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# The Implementation and Impact of the Teacher Evaluation Process On Special Educator Professional Growth in a Public Middle School

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THE IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT OF THE TEACHER EVALUATION  
PROCESS ON SPECIAL EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH IN A PUBLIC  
MIDDLE SCHOOL

By  
Michael L. Lefko

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University College of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2023

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Michael L. Lefko under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## **Abstract**

THE IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT OF THE TEACHER EVALUATION PROCESS ON SPECIAL EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH IN A PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL. Lefko, Michael L., 2023: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University.

This mixed methods program evaluation examined teacher and administrator perceptions regarding fidelity of implementation of components of the teacher evaluation program with middle school special education teachers. These components include pre-conferences, observations, and post-conferences; summary evaluations; and professional development plans. Incorporating evidence from qualitative interviews with school-based administrators, qualitative focus groups with special education teachers, and a quantitative survey with special education teachers, this study found that fidelity of implementation of the components of teacher evaluation is impacted by evaluator capacity. Capacity is defined as both, time to engage in the components of teacher evaluation and professional knowledge of special education. The study found that school administrators want to engage fully in the evaluation process with fidelity but often believed they lack the time to do so. The study found that increased evaluator knowledge of teaching special education was warranted to enable evaluators to provide specific actionable feedback to special education teachers. Quality feedback is necessary as part of the evaluation process to facilitate professional growth. The findings of this study suggested actions school administrators can take at the school-based level, such as improving time management, increasing their own professional knowledge, and effective utilization of other professionals to assist with teacher feedback and professional development. This study suggested that improving the fidelity of implementation of the

components that comprise teacher evaluation could result in professional growth of special education teachers, increased competence, and improved self-efficacy.

*Keywords:* teacher evaluation, teacher feedback, administrator capacity, fidelity of implementation

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background**

During my first year of teaching in 1991, I participated in teacher observations and an evaluation instrument utilized for the purposes of my evaluation and professional growth. I worked with an assistant principal who embodied “the heart of a coach” (Crane, 2012, p. 149). As a school leader and coach, my assistant principal helped me develop my self-esteem regarding my “internal image of self-efficacy” (Crane, 2012, p. 189) through our interactions during the evaluation process. Through his relationship and his capacity to lead and evaluate, he helped me, as Crane (2012) alluded to, to increase confidence in my own ability to think, act, manage, and face trials in my work life. This assistant principal was invested in me. The tools he utilized, such as the evaluation instruments, were the tools that served as a springboard for that investment and my growth and success as an educator.

Current research suggests that my experience with my assistant principal is the exception rather than the rule when examining the implementation of teacher evaluation in schools. Smylie (2011) found in a national survey of more than 1,000 teachers across the country that only one-quarter of teachers considered their most recent formal evaluations useful or effective. Smylie also established that the consensus was among educator professionals that the educator evaluation process was ineffective and has been for a long time.

This study is a program evaluation that examined the teacher evaluation process in a large K-12 public school district in North Carolina. My study aimed to see if the teacher evaluation program is implemented as intended with fidelity, resulting in intended

impacts specifically on middle school special education teachers' professional growth. One of the main reasons for selecting middle school special educators as my focus is that middle school special educators need to possess a specific specialized skill set for them to become effective practitioners at delivering specially designed instruction that is unique as compared with their general educator counterparts. Specially designed instruction, as defined through the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (United States Congress, 2017) is adapting instruction to the individual needs of a particular student to address the unique needs resulting from their disability, ensuring that student access to the general curriculum so a child can meet specified educational standards. Therefore, my main questions are whether the teacher evaluation program is implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers and to what extent the evaluation process supports the professional growth they need.

According to the implementation manual for the school district in this program evaluation, the purpose of the educator evaluation system is to promote effective leadership, quality teaching, and student learning and to encourage professional growth, to be adaptable to the educator being evaluated, and to serve as the foundation for the creation of professional goals and the identification of professional development needs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, special education teachers in K-12 public middle schools have a more difficult job than ever before. Whether a beginning teacher or an experienced teacher, special education teachers, according to Collins et al. (2017), are charged with understanding needs associated with various disabilities, developing and implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), collecting and managing data, and effectively

communicating with all stakeholders. They must do this all while implementing specially designed instruction improving the academic, behavioral and social outcomes of students with disabilities (Collins et al., 2017). Specially designed instruction, as defined through the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (2004), is adapting instruction to the individual needs of a particular student to address the unique needs resulting from their disability, ensuring them access to the general curriculum so they can meet specified educational standards. Special educators must do all these things for students who, in most cases, are already perhaps years behind in skills. Finally, they must practice with efficacy with limited support from their school-based evaluators as evidenced in the data collected in this study, making this job a challenging proposition for novice and experienced special education teachers alike. According to Conderman and Stephens (2001), compared to their general education counterparts, special educators report higher rates of occupational stress. These teachers often work in isolation with a lack of administrative guidance. Conderman and Stephens concluded that while administrative support at the school-based level is limited for reasons discussed within this study, the involvement of the principal or other members of the school-based administrative team is critical for special education teachers to feel they have the support they need.

Mehrenburg (2013) stated that many supervisors place a higher importance on the administrative demands of their job, compared to teaching. This, according to Mehrenburg , leads to burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and decreased commitment to the profession. Fore et al. (2002) noted in their study on special education teachers and burnout that special education teachers often encountered stress described as heavy paperwork loads, extensive time spent in meetings and limited individualization

opportunities. This was, in Fore et al., one factor leading participants to leave the profession. Kaff (2004) wrote that one of the many issues leading teachers to leave special education included, though not exclusively, the overwhelming amount of paperwork. One teacher in Kaff stated, “I want to teach the children, instead of spending hours doing paperwork. I feel we cheat the children. They come after the paperwork” (p. 12).

Public schools in the United States have long pressured teachers to show student growth as measured by test scores, as dictated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), reauthorized as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as Every Student Succeeds Act. A supplementary approach to educating youth has reemerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In contrast to the idea of a child’s educational achievement and academic needs being reduced to a test score, the whole child approach, according to Slade and Griffith (2013), attends to the social, emotional, mental, physical, and cognitive development of children.

Special educators, along with being challenged to show both student growth and meet the needs of the whole child, must also, according to Washburn- Moses (2005), become competent at teaching everything. They work in different settings and must teach and adapt content across all levels. They must do this at times with insufficient content area knowledge, the diverse needs of a large caseload of students they serve, and the incumbrance of paperwork that often competes in the eyes of supervisors for priority with teaching and learning.

Special educators need to grow professionally to meet the challenges of students and the demands of schools, systems, and other stakeholders. Special education teachers

need to develop the professional knowledge and self-efficacy required to sustain them in a very challenging profession. The evaluation process is designed, when implemented with fidelity, to support special education teachers in this way. Special educators require an evaluation system implemented comprehensively with fidelity by instructional leaders who will individualize a professional development experience that will highlight their strengths, recognize opportunities for growth, and place special education teachers on a path to learning and development. According to Collins et al. (2017), a focus on learning and professional growth for teachers is linked with increased satisfaction, lowered stress levels, and greater probability of remaining in the profession. The North Carolina Teacher Evaluation System District Implementation Manual states that all of the instruments and processes that encompass teacher evaluation are designed to encourage professional growth, so while the research examining the design and intent of the teacher evaluation system suggests that professional growth is one goal of teacher evaluation, current teacher evaluation programs, according to my preliminary interviews with school-based district- and state-level leaders, do not consistently facilitate professional growth in a meaningful way.

A more specific question is whether the teacher evaluation process is consistently implemented with fidelity for formative purposes rather than as simply a summative instrument measuring teacher proficiency used for bureaucratic and institutional purposes. Dr. Robert Sox, Director for Educational Standards and Evaluation for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, distinguished between the evaluative responsibilities of the teacher evaluation program and the supervisory responsibilities, the latter being more concerned with formative professional growth and learning, whereas

the former is more concerned with rating a teacher. Supporting Dr. Sox's call for evaluations to be more formative, Smylie (2011) wrote that if educator evaluations are to serve as instruments for educational development (p. 97), it is essential that evaluation be formative and that there be a strong connection or link between the process of evaluation and robust ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers. This is something the research confirms does not, on a large scale, occur in schools or school systems across the country. Smylie concluded that an evaluation or observation by itself, in the absence of strong targeted professional development, even when implemented with fidelity, is a "‘weak lever’ for significant and meaningful improvement of teacher performance and practice" (p. 99).

This study, as a process program evaluation, examined whether the components of the teacher evaluation program are being implemented for special education teachers as planned and intended and what barriers, if any, there are to implementation with fidelity. It also discusses what revisions to the program implementation might be recommended to positively impact our middle school special education teachers.

### **Specified Purposes of Teacher Evaluation**

According to Mireles-Rios (2019), the teacher evaluation process, since the inception of NCLB, was intended to serve two purposes: to measure teacher competence and to develop teacher quality. The problem, according to Mireles-Rios and concurred by Dr. Robert Sox of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, is that the current role of teacher evaluations focuses primarily on the summative component with a focus on adherence to the grade-level standards. According to Mireles-Rios and Becchio (2018), the evaluation process, in large part, continues to be reduced to a summative

instrument; one to be completed for district compliance, rather than a process to grow and develop educators' skills and competencies, as the process was designed and intended.

### **Instructional Leader Behaviors in the Evaluation Process**

Some of the problems with the evaluation process, according to Mireles-Rios (2019), include instructional leaders providing only superficial comments and a lack of consistency among different evaluators. In a study by Hester et al. (2020), several participants described administrators as “totally clueless” (p. 355) about special education. Hester et al. went on to say that participants frequently described a lack of support and resources coming from their schools and administrators as reasons they chose to leave the profession. Challenges and needs when it comes to administrators and special education were cited by Hester et al. as the need for school administrators to understand special education laws and responsibilities as well as to create positive working conditions Hester et al. described as materials, planning time, and mentoring and to provide meaningful professional development opportunities that meet the needs of special educators.

