidence will be admissible is made. Third, how the different evidence sources will be weighted is agreed upon, and a decision made about whether these weights can be adjusted depending on teachers’ particular instructional circumstances before arriving at a final evaluation. Since teacher evaluation systems must both be designed and executed well, Popham raises the importance of the how reviewers are chosen and urges the incorporation of checks within the system to ensure that the individuals involved are implementing the system fairly.

More than half of the book – Chapters 4-8 – focuses on the most common evidence used in teacher evaluation systems and aims to help readers understand their strengths and weaknesses. A brief history of standardized tests is offered in Chapter 4, reaching back to the development of the Army Alpha during World War II which was intended to help identify promising candidates for military leadership roles. Popham also spends time explaining validity, reliability, and the absence of bias as criteria
employed by standardized test makers to ascertain the quality of their instruments. Among the vast ground covered in this chapter, Popham’s point about a test’s instructional sensitivity is particularly germane to the topic of teacher evaluation. In other words, how students do on a test that will be used to measure their teacher’s effectiveness should be demonstrably and substantially influenced by the instruction that their teacher provided, as opposed to other factors. To the degree that this is not the case, the test scores become less clear signals of teacher impact.

Several of Popham’s concerns about standardized test scores also apply to classroom or teacher-made assessments, which is the topic of Chapter 5. Indeed, it is unrealistic to expect teachers, who are unlikely to be psychometricians themselves, to be able to perform the same diagnostics on their assessments that organizations such as Pearson, whose annual revenues are measured in the billions of dollars. Nevertheless, since most states only administer standardized assessments to students in grades 3-8 in two subjects (English language arts/reading and math), the majority of teachers in so-called non-tested grades and subjects are left to demonstrate their effectiveness via classroom assessments which are generally neither well-suited for that purpose nor meet the criteria for high-quality tests.

Classroom observations are discussed in Chapter 6. Here, Popham offers a brisk review of two commonly used rubrics, specifically, those developed by Charlotte Danielson and Robert Marzano. The presentation of these rubrics becomes too nuanced at times and distracts from the general aims of the chapter. No matter the rubric, classroom observations tend to be better at identifying teacher performance that is either very strong or very weak, and are less precise in distinguishing across the great majority in the middle. Even still, for classroom observations to be most illuminating, Popham recommends that they are performed by well-trained staff, occur often and for longer periods of time, and are unannounced to increase the likelihood that the teaching that is observed reflects that which is typically happening in the classroom.

Together, Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the other miscellaneous evidence that may be incorporated into teacher evaluation systems. These include administrator and colleague ratings and student and parent surveys, among others. While Popham is highly critical of these
categories of evidence, he does provide constructive advice for how to maximize their evaluative value.

The concluding chapter is a note of encouragement to readers to become informed about how teachers are being evaluated – at their children’s school, in their district, or their state. He urges readers to get involved and to act in the interest of working to increase the usefulness of these systems to distinguish between strong and weak teachers. His noble intention is to empower stakeholders with knowledge so that they can act to improve learning outcomes for students. Thus, Popham answers the question posed by the title of his book. Despite all of the associated challenges and obstacles, many of which are raised in this book, Popham believes that teacher evaluation can be performed well such that it advances the quality of professional practice and increases opportunities for young people to excel because of what they learn at school. His optimism, while unexpected by the end of the book, is refreshing.

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