Mireles-Rios and Becchio (2018) stated that specific administrator behaviors within the evaluation process and program play a significant role in developing teacher self-efficacy when employed with fidelity. These include providing opportunities to observe other teachers, providing verbal encouragement during observations, and eliciting emotional arousal resulting from quality feedback on their teaching (Mireles-Rios & Becchio, 2018, p. 463). The challenges instructional leaders have in providing these experiences for teachers, as described by Smylie (2011), occur when evaluators have limited competences, commitments, time, and training to engage in post-

conferencing and coaching with fidelity. With limited capabilities or capacity to coach, the quality feedback necessary to promote professional development to address their specific needs remains limited. With limited time and preparation, teacher evaluation, as a program and a process, often, according to Smylie and Robert Sox (personal communication, October 13, 2021) of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, does not get the attention it deserves to develop educators to their truest potential through targeted professional growth opportunities.

### **The Need for an Evaluation Approach**

For this study, I examined the evaluation of middle school special education teachers through the lens of a process program evaluation. Specifically, I sought to examine the implementation of components of the evaluation process. These components included self-assessment, pre-observation conference, observations, post-observation conference, and the development and implementation of the professional development plan (PDP) as well as the summary evaluation.

In this study, I studied the extent to which the evaluation process for middle school special education teachers was implemented as intended and with fidelity. I wanted to see where the strengths existed in the program's components and processes in the middle schools in a district as well as where there were opportunities for growth, comparing existing practices to the program design.

### **Context of the Study**

The teacher evaluation program that was the subject of this study is utilized in all elementary, middle, and high schools in a public K-12 school district located in North Carolina. The focus of the study was researching within the school district's nine middle



schools that serve approximately 9,962 total students in Grades 6-8, comprising roughly 24% of the total student population for the district of 41,500 students. Of the 9,962 total middle school students, approximately 834 students, or 8.37% of the total middle school student population, have IEPs and are considered exceptional students. This special education student subgroup is served by 60 middle school special education teachers.

### **Logic Model**

The logic model created for this study is based on a thorough review of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Manual and feedback from various professionals at the building, district, and state levels, to gain multiple perspectives on how components of teacher evaluation should be conducted, as designed and intended. The logic model is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1***Logic Model–Inputs–Resources to Support Teacher Evaluation*

Inputs
Tangible Resources
<p>Funding Budget cuts at the state level have limited capacity to provide support and training to principals</p> <p>Personnel School-based administrators trained in teacher evaluation School performance officers provided to each school to serve as resource and monitor for teacher evaluation</p> <p>Training Principals and assistant principals have access to trainings/ refreshers, assistant principal's academy Requirement for all administrators to be trained in North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System (NCEES, North Carolina Department of Instruction, 2021)</p> <p>Materials/equipment Web-based resources are available -assistant principal's academy, orientation to the evaluation process and local and state policies regarding teacher evaluation. Toolkit from employee relations.</p> <p>Technology  Web-based (NCEES, North Carolina Department of Instruction, 2021) laptops</p>
Intangible Resources
<p>Partnership Mentors (new teachers only)</p> <p>Program for beginning teachers</p> <p>For principals: district performance officers</p> <p>For teachers: there are instructional coaches and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) but their potential to assist with capacity with evaluation and supervision has not yet been realized according to preliminary research.</p> <p>Time for pre-conferences, observations, post-conferences, and development of professional development plans</p> <p>Research (NCEES, North Carolina Department of Instruction, 2021) is research-based</p> <p>Regulations–local district and state guidelines–North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Manual, rubric of teacher standards.</p>

**Table 2***Logic Model—Outputs—Actions, Products, and Outcomes of Teacher Evaluation*

Outputs (What we do/the program components products- teachers & administra- tors)	Products of each component: products- teachers & administrators)	Teacher and administrator roles	Outcomes (short-term) benefits	Outcomes (medium- term) benefits	Outcomes (long-term) benefits
Teacher self- assessment	Using the rubric for evaluating North Carolina teachers, the teacher rates his or her own performance at the beginning of the year and reflects on his or her performance throughout the year. This will also be used during the post- observation conference.	Teacher: rates their own performance  Administrator: discusses with teacher during pre-observation conference	Teachers understand the intent and complete the process	Teachers make self- reflection part of their planning and professional development practices	Teachers become true reflective practitioners.
Pre- observation conference	Before first formal observation, principal meets with the teacher to discuss the teacher's self- assessment based on the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers, the teacher's most recent professional growth plan, and the lesson(s) to be observed. The teacher will provide the principal with a written description of the lesson(s). The goal of this	Teacher: provides the administrator a written description of the lesson to be observed.  Administrator: Facilitates discussion of teacher's self- assessment, most recent professional growth or professional development plan, and the lesson to be observed	Teachers engage in the process for the purpose of professional growth.	Teachers begin to develop a trusting relationship with instructional leaders- transformative dialogue begins to occur.	The observation and subsequent dialogue become a catalyst for continued professional growth and contribute to the development of the PDP (however this process only occurs once

(continued)

Outputs (What we do/the program components products- teachers & administra- tors)	Products of each component: products- teachers & administrators)	Teacher and administrator roles	Outcomes (short-term) benefits	Outcomes (medium- term) benefits	Outcomes (long-term) benefits
	conference is to prepare the principal for the observation. Pre-Observation conferences are not required for subsequent observations.				
Observation	Formal Observation: A formal observation shall last 45 minutes or an entire class period. Informal Observation: An informal observation may take place as an evaluator visits classrooms, helps a student, or “drops in” on the teacher’s classroom for a minimum of 20 minutes in one sitting. evaluator checks descriptors of the rubric while watching a lesson	Teacher: teach the specified lesson.  Administrator: Administrator will note the teacher’s performance in relation to the applicable standards on the rubric for evaluating North Carolina teachers	Observe the teacher’s lesson by the specified date, for the specified time in the specified form-completion and compliance	To assess the teacher’s performance in relation to the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards – noting strengths and needs - administrative and professional growth	To design a plan for professional growth. - administrative and professional growth
Post-observation conference	During the post-observation conference, the principal and teacher shall discuss and document on the Rubric the strengths and weaknesses of the teacher’s	Teacher: Discuss with administrator and document on the rubric strengths and weaknesses during observed lesson.  Administrator:	Complete the post-conference within the specified timeframe, fulfilling all requirements-completion, and compliance -	Teacher and administrator discuss needs or challenges in terms of growth targets which will become a part of a teacher’s professional development	Teacher and administrator utilize data from the observation to design a plan for professional  (continued)

Outputs (What we do/the program components products- teachers & administra- tors)	Products of each component: products- teachers & administrators)	Teacher and administrator roles	Outcomes (short-term) benefits	Outcomes (medium- term) benefits	Outcomes (long-term) benefits
	performance during the observed lesson. The intent of the conference is to review the evaluator's judgments of the teacher's performance based on the pre-conference discussion and formal observations and discuss areas of strength as well as areas where the teacher should focus improvement efforts.	conducts the post-observation conference no later than 10 school days after the formal observation. Discuss and document on the rubric strengths and weaknesses of the teachers performance during the observed lesson		plan.	growth – administrative and professional growth
Summary evaluation	Discussion of the teacher's self-assessment, the teacher's most recent Professional Development Plan, the components of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process completed during the year, classroom observations, artifacts submitted or collected during the evaluation process, and other evidence of the teacher's	Teacher: participates in the review with administrator  Administrator: administrator completes prior to the end of the school year with the teacher discussing self-assessment, most recent professional growth plan and components of the North Carolina teacher evaluation process completed during the year	Discuss self-assessment, most recent professional growth plan, and components of the North Carolina teacher evaluation	Behavioral changes include interaction on the summary evaluation which drives the creation of the professional development plan goals and implementation of strategies.	Systematically administrators and teachers utilize summary evaluation for both evaluation as well as supervision making plans to support professional growth

(continued)

Outputs (What we do/the program components products-teachers & administrators)	Products of each component: products- teachers & administrators)	Teacher and administrator roles	Outcomes (short-term) benefits	Outcomes (medium-term) benefits	Outcomes (long-term) benefits
	performance on the Rubric. Report given to a teacher that includes the evaluator's conclusions and recommendations for performance improvement regarding the quality and level of performance of the teacher being evaluated.	observations and artifacts submitted or collected during the evaluation process and other evidence of the teacher's performance on the rubric			
Professional development plan	To identify goals and strategies to improve performance. 1. Individual Growth Plan: Developed by a teacher and should be discussed with the principal. 2. Monitored Growth Plan: Placed on the plan by the principal, developed and monitored by the teacher and principal. 3. Directed Growth Plan: Placed on the plan by the principal, developed and monitored by the principal.	Teacher: Work with administrator in the creation and implementation of the PDP  Administrator: Decides, based on teacher performance which type of growth plan is indicated, based on specific teacher strengths and needs.	Teachers understand the process and intent of professional development plans as more than just compliance.	Teachers develop trusting relationships with instructional leaders and real transformative dialogue begins to occur regarding strengths and areas for growth	Teachers use their PDP to truly drive their professional growth rather than completing for compliance. It becomes a tool that is revisited throughout the year, and through administrative and school support, teachers have the tools and resources needed to meet their individual growth goals.

The logic model in Tables 1 and 2 describe investments (inputs), activities (outputs), and intended outcomes for both teachers and the school administrators who implement the program's components, since addressing the needs of both the evaluators as well as those to be evaluated is crucial to have an accurate understanding of how the program operates when implemented as designed and intended.

***Inputs–Resources to Support Teacher Evaluation Process Components***

Inputs are what schools invest in the teacher evaluation process. They include funding, staffing, training, time, and support. Funding for teacher evaluation is defined as funds to be allocated by school principals as needed as part of the professional development process. Staffing and training include the people, resources, and programs put into place to support teachers through the evaluation process. Finally, time and support are defined as time and support for the implementation of the teacher evaluation. Time and support do, in many instances, overlap with staffing.

In terms of funding, there exist instructional funds to be allocated by school principals as needed as part of the professional development process (the PDP component) for groups of teachers or individual teachers. Funding in this school district for these professional development opportunities is determined on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of school principals. From a district perspective, funding provides the allocation of school performance officers to assist principals and personnel to work with beginning teachers in the implementation of the components of evaluation. Funding at the state level is portrayed in my preliminary interviews conducted prior to the study's implementation as an obstacle to the implementation of teacher evaluation with fidelity. Dr. Robert Sox (personal communication, October 13, 2021), the Director for

Educational Standards and Evaluation for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, stated that because of budget cuts, what began as 25 people working on teacher evaluation programs with districts, schools, and principals around the state was reduced to six and then to two. He stated that his department, once charged specifically with teacher evaluation, was no longer focused just on evaluation; rather, they were more broadly focused on supporting low-performing schools (R. Sox, personal communication, October 13, 2021). My research examined the impact of the limited state-level resources and support on teacher evaluation at the school-based level.

As a part of my logic model, I examined staffing and training together. There are instructional personnel hired by human resources to assist beginning teachers. For career educators, staffing consists of school-based administrators who assist teachers with the components of the evaluation process including the self-assessment, pre-observation conferences, observations, and post-observation conferences as well as the development, implementation, and review of PDPs and completing their summary evaluations.

Training of school administrators in teacher evaluation is not specifically described in the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Manual. The manual does state that the evaluator is the person responsible for overseeing and completing the teacher evaluation process. It also states that before participating in the evaluation process, all teachers, principals, and peer evaluators must complete training in the evaluation process. Conversations with district leadership described administrator training in teacher evaluation as working to remove barriers for school administrators to facilitate the process of teacher evaluation so they can carry out the process with fidelity. To accomplish this, the district offers ongoing refreshers on an as-needed basis for any



component of the evaluation process in which a school administrator may need support. More specifically, a district leader explained, there exists a landing page for principals online that provides a school principal with everything they need to understand the evaluation process. Within this website, there exist links to webinars and other various sites that are excellent resources to help principals implement all the components of the teacher evaluation program. District leadership also explained that there is an Assistant Principal's Academy online that contains both refreshers as well as required components that assistant principals must complete for them to be able to implement the components of the evaluation process. It was not clear from my preliminary research prior to the study exactly what those pieces of training consisted of. It was also unclear what training, specifically, is required of school principals implementing teacher evaluation components. The district tracks which administrators have participated in the pieces of training through records of their continuing education units. Finally, the district leader I spoke with mentioned that there does exist an orientation packet for school administrators specific to teacher evaluation with links to different websites and different policies, as well as exposing them to required timelines for teacher evaluation for compliance purposes. My research examined whether school-based administrators and middle school exceptional children (EC) teachers believe staffing and training are adequate to implement the components of teacher evaluation with fidelity for middle school EC teachers.

Time and support for the implementation of the teacher evaluation process were the next inputs examined through my logic model. An examination of the district's North Carolina Teacher Evaluation System Implementation Manual did not yield any

information specific to time and support for the implementation of the teacher evaluation process. This appears to be a document designed primarily for teachers, not administrators or evaluators. A discussion with the director for support services and human resources revealed that at least in the district that is the subject of this study, time and support for the implementation of the teacher evaluation process were made available. Time and support were made available mostly through online training and resources to help school-based administrators become proficient in implementing the components of the teacher evaluation process. Time appeared to be flexible, as training was mostly offered on an as-needed basis, though it was indicated that preliminary training in teacher evaluation is required for principals and assistant principals, and completion of that training is tracked by the district. At the state level, challenges exist to providing school principals the time and support for the implementation of the teacher evaluation program. Very limited training, according to Dr. Robert Sox (personal communication, October 13, 2021), is available when requested by districts. It was explained that currently, districts must know whom to call and must be willing to advocate for their own needs regarding teacher evaluation training for principals, as the capacity of state-level personnel to provide training is limited, due to budget cuts. My research examined whether time and support are adequate to implement the components of teacher evaluation with fidelity for middle school EC teachers at the school-based level.

### ***Outputs–What Administrators and Teachers Do: Implementing the Program’s Components***

Implementation of each of the components of teacher evaluation is determined to be the outputs in my logic model. It includes what both administrators and teachers do as part of the implementation of each component. The components in this study include the teacher self-assessment, the pre-observation conference, the teacher observation, the post-observation conference, the development and implementation of the PDP, and the summary evaluation conference completed prior to the end of each school year with teachers.

The first component, the teacher self-assessment, is completed at the beginning of each school year when a teacher reflects upon their own perceptions of performance using the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers. This is the same instrument that is used when school administrators rate a teacher’s performance on the standards throughout the school year. The self-assessment is designed also to be used during post-observation conferences as well as at the summary evaluation conference at the end of the year. The goal of the self-assessment is to develop teachers into reflective practitioners examining their own practices for self-improvement. An administrator’s role in the self-assessment is not specified in any of the literature.

The next component of teacher evaluation is the pre-observation conference. Designed only to be conducted prior to the first formal teacher observation, the goal of this conference is to prepare the school administrator for the observation and provide insight for the teacher regarding the observation process. Components designed to be discussed at the pre-observation conference include the teacher self-assessment, the most

recent PDP, and the lesson to be observed. An administrator's role is to structure and guide the pre-observation conference to include all the required components. A teacher's role is to come to the meeting prepared with any components completed for review prior to the meeting.

The formal observation is designed to last at least 45 minutes or for the entire class period. The number of formal evaluations conducted on teachers is determined by a teacher's career status and the number of years they have been teaching. New or probationary teachers, according to the program design, will have more formal observations than more experienced teachers. The goal of the observation is to measure a teacher's performance in a specified lesson on each of the standards measured in the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers and provide feedback for improvement. An administrator's role in the formal observation is to rate a teacher's performance against the standards specified in the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers. A teacher's role is to teach a lesson incorporating the standards measured within the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers.

The post-observation conference is designed to discuss, document, and provide feedback on the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers' strengths and weaknesses of a teacher's performance in an observed lesson in relation to the standards measured in the rubric. The goal is to discuss areas of strength as well as where teachers should focus improvement efforts. A strong connection to the PDP is suggested in the post-observation conference by a state-level director who helped to develop the evaluation, though there is no literature specifying this. The administrator's role in the post-conference is to share the observation data regarding the teacher's performance in

the specified lesson in relation to the standards measured in the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers. The teacher's role in the post-conference is to discuss with the administrator reactions, reflections, agreements, or disagreements with the evaluator's assessment of the teacher's performance in relation to standards on the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers.

The summary evaluation is designed to discuss the teacher's self-assessment, the most recent PDP, the components of the North Carolina teacher evaluation process, classroom observations, artifacts, or evidence demonstrating the performance of specified standards. A report is given to a teacher including the evaluator's conclusions and recommendations for performance improvement. The administrator's role in the summary evaluation is to discuss with the teacher the teacher's self-assessment, the most recent PDP, the components of the North Carolina teacher evaluation process, classroom observations, artifacts, or evidence demonstrating the performance of specified standards. The administrator's role is also to make determinations about career status and continued employment based on the data. The teacher's role is to participate in the discussion of each of these components with the administrator. Finally, administrators are required to provide feedback that supports a cycle of continuous improvement. A necessary connection between the summary evaluation and the PDP is not a part of the design, according to a director at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction in an interview conducted in late 2021 (R. Sox, personal communication, October 13, 2021).

The PDP is designed to identify a teacher's goals and strategies for improvement on the standards measured within the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers. It is separated into individual growth plans, monitored growth plans, and directed growth

plans. Individual growth plans are developed by teachers and discussed with the principal. Teachers are placed on monitored growth plans, which are developed and monitored by both the principal and the teacher. Teachers are placed on directed growth plans by a principal and monitored by the principal when necessary. As the names suggest individual growth plans offer the most autonomy, while directed growth plans offer the most direction. Monitored growth plans have a balance of autonomy and guidance based on a teacher's proficiency in the classroom in relation to the standards measured on the rubric. A teacher is typically placed on a directed growth plan when a teacher is rated as not demonstrated on any standard or developing on a standard for 2 sequential years on the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers. A teacher is normally placed on a monitored growth plan when they are developing on any one standard on the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers.

The administrator's role in the PDP is to determine the type of plan a teacher will be placed on, based on their strengths and their needs. They will also assist the teacher in identifying appropriate goals for their plans and assist with support and resources to meet those goals. The teacher's role in the PDP process is to self-assess and take an active role in creating personal goals for professional growth and development, advocating for any support or resources needed to achieve those goals, and working on their individual goals throughout the school year. The current district- and state-level documentation does not specify specific criteria for being placed on particular types of plans.

### ***Outcomes—What We Hope to Achieve With Teacher Evaluations***

Outcomes for teachers are categorized into short-term initial outcomes, medium-term or process outcomes, and long-term outcomes.

In my examination of the design and intent of the teacher self-assessment, short-term outcomes include teachers understanding the intent and completing the process. Mid-term outcomes have teachers making self-reflection a part of their planning and professional development practices. The long-term outcome and benefits of teacher self-assessment would be that teachers become reflective practitioners and reflect regularly on their practice to make changes to improve their own teaching.

Analyzing the design and intent of the pre-observation conference, the short-term outcome would be teachers engaging in the process for the purpose of professional learning and growth. The mid-term outcome would be teachers beginning to develop trusting relationships with their instructional leaders. Long term, the goal for the pre-observation conference would be that dialogue becomes a catalyst for continued professional growth. The one issue, with long-term outcomes of the pre-observation conference, is that by design, it is only designed to occur once per year, possibly limiting the long-term benefit of this component. This is further explored in my study.

Investigating the design and intent of the teacher observation, the short-term goal is to complete the teacher's classroom observation, following the guidelines for a teacher's observation cycle within the specified timeframe for the purposes of compliance. The mid-term outcome or benefits include assessing a teacher's performance in relation to the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards. The long-term outcomes of the teacher observation would include utilizing the data gathered for individual teacher professional growth. These outcomes were inferences made based on a review of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Manual and discussions with those who created the evaluation process as well as those who oversee the implementation of the

program on a district level. The manual itself does not explicitly state the specific desired outcomes from a formal observation, aside from measuring a teacher in relation to the rubric for North Carolina teachers.

Based on the design and intent of the post-observation conference, the short-term outcome would be the completion of the post-conference within the specified timeframe fulfilling all the requirements. The mid-term outcomes would include a discussion of needs or challenges in terms of growth targets, which would become a part of the teacher's PDP. The long-term outcome would be the utilization and discussion of data from the teacher observation that would drive professional growth. The manual itself does not explicitly state the specific desired outcomes from a post-observation conference beyond completion of the required components. I investigated this more in the context of my study.

Upon inspection of the design and intent of the summary evaluation process, the short-term outcomes would include a discussion of the self-assessment, PDP, and components of the North Carolina teacher evaluation. Mid-term outcomes include behavioral changes driving the creation or revision of PDP goals and implementation strategies. Long-term outcomes would include the systematic utilization of all the data gathered in the summary evaluation to make plans that support a teacher's professional growth.

In my examination of the design and intent of the PDP process, short-term outcomes would include teachers understanding the process and intent of the professional development process. Mid-term outcomes would include teachers developing trusting relationships with their instructional leaders where real transformative dialogue begins to



occur regarding strengths and individual areas for professional growth. The long-term outcomes for the PDP process would be that teachers truly utilize their PDPs to drive their professional growth and that it becomes a tool revisited throughout the year. The director at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Dr. Robert Sox (personal communication, October 13, 2021), who helped to develop the evaluation program and the associated tools, has stated that to have the PDP interconnected to teacher observations and the process was the intent, though he believed that the current program design does not support a PDP's use in this way. It was interesting through my research to see what school-based leaders' and middle school special education teachers' perceptions of PDPs were.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions about the teacher evaluation process prior to completing the study included the assumption that school administrators were instructional leaders invested in teacher growth, were properly and adequately trained, and desired to implement the program as designed, and that the design and implementation were consistent from school to school. I can justify this assumption based on my research prior to this study as well as my professional experiences, both of which suggest administrators are instructional leaders invested in teacher growth and are properly and adequately trained.

Another assumption was that, as a program, there is a solid connection between all components of the program from pre-conferences to observations, to the development of professional development goals, to the strategies employed to help teachers work toward those goals. I can also justify this assumption by my research prior to the study. In this preliminary research, one of the designers of the program suggested in an interview

that the evaluation program is designed and intended to include a solid connection between all components of the program from pre-conferences to observations to the development of professional development goals, to the strategies employed to help teachers work toward those goals.

Other assumptions are that teachers will be invested in the process and their own professional growth. This is based on the presumption that most educator professionals want to improve their practice and are committed to their own learning.

### **External Factors**

External factors that may impact the implementation of the evaluation program as designed and intended include district mandates and priorities that may not align with research-based best practices for teacher evaluation as well as teacher motivation and accountability to the process. Additionally, administrators' workload and capacity to engage in the evaluation process with fidelity are not guaranteed, given the numerous competing priorities school-based administrators face on a day-to-day basis. Finally, an instructional leader's lack of training may be outside our sphere of influence. The current design of the teacher evaluation program and process, according to Dr. Robert Sox (personal communication, October 13, 2021), may not be aligned with the current needs and structures within public schools since the federal initiative Race to the Top, which was designed to raise public school standards, and teacher quality required much more evaluation from principals than the current evaluation program was designed to provide.

### **Conclusions From Logic Model**

In conclusion, from an examination of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Implementation Manual and discussions with school-level, district-level, and state-level

personnel, it is evident that there are processes, procedures, and frameworks in place to allow for the implementation of each of the components of the teacher evaluation process with fidelity for all teachers, including EC teachers. The rubric for evaluating teachers, according to those who designed it, if implemented with fidelity and individually, should meet the specific needs of special education teachers. At least at the surface level, if fidelity is defined as it is described by both district- and state-level personnel as completion of each component for compliance, the structures are in place to be able to implement the process with fidelity for teachers. For school administrators, there also exist structures, though they seem less formal, to ensure that school-based administrators have the basic competencies required to implement the components of teacher evaluation for teachers in general, though not specific to EC teachers. It is unclear, at this point, however, what specifically the basic competencies are that school administrators should possess or what the method is for determining who is competent to implement with fidelity the components of teacher evaluation with teachers specifically, but not exclusively EC teachers. It should be noted that in my preliminary research, I spoke to Dr. Robert Sox (personal communication, October 13, 2021) from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, one of the people who designed the current teacher evaluation program and process. Dr. Sox stated that he believes strongly that when implemented with fidelity, the evaluation program for teachers is individualized, targeted, and specific. It can be effective for all teachers, at least by design. Johnson and Semmelroth (2014), in contrast, wrote about how special education teachers should be evaluated. Johnson and Semmelroth discussed that special education teachers work under complex conditions, with a diverse population supporting students with very

individualized set of goals and thus require an evaluation system that focuses on measuring their instructional practices and supporting their individual needs for professional growth. The question that remains, a focus of this study, is whether the current teacher evaluation program is being implemented with fidelity with special education teachers, and if it is, is it providing these teachers with the kind of professional growth experiences that the components are designed to provide all teachers.

### **Description of Stakeholders and Relevant Audience Associated With the Evaluation**

The target audience for this program evaluation is school-based administrators at the middle school level in a large public K-12 school district in North Carolina as they are responsible for the primary implementation of the teacher evaluation process and program. Another target audience for this program evaluation is district-level administration as they will have the greatest influence in the potential implementation of any of the proposed recommendations.

### **Purpose of the Study and Program Evaluation: Significance**

Self-efficacy impacts special education teachers in our public schools and the satisfaction they have with the work they do. Stempien and Loeb (2002) wrote in their study that retention after 1 year of teaching was considerably lower for special education teachers (89%) than it was for general education teachers (94%; p. 261), suggesting that promotion of special education teacher professional development and providing needed supports through the evaluation process are crucial, particularly but not exclusively, early on in a teacher's career.

One of the goals of an instructional leader is to create an environment within our schools where special education teachers feel that they are supported to learn and grow to

the point where they feel like competent professionals who can fulfill the responsibilities they were hired to do effectively. DeWitt (2021), a former principal turned author, presenter, and leadership coach, stated that effective instructional leadership involves coaching, going into classrooms, working with teachers, and trying to improve the practices of those teachers. Glickman et al. (2018) stated that having the knowledge of how teachers grow and develop as adults and professionals should be a guiding principle of instructional leaders and evaluators, in order for teachers to become true professionals. The teacher evaluation process, implemented by school administrators and supervisors, when implemented with fidelity, is intended to be one of the primary ways instructional leaders provide teachers the feedback and support needed to improve and grow.

This study sought to examine if the program that comprises teacher evaluation is implemented with fidelity with special educators and specifically provides them with the tools they need to grow as professionals. It also sought to examine what school administrators may require ensuring that each component of the teacher evaluation program is implemented comprehensively and with fidelity to benefit the professional development of middle school special education teachers.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent are the components of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - a. To what extent is the teacher self-assessment component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - b. To what extent is the teacher pre-observation conference component of the

teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?

- c. To what extent is the teacher observation component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - d. To what extent is the teacher post-observation conference component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - e. To what extent is the teacher summary evaluation process component of the middle school special education teacher evaluation process implemented with fidelity?
  - f. To what extent is the teacher PDP process component of the middle school special education teacher evaluation process implemented with fidelity?
2. How do middle school education teachers perceive the impact of the teacher evaluation process on their professional growth?
  3. What suggestions do middle school EC teachers have for improvements to the teacher evaluation program and process to best impact their own professional growth?

Background research was conducted prior to the commencement of the study to provide a foundational understanding of the design of the teacher evaluation process, the intent of the designers, and some of the current perceived challenges of implementation with fidelity of components of the evaluation process. Survey responses from middle school EC teachers, focus group data, and interview data were collected by me and used

to answer each of the research questions to examine strengths and opportunities for improvement within the teacher evaluation program as perceived by users.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will help educators and school leaders understand what schools and districts are doing well and what they may need to improve or change regarding the fidelity of implementation of the teacher evaluation process for special educators at the middle school level. It has implications for both program development and improvement as well as the in-service training of instructional leaders. Given an expanded understanding, school administrators can work to implement the evaluation process more effectively to impact the professional growth of special education teachers at the middle school level. Teachers can best utilize the evaluation process to learn, grow as professionals, and develop self-efficacy in all the varied aspects of their job responsibilities. This study is significant because an examination of instructional leaders and their capacity to fully engage in the evaluation and coaching process is reasonable to ensure that instructional leaders possess the capacity and have the tools they need to be the efficacious benefactors in the process of evaluation of special education teachers.

This study expands a theoretical understanding of the different factors that impact the professional growth of special educators at the middle school level as well as expands an understanding of the skill set and capacities required of instructional leaders to both evaluate and lead middle school special education teachers instructionally. This study provides recommendations for further professional development, specifically focused on improving the teacher evaluation process at the school or district level for both teachers and instructional leaders.

### **Practical Implications**

This program evaluation adds to the current body of research about teacher evaluations and addresses the challenges that exist and persist for middle school special educators with the evaluation process in having access to all the requisite supports to grow professionally and sustain themselves in the profession. It addresses any challenges for instructional leaders in implementing the evaluation program with fidelity. This study will help instructional leaders to critically examine their use of the teacher evaluation process and to utilize these evaluation program components not merely as documents to complete for the purposes of compliance, but as processes to help professionals grow as educators and develop a sense of self-efficacy. It will help school leaders examine their capacities as instructional leaders within the evaluation process and offer research-based suggestions for building capacity as instructional leaders and coaches. The implications from this study will have a significant impact on the opportunities to design a more effective model for teacher evaluation that will support the growth of special education teachers.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation continues with a review of the literature on self-efficacy which is where my initial research began. Specifically, the literature review begins with supports and obstacles to teacher self-efficacy and professional competence. It examines the complexity of the role of the special educator and how the complexities challenge special education teacher capacities. It examines college and university teacher preparation and self-efficacy, teacher workload and self-efficacy, and job design, and then transitions to administrative support, the teacher evaluation process, and professional growth. The



literature review then discusses the purposes of teacher evaluation cited in the research and instructional leader experience and capacity as it relates to the fidelity of implementation of the teacher evaluation process, as well as looks at school district professional development and how it contributes to professional development and teacher growth. The historical background of teacher evaluation in the United States follows and concludes with a summary of Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 begins with the research design methods and the purpose of the study, followed by the research questions. A discussion of the design of the study, including a description of the data collection and data analysis methods, follows along with a description of the population and sample. Assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations close out Chapter 3, followed by a chapter summary.

Chapter 4 includes the results of the research and the findings from all collected data sources as they apply to my research questions. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings and implications for further research as well as recommendations to further improve the teacher evaluation process for middle school special education teachers.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Organization of This Chapter**

This literature review examines college and university preparation and teacher competence. It examines the need for special education teachers to possess a complex skill set. The literature review also looks at job design as a factor related to teacher self-efficacy and ways to build teacher capacity through effective job design. The literature review explores the use of effective feedback and formative versus summative approaches to teacher evaluation. The literature review concludes with an examination of instructional leader experience, capacity and the evaluation process, professional development, and a historical perspective on teacher evaluation.

### **Factors Impacting Special Education Teacher Self-Efficacy**

#### ***Teaching as an Unstaged Career Creates the Need for a Comprehensive In-Service Evaluation Process***

Preservice teacher preparation programs often do not provide aspiring special education teachers with the internships and hands-on experience required to take on a classroom on Day 1 of their careers. This challenge necessitates an individualized teacher evaluation program with a solid professional development component to ensure that special educators gain the skill set to meet the demands of their chosen profession.

Glickman et al. (2018) wrote of new teachers, “neophytes are faced with the numbing realization that they are unprepared to deal with the harsh realities of teaching” (p. 29). Glickman et al. discussed the concept of teaching being an “unstaged career.” In contrast to physicians, lawyers, engineers, and scientists, who all experience several transition years of apprenticeship or internship before they assume full responsibilities in

their profession, teachers are made to assume full responsibility from Day 1 without the benefit of extensive internships such as those that exist for other new professionals. This point suggests the need for a system of ongoing support for teachers once they enter the profession.

Malcolm (2006) wrote that too often teacher preparation programs are too theoretical and provide “insufficient emphasis on real situations” (p. 4). Malcolm also contended that school practice at the university level was “weak...too different from the real thing...too brief, too artificial, too 'spoon fed,' and too restricted in scope to be entirely satisfactory” (p. 2). Anagnostopoulos et al. (2007) discussed that there often exists a disconnect between their university teacher preparation and the practices in which they must engage in the K-12 classrooms in which they learn to teach.

Deficient preservice teacher preparation combined with the challenges inherent in the teaching profession necessitates a comprehensive teacher evaluation program for all teachers to both support and grow their skill set to meet the needs of their chosen profession. The next section is a discussion of the specific skill set special educators should look to develop to be successful in the profession.

### ***The Need for Special Education Teachers to Possess a Complex Skill Set***

Special education teachers move into roles early on in their careers where challenges include the expectations that they be content experts, intervention experts, paperwork experts, and special education law experts, many times with insufficient training. Washburn-Moses (2005) expressed concern when she wrote that special education teachers must show competency teaching everything. Washburn-Moses went on to explain how special education teachers are frequently overburdened with many

competing duties. Washburn-Moses discussed the concept of role conflict when there is a clash between formal roles and responsibilities and the reality of a teacher's work life. More specifically, Washburn-Moses provided the example of how many special education teachers "believe that their role of teaching students conflicts with the expectations of others and is hindered by the burden of paperwork, the diverse needs of the student population, and limited opportunities to individualize instruction" (p. 152). A well-designed, individualized teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity would open the lines of communication between administrator evaluators and teachers, facilitating a process whereby teachers and administrators could most effectively identify and implement what special education teachers need from the program and the process to develop as competent confident professionals.

Research has suggested that both preservice preparation for special education teachers and in-service preparation are insufficient to prepare teachers for the demands of the job and the roles teachers must assume. Ergul et al. (2013) wrote that developing relationships with families, teaching social skills, and fostering professional collaboration are just some of the skills not addressed sufficiently in either preservice training or in-service professional development. Ergul et al. also indicated that of teachers graduating from undergraduate special education programs, only 20% found themselves competent to teach reading and writing, and 11% believed they had enough knowledge to work with students with autism. Ergul et al. also suggested a disconnect between what preservice and in-service teachers believed they needed regarding training to have the basic competencies or knowledge and skills a teacher needs to have to successfully fulfill their professional responsibilities. Finally, both preservice special education teachers and in-

service special education teachers perceived themselves as less competent in the areas of assessment, classroom management, school law, and collaboration with colleagues and families, all of which are essential skills for a special education teacher to possess.

Current deficits in undergraduate training and in-service opportunities for growth of essential skills reinforce the need for a comprehensive tailored evaluation program at the in-service level, delivered by knowledgeable and competent evaluators to help practicing special educators develop and maintain the competencies necessary to do their jobs in a quality way.

A complex skill set is necessary for both novice and experienced special education teachers alike. Whitaker (2000) wrote that the teachers leaving special education tend to be the younger, less-experienced teachers. Brownell et al. (2004) echoed Whitaker's sentiment when they expressed that special educators are more of an attrition risk than other teachers because of the challenging nature of teaching special education. Whitaker wrote that existing special education teacher shortages combined with high attrition in the field have led to the recommendation that some form of mentoring and support be available for all special education teachers, specifically but not exclusively novice teachers. Whitaker recommended frequent structured and unstructured contact with mentors to support these teachers. Teachers in the Whitaker study also expressed a need to be observed by both mentors and administrators and for them to have opportunities to observe other teachers. Regarding areas in need of support, Whitaker discussed eight areas. They included emotional support, support with paperwork and compliance, support with materials and resources, curriculum and instruction, and discipline. In the district that is the subject of this study, mentors are provided for new

teachers only. The void for support that is left for teachers who are not considered new to the profession can potentially be filled by school leaders implementing a teacher evaluation program as designed and intended with an emphasis on individualized professional learning and growth.

Brownell et al. (2004) wrote of special education teachers that successful new teacher induction programs provide teachers with clear goals to improve their teaching, provide opportunities to work with well- trained mentors, and provide extensive professional development geared toward specific goals. The reason for this, according to Brownell et al. is that it is not expected that teachers are finished with their growth and development when they complete their undergraduate programs. Brownell et al. recommended calling on school districts and undergraduate institutions to strongly partner to ensure a successful induction into the profession. A teacher evaluation program, implemented as designed and intended with an emphasis on individualized professional learning and growth, can also address the need for quality induction into special education teaching.

Examining the needs for and the challenges of having an evaluation system specifically for special education teachers, Johnson and Semmelroth (2014) wrote about how special education teachers should be evaluated. Johnson and Semmelroth stated that special education teachers work under complex conditions, with diverse populations, working toward individualized goals. Therefore, special education teachers require an evaluation system that focuses on measuring their differentiated instructional practices and providing professional development to help teacher grow in these practices. These complex conditions for special educators, combined with an evaluation system that does

not consistently and individually promote teacher growth and learning have contributed to what Johnson and Semmelroth called a “sub-standard” quality of education for special education students. Johnson and Semmelroth believed that an appropriate evaluation system providing meaningful and actionable feedback to improve instructional practice will strengthen special education teaching skills and maintain and retain high-quality teachers. In the absence of an appropriate evaluation system to support and grow special educators, the result cited by Johnson and Semmelroth is that students with IEPs do not always receive the quality of services that adequately meet their individualized needs to help them make adequate growth.

Johnson and Semmelroth advocated for an evaluation program that will compensate for the current shortcomings of teacher preparation programs. These include undergraduate programs not integrating the use of evidence-based best practices and not preparing aspiring teachers to be highly qualified in content areas, both of which, according to Johnson and Semmelroth, leave new special education teachers ill-prepared to meet the challenges of their special education classrooms. Special education teachers require not only an evaluation system that focuses on improving student outcomes but also an evaluation system that ensures teacher quality, given that the latter impacts the former. Johnson and Semmelroth also noted that there exists a “significant disconnect” (p. 74) between research-based best instructional practices for special educators and what is happening in most special education classrooms. A teacher evaluation program, implemented as designed and intended by knowledgeable and competent evaluators with an emphasis on individualized professional learning and research-based best practices, can mitigate the current disconnect.

Responding to the unique needs of special education teachers in the evaluation process, Goeke et al. (2017) sought to develop an evaluation tool specifically for special education teachers. Their focus was to provide specific feedback to special education teachers on what they referred to as evidence-based practices for students with disabilities when the way special education teachers teach is so individualized.

Goeke et al. (2017) sought specifically to create an observation system that provides explicit, actionable feedback based on rubrics that distinctly explain the elements of evidence-based practices for students with disabilities. Goeke et al. advocated for what is referred to as microteaching. Microteaching includes examination of teaching, reflection on that teaching, and videotaping teaching with debriefing for professional development.

When the discussion turned to observing instructional practices, Goeke et al. (2017) supported three categories of instructional practices that should be observed in the practice of a special education teacher because they have significant empirical support for leading to successful student outcomes for students with disabilities. They include explicit instruction, cognitive strategy instruction, and peer-assisted learning, or reciprocal teaching.

Following the identification of instructional practices, the next challenge for the developers of an evaluation program that would meet the needs of the special educator would be to create a rubric that measured these instructional practices. The problem, explained further, was that what a special education teacher teaches cannot always be standardized. Goeke et al. (2017) wrote that there may be important exchanges between special education teachers and their students that can be difficult to capture through an



explicit list of instructional elements of practice. Goeke et al. sought to create an evaluation system that was flexible and responsive to the context in which a particular special educator teaches that focuses on essential elements of their practice.

A focus just on instructional practices, according to Goeke et al. (2017) would ineffectively recognize the critical aspect of evaluating the content that is being presented to students with disabilities. Student performance, Goeke et al. contended, can be significantly impacted by both the quality of instruction as well as the quality of the organization and presentation. Focusing exclusively on instructional practices neglecting content could lead to inaccurate evaluations of teacher performance. Examples of content included the implementation of best practices for teaching reading and math.

Another point made by Goeke et al. (2017) related to the individualized instruction special education teachers provide. Because IEPs mandate specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities, designing a standard rubric to measure special education teacher performance and quality is a very difficult task. With instruction for students with disabilities being individualized, Goeke et al. discussed that it is difficult to observe a special education teacher without having detailed information about each student's specific needs. For an evaluator to give special education teachers feedback about a teacher's ability to individualize instruction based on the specific student needs, it will be necessary to include evaluation methods that go beyond the observation. These will include artifacts to help the evaluator understand why particular decisions to individualize were made and how the specific modifications were expected to meet student needs.

To conclude, the challenge with creating a rubric on individualization is that it

should look different depending on children's specific needs while standardizing the process in ways that are effective and useful.

The conclusions in this study showed that developing such a rubric was successful. The challenge is that it will require educators in the district that is the subject of this research to do things very differently for special education teachers than current design and implementation seem to allow.

So, while the development of instruments and processes for the evaluation of special education teachers was proven to be possible by this study, the challenge remains the same: how to implement it as designed with fidelity in a way that truly meets the needs of special education teachers. The next section examines in more depth everything that encompasses the role of a special education teacher that must be taken into consideration for evaluation to be effective. In many fields, including education, this is called job design.

### ***Job Design and Special Education Teacher Self-Efficacy***

Gersten et al. (2001) provided an interesting angle when examining teacher self-efficacy burnout and the need for a comprehensive evaluation program to support middle school special education teachers. Gersten et al. discussed the concept of job design, a concept that, according to the authors, had not been applied previously to teaching or education. Gersten et al. wrote,

When thinking about job design one essentially asks: does the job, with all that it entails, make sense? Is it feasible? Is it one that well-trained, interested, special education professionals can manage in order to accomplish their major objective-enhancing students' academic, social and vocational competence? (p. 551)

For an individual, Gersten et al. stated that poor job design results in worker frustration and work-related stress, which may lead to decreased self-efficacy and increased attrition. Gersten et al. recommended that school administrators and district leaders need to consider job design and the role dissonance for a special education teacher who is trying to navigate the array of teaching and nonteaching responsibilities that characterize their day. Role dissonance could be a legitimate factor impacting teacher self-efficacy. Role dissonance, as defined by Gersten et al., refers to the degree to which special education teachers experience conflict between what they believe about their role as compared to their day-to-day experiences. This becomes a question for school-based instructional leaders and district administrators as they contemplate the best ways to support special education teachers through a comprehensive evaluation process.

While making sweeping transformations in the realm of job design may be beyond the scope of this dissertation, there are many ideas that could be applied successfully within the teacher evaluation process. Garg and Rastogi (2005) wrote that employees should be given proper training to increase knowledge, which will, in turn, motivate them to perform better because training will put employees in a better position to meet job-related challenges. This idea of proper training connects well with the teacher evaluation process and what PDPs accomplish when implemented with fidelity.

One model presented by Garg and Rastogi (2005) was useful in potentially applying it to teacher evaluation, as it contains many of the components of a comprehensive evaluation model. The model began with a performance analysis where evaluators complete a thorough assessment of performance to determine interventions needed to increase the performance of employees. Next, a root-cause analysis is

performed to highlight the cause of performance problems leading to an appropriate intervention strategy. Interventions are implemented and evaluated frequently to determine efficacy. Finally, determinations are made on whether to continue, modify, or terminate interventions. This process speaks to the critical conversations that need to occur between evaluators and special education teachers to help teachers grow professionally and develop greater self-efficacy that do not always occur as a part of the evaluation process for a variety of reasons.

So, while we may not be able to create major transformations to job design within the public schools, school leaders who focus the evaluation process on the individual concerns and needs of their teachers might be able to transform teacher evaluation in ways that have positive impacts on teacher self-efficacy and professional growth.

## **Teacher Evaluation**

### ***Teacher Feedback and Professional Growth–Capacity Building***

Glickman et al. (2018) wrote that novice teachers report that having someone who observes them and provides feedback and dialogue regarding their teaching is a transformative form of support. For all teachers, in fact, quality support from their instructional leaders has an impact on self-efficacy. Gersten et al. (2001) wrote that there were correlations between meaningful substantive conversations with administrators and the reduction of role dissonance and stress. This underscores the importance of an effective teacher evaluation program and administrative support.

Glickman et al. (2018) convinced us that the role of a supervisor is significant. Glickman et al. explained that supervision of teachers, as opposed to a more formative evaluation process with a specifically targeted focus on developing teachers as

professionals, fails to provide teachers with all the support they truly need. This speaks to the need for better training for supervisors, specifically in the areas of teacher evaluation and supervision.

Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano (2019) focused on the importance of effective feedback, creating an effective evaluation experience leading to increased teacher self-efficacy. Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano emphasized that “adults with different ways of knowing” (p. 2) will need different kinds of supports to fully receive, comprehend, and implement feedback as they grow and learn. This suggests from the start that instructional leaders and evaluators will need to add to their repertoire of leadership skills to effectively evaluate and truly support all teachers.

Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano (2019) also touched on the need for instructional leaders to “build capacity” (p. 9) around how they give feedback. Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano suggested that leaders and feedback givers must develop themselves professionally to have knowledge of the most recent and relevant content to be the most effective facilitator of feedback. This was referred to as “information learning” (Drago-Severson & Blum-Destefano, 2019, p. 9). Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano also advocated for what they referred to as “transformational learning” (p. 9) on the part of instructional leaders. This, Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano contended, required a transformation in our instructional leaders where they, through training, increased their capacities in the cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal realms. In this way, instructional leaders learn to provide quality feedback that aligns with a teacher’s needs and their capacity to process and utilize that feedback. From a teacher’s perspective, Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano (2019) stated that

teachers will be asking about their instructional leaders: “Is this a person who understands me and my needs? Is this a person who can help me” (p. 22)?

Administrators essentially, through the evaluation process, need to be capacity builders, and it requires that they build their own knowledge base and professional capacity to do this. According to Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano (2019), offering capacity-building feedback, delivered at the level that a teacher can use it and grow from it, is only the first step in effective instructional leadership. Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano advocated “follow-through” and effective “follow-up,” where the instructional leader helps teachers to apply the feedback they’ve received in consequential ways. This emphasizes the idea that evaluation is an ongoing process as opposed to a single event observation and follow-up post-conference. This follow-through and follow-up, according to Drago-Severson (2019) is intentional in attending to teachers’ thoughts, their feelings, and how they make meaning from their feedback. In short, effectively supervising, evaluating, and supporting teachers takes systems, processes, procedures, and time.

Crane (2012) and Quinn (2014) expressed some of the same sentiments of Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano (2019) when they suggested that effective instructional leadership takes time. As an administrator and instructional leader, Crane said that we need to

slow down, listen more deeply, learn, and become less reactive. “It”, being a true coach, requires more patience than most people are accustomed to exercising in their interpersonal communications. It allows (people) to become better connected. (p. 38)

Another problem with teacher evaluation stated by Marzano (as cited in Quinn, 2014), is that teacher evaluation is too often concentrated on measuring teachers versus developing teachers, evaluation, as opposed to supervision. As a result, Marzano (as stated in Quinn, 2014) stated that evaluation processes were missing a “level of granularity that helps people improve” (p. 13). The problem is multi-faceted but begins with the fact that, according to Quinn (2014), often teachers are not observed enough for anyone to gain a clear picture of what a teacher is doing. Papay (2012) also wrote about this concern when he wrote about reliability being a concern with classroom observations. Papay stated that because of the time-consuming nature of high-quality observations, evaluators often resort to making judgements from a limited sample of observed teaching. Also of concern was the fact that since many observations are announced, teachers can prepare and execute an effective lesson on the day they are observed. This may or may not be representative of how a teacher performs from day to day. The next section examines how teacher evaluation, when implemented with fidelity offers the potential to grow teacher self-efficacy.

### ***An Important Tool to Grow Teacher Self-Efficacy***

While the teacher evaluation process was not designed explicitly to help build and grow teacher self-efficacy, Mireles-Rios and Becchio (2018) wrote that the result of proper feedback on instructional strategies can be substantive improvements in teacher performance. Glickman et al. (2018) wrote that “self-efficacy and achievement can be cyclical; early achievement [or performance] can increase self-efficacy, which in turn can lead to higher levels of achievement” (p. 44). According to Mireles-Rios and Becchio, the beliefs teachers have regarding their own self-efficacy have an impact on student

achievement and outcomes. Those implementing current evaluation processes should acknowledge the correlation in the research between effective evaluations delivering thorough feedback to teachers with both strengths and areas for growth to teacher self-efficacy and student achievement.

### ***Effective Thorough Feedback and Support Versus System Compliance***

According to the research, too frequently school leaders tell teachers through the observation process that they are at or above standard when they are not. Quinn (2014) went on to say that the whole goal of observations was to help teachers improve, and teachers must know specifically what areas require growth to facilitate that improvement.

Another concern regarding the teacher evaluation process, according to Young et al. (2015) also spoke to the purposes and processes of teacher evaluation. Young et al. wrote about the importance of effective teacher evaluation stating evaluation has a profound impact on teacher practice and student achievement, yet in most cases, traditional teacher evaluation systems do little to impact a teacher's practice and are perceived by practitioners as "cursory routines" (p. 159) that serve the "primary purpose of bureaucratic accountability" (p. 159) that are more a measure of performance than a tool to facilitate growth. While teachers need a more formative evaluation approach that would provide substantive feedback for professional growth, too often educators are provided observations and evaluations for a summative purpose only to fulfill administrative obligations. The problem, according to most of the research, is the amount of time teacher evaluation takes administrators to implement with fidelity.



### ***A Comprehensive Formative Approach Versus a cursory Approach Takes Time***

Cantrell and Kane (2013) found that classroom observations alone were far less predictive of a teacher's classroom effectiveness than when used together as part of a comprehensive program with data provided by items such as student surveys and student achievement data. Papay's (2012) study expressed similar concerns as those voiced by Young et al. (2015) that teacher evaluations nationwide tend to be a process in which almost all teachers succeed and few are identified as unsatisfactory. Papay wrote that when used as a formative professional development tool, evaluation should provide feedback on teachers' strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement and support a teacher's continued development. A problem highlighted by Papay was that

many of the evaluations that do occur consist of only so-called "drive-by" observations in which a principal stops by a classroom for a brief visit and indicates whether the teacher is "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" on a basic checklist of practices. (p. 125)

Also voiced by Papay, according to the research, very few teachers state that they receive meaningful feedback—or any feedback at all from their evaluators. One issue found in the research was that along with time being an issue preventing evaluators from providing quality feedback, an instructional leader's knowledge and experience that would allow them to confidently provide feedback to teachers are often lacking.

### ***Instructional Leader Experience Matters***

Another concern with teacher evaluation and its ability to promote teacher self-efficacy and growth has to do with an instructional leader's training and experience. Papay (2012) wrote regarding evaluator training that all evaluators must complete a

comprehensive training program to ensure they can provide inter-rater reliability. Papay went on to say that without comprehensive training, individual evaluators may rate using different standards. Achieving inter-rater reliability may be difficult. There exists the possibility that two different evaluators could rate the same teacher's practice differently. For observations to have validity, they must be unbiased and reliable. In both my interviews with a director of human resources in the district that is the subject of this study and a director from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, both emphasized the need for training that creates observers who can achieve inter-rater reliability.

A final point speaks to an instructional leader's experience and expertise in conducting evaluations. Papay (2012) contended that all evaluators must be trained and must also be experts in providing rich, important, and actionable feedback to the teachers. Papay concluded that effective evaluators need to possess the ability to provide difficult assessments and to draw conclusions about a teacher's practice. This is not easy work, and it is work that requires training and experience to do well.

Teacher evaluation is often a bridge to fulfilling bureaucratic requirements. The time requirement needed to conduct comprehensive teacher evaluations, as well as a need for comprehensive instructional leader training and experience, often results in the teacher evaluation process being reduced to fulfilling a requirement, rather than developing a relationship that will ultimately grow the skill set and self-efficacy of our special education teachers in the public schools. In my initial conversations with professionals in the field for the purposes of foundational research, it was evident that this problem is real in day-to-day practice in our public schools.

### ***Why the Different Components in the Process are Important***

In a more specific examination of the different components that comprise a teacher evaluation program and their importance, the following was noted. Acheson and Gail (2003, as cited in de Lima and Silva, 2018) wrote that classroom observations should not be “isolated acts” (p. 10) but rather should be part of a

clinical supervisory process consisting of three steps: a pre-observation conference, when the observation is planned; classroom observation, according to an observation protocol; and a post-observation conference for analyzing the data collected by the observer, interpreting and discussing the data, collecting the teachers’ views, and making decisions about the future. (p. 10)

De Lima and Silva stressed the benefits of performing classroom observations. These include helping to identify effective teachers and effective teaching practices, having a positive effect on instruction, and facilitating change to a teacher’s practices because of being observed. Other reasons to conduct evaluations include providing educators with a common language and explicit criteria to use when dialoging with teachers about teaching and learning. Finally, De Lima and Silva contended that “collective analysis” (p. 9) and “collegial conversations” (p. 9) can only increase teacher professionalism. The next sections discuss other obstacles to effective teacher observations.

### ***Other Obstacles to Effective Evaluations***

In further examining what constitutes effective teacher evaluations de Lima and Silva (2018) wrote about some of the reasons educators remain skeptical or anxious about the process. For one, in some instances, classroom observation can be seen as intrusive and a challenge to a teacher's autonomy. Second, many teachers are concerned that

judgments about the quality of their teaching are based on select observations that may not be representative of their typical performance. Teachers may also feel that observers are not objective, or they are simply not comfortable with others surveilling and judging their work. It was interesting as I began my research to talk to both teachers and administrators about what their perceptions are of the process. The next section examines professional development at the in-service level as well as ways to increase evaluator capacity with the aim of bridging gaps in learning from undergraduate programs and developing the professional knowledge and self-efficacy of special education teachers.

### **School and District Professional Development and Development of Special Educators**

Glickman et al. (2018) wrote that historically, professional development in PK-12 schools has been ineffectual, though effective professional development is critical for new and experienced teachers alike. A similar thought was elaborated upon when Glickman et al. wrote, “many decisions about the kinds of educational innovations introduced in school districts are biased, poorly thought out, and unconnected to the stated purposes of education” (p. 73). Perhaps well-intended, professional development for special educators in public schools so often does not address the specific needs of the middle school special educator in public schools. Glickman et al. wrote that the necessity to individualize learning for teachers often contrasts sharply to the actual treatment of teachers in our schools. Glickman et al. (2018) proposed the following options when teachers are not provided the professional development needed for them to adequately address the increasingly complex needs of the classroom:

The only alternative for a teacher in a complex environment who cannot adjust to

the multiple demands and is not being helped to acquire the abilities to think abstractly and autonomously is to simplify and deaden in the instructional environment. Teachers make the environment less complex by disregarding differences among students and by establishing routines and instructional practices that remain the same day after day and year after year. (p. 83)

Washburn-Moses (2005) discussed the need for better, more comprehensive, and relevant professional development for special education teachers when she wrote that many special education teachers teach more than one content area. Some special education teachers teach what would be unthinkable for a general education teacher at the secondary level, teaching all four major content areas. They do this without specialized content-area training specific to the classes they teach, something that is required for general education teachers to become highly qualified in their subject areas. In a comprehensive evaluation program implemented with fidelity, professional development would be focused and individualized via a well-thought-out and executed PDP that meets the specific needs of each educator as designed. The next section examines PDPs and the potential they have to foster professional growth when implemented with fidelity.

### ***PDPs and Teacher Growth***

According to Janssen et al. (2013), PDPs help teachers design their professional development in terms of their learning goals and provide teachers with a plan of action for meeting those goals. Janssen et al. also wrote that a PDP forms a basis for critical conversations between teachers and supervisors and that the key purpose of a PDP is to support professional development. Janssen et al. went on to say that there is mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of PDPs.

Janssen et al. (2013) also wrote that activities within a PDP should promote reflection and greater self-awareness. The mere act of writing down learning goals, according to Janssen et al., focuses and fosters commitment to a professional's growth. Further, discussing learning goals with a supervisor provides an opportunity to align individual goals with a school's goals. In the Janssen et al. study, 10% of participants presented a negative attitude about the PDP process, 32% were neutral, and 59% were positive. In a discussion of this study, according to Janssen et al., participants who found the PDP to be too time consuming and not valuable as a tool for their own professional development were less motivated and more frustrated with the process, whereas if an employee perceived the PDP as a learning tool, employees were more willing to undertake the development activities leading to professional growth. While most teachers in this study were positive about the PDP process, most regarded it as something extra to do. In all, this study showed that PDPs have the potential to be extremely useful tools for personal and professional development. The key was making certain they were designed in such a way as to be valuable to every individual asked to create one.

Burke (2000) believed personal growth plans are a welcomed alternative to teachers sitting through all-day in-services that may or may not relate to their needs or meet the needs of their students. Burke called for alternatives to one-size-fits-all training where individual teachers or groups of teachers select an area of concern or a new instructional strategy based on the specific needs of the students they teach, what she referred to as results-based professional development. Teachers then assume control over their own goals and their own growth plan. Goals for professional development are often connected to the school improvement plan so there is some administrative oversight.

Goals are explicit and describe what the teacher will do and what the student-centered goals will be as the result. Then, Burke wrote that principals should conference with teachers throughout the year, discussing their progress and providing encouragement and support as necessary.

Ozer et al. (2020) wrote that every teacher's professional development level and field of study are different, necessitating individualized professional development planning to provide effective learning and teaching situations for both teachers and their students. An individual PDP, as defined by Ozer et al., is a plan where each employee examines individual developmental needs, sets individual specific annual goals, and targets opportunities to achieve their goals. Ozer et al. went on to say that solid professional goals will benefit the teacher, the students, and the school.

Ozer et al. (2020) also stated that individual professional development needs to be planned and constantly updated. Ozer et al. also suggested that many teachers do not make efforts to ensure their own development to keep pace with changing educational approaches unless compelled to do so through the PDP process. Also noted was that many times, a lack of time and multiple responsibilities prevented teachers from fully engaging in the professional development process.

Teachers also need their PDP to be truly individualized. Ozer et al. (2020) proposed that in-service trainings where teachers participate individually with their own will are more effective than trainings mandated by schools or school systems, suggesting that relevancy and buy-in are key to the success of PDPs. When implemented with fidelity, as part of a comprehensive teacher evaluation program, PDPs could be the way to ensure that learning and professional development are truly individualized. The next

section examines evaluator capacity as an obstacle to fidelity of implementation of teacher evaluation and some potential solutions.

### **Improving Evaluator Capacity by Enlisting Other Professionals to Assist With Evaluation**

In my preliminary research prior to the commencement of my study, it was suggested that one of the obstacles to fidelity of implementation of teacher evaluation was lack of evaluator capacity to implement it as designed and intended. The following research examined evaluator capacity to implement the components of teacher evaluation with capacity and some possible research-based solutions.

#### ***Challenges to Evaluator Capacity***

Neumerski et al. (2018) spoke to the capacity challenges of school administrators in delivering teacher evaluations with fidelity. Neumerski et al. wrote that while principals nowadays are expected to “engage closely” (p. 271) with teaching and learning, evidence suggests that few principals spend extensive amounts of time on instructional issues, and the time they spend in classrooms engaged directly with teacher instruction is only a fraction of this limited instructional time. The time they do spend in classrooms tends to be succinct, and their feedback to teachers is often “infrequent, superficial, or nonexistent” (Neumerski et al., 2018, p. 271).

The reasons Neumerski et al. stated evaluators did not spend sufficient time on instructional issues included first a lack of training to assess teaching and coach teachers around instructional improvement. Second, evaluation had become a formality rather than a true tool for instructional improvement. Finally, the amount of time it took to observe, score, and provide feedback to each teacher challenged evaluator capacities.



Data from the evaluators in my study supported what Neumerski et al. (2018) wrote when my evaluators concurred that their capacities were stretched; they simply did not have time to conduct teacher evaluation as designed and intended, and they often lacked the training in special education to support special education teachers well. Many evaluators noted that prior to the newest teacher evaluation mandates, evaluators had more time to be visible and conduct informal walkthroughs that they simply did not have time for in the current evaluation configuration.

### ***Multiple Data Sources Increase Evaluator Capacity***

Maslow and Kelley's (2012) study supported the use of veteran teachers to serve as coaches and evaluators. Another interesting concept Maslow and Kelley suggested was to involve more stakeholders in the teacher evaluation process. Using what Maslow and Kelley called the "360-degree process," this evaluation process includes feedback from parents, students, and peers along with the supervisor's evaluation and student achievement data as well as the teacher self-assessment, thereby making the evaluation process a shared responsibility, rather than the sole responsibility of school administrators.

### ***Instructional Coaches Increasing Evaluator Capacity***

Kane and Rosenquist (2019) studied the use of instructional coaches hired by schools and districts to help increase principal capacity by assisting teachers in their evaluation processes and professional development. Kane and Rosenquist's study was a cautionary tale of how instructional coaches have the potential to both support teachers instructionally and increase administrator capacity if their job descriptions and responsibilities are explicit. The concern mentioned in this study was when principals

assign instructional coaches additional duties aside from coaching teachers, such as attending meetings, administering assessments, and even substitute teaching. This can happen very naturally in a school setting when the demands of the day necessitate a principal delegating responsibilities to fill all roles. The result, however, is like the initial problem that the principal had before the instructional coach. The coach's capacity is now stretched, and they are unable to coach and provide the instructional feedback required for teacher professional growth.

***Tiered Support within Evaluations Could Improve Capacity***

Supporting the idea of enlisting other professionals within the school building to assist with teacher evaluation, Woodland and Mazur (2015) argued that school principals and assistant principals are often not positioned to be the best evaluators for teachers and that because of a lack of training and time, feedback to teachers is often “vague, unsubstantiated, infrequent and inaccurate” (p. 12). Woodland and Mazur advocated for what they call a “tiered system of job-embedded professional development” (p. 12). Tier 1 consists of a school's entire instructional team and teams of teachers regularly and continuously engaging in dialogue, decision-making, action-taking, and evaluation of their instructional practices. Tier 1 would be for teachers requiring the least amount of intervention. Tier 2 would exist for teachers who need short-term support with a particular problem or practice or someone who needs training in a new skill or program. Tier 3 is for teachers requiring intense targeted remediation or whose exceptional teaching requires additional recognition or opportunities for professional growth beyond what the school typically provides. The challenge to this model, according to Woodland and Mazur, is that it requires teachers to work together for a great deal more time than is

currently allotted for teaming. In the middle schools in the school system that is the subject of this study, professional learning communities meet weekly for at least 80 minutes, and grade-level teams meet for another 80 minutes, suggesting that the potential to turn more evaluation and professional development to teacher leaders is possible. When a teacher is in Tier 2, the evaluator's job is to support a teacher's continued growth, evaluate how needed interventions are working, and see how successful teachers are in their Tier 1 activities with other teachers, which they will participate in, even in Tier 2. The responsibility of the evaluator in Tier 3 is to assist those who need remediation, observe and reevaluate teaching performance after the intervention has been implemented, and document the process.

A challenge to this approach, as expressed by Woodland and Mazur (2015), which gives more authority to teacher leaders and potentially frees up school administrators when teachers are more independent at Tier 1, is that in most states, professional learning communities and teacher evaluation are not linked, and educator accountability and professional development are treated as separate policy initiatives. Woodland and Mazur concluded that professional learning communities, collaboration, and inquiry into student work and student needs are the most effective practices schools have to change instructional practices and improve teaching and learning.

### ***Prioritization and Time Management Could Improve Evaluator Capacity***

Neumerski et al. (2018) cited the Wallace Foundation's national School Administration Manager Project which helps principals reallocate their time for managerial tasks to instructional leadership through documentation of their time use and identifying areas for greater efficiency. The program also trains principals on how to

build staff capacity to manage operations and respond to situations that a principal historically has responded to that are outside of the realm of instructional leadership. The School Administration Manager Project is another program designed to help school principals better manage their time and productivity. Many of the teachers in my study believed that evaluator capacity issues are more scheduling and prioritizing issues.

Finally, a word on capacity and prioritization came from Goldring et al. (2020) when they wrote, “Research over the past 35 years consistently demonstrates that principals spend minimal amounts of time on instructional leadership activities” (p. 19), yet “increasing the time principals spend on instructional leadership will improve the school’s culture, teaching and, ultimately student outcomes” (p. 20). Goldring et al. focused on the time-management skills of school principals and asserted that if principals improved their time management, they could spend more time on tasks that are related to changes in school culture and improving teaching and learning. Goldring et al. advocated for principals and assistant principals to spend less time on administrative and managerial matters. Through task analysis, the School Administration Manager, with the help of other key roles in the school, the principal analyzes where they are using their time on a regular basis and making personal goals regarding increasing instructional time. The program involves delegating school personnel who can be first responders when management issues arise so principals can spend more time on instruction. This program, where the principal delegates more managerial responsibilities to other staff members, requires principal/administrator buy-in. Goldring et al. contended that while change is challenging, once a principal sets up a calendar and manages their time better, the real challenge begins on what principals can do with teachers to improve teaching and

learning. The next section provides an overview of where teacher evaluation began in the United States for a historical perspective.

### **Historical Background of Teacher Evaluation**

As early as colonial times, teacher evaluation has been used. In the beginning, according to Jewell (2017), access to education was limited, most Americans were illiterate, and teachers lacked qualifications. As schools increased in number, the curriculum shifted from community-based topics and religious training (Jewell, 2017, p. 373) to more academic subjects. In America, education reform included less teacher autonomy and more administrative control in schools. As time went on, there was a growing need for teachers and administrators who were experts capable of training others. School districts were organized, and the systems became more complex.

Over the years, as early as the 1800s, there were calls to improve teacher pedagogy. This resulted in the establishment of normal schools whose purpose was to train teachers. Over the years, there were many debates about the purpose and goals of education. As schools and systems got larger, there became the need to standardize the curriculum and create American citizens. This reduced teacher influence over academic content and increased the monitoring and control of their work by administrators (Jewell, 2017). It was around this time that more formal teacher evaluations were introduced. During these years, there was also a debate about educational goals and what appropriate curriculum consisted of, and there was a call for conformity.

By the early 1900s, schools began to adopt a more business productivity model to make schools more successful and efficient. This included a shift away from an “inspection model” (Jewell, 2017, p. 378) of teacher evaluation and the development of

criteria to measure teacher performance. There was a shift from the colonial model of teacher observation which was described as “perform well or suffer the consequences” (Jewel, 2017, p. 378) to the goal of improving the quality of a teacher’s skills to retain and improve them rather than to dismiss them.

By World War II, the United States was looking at a reversal of *Brown v. Board of Education*. This was just one of the things that began to highlight the inequality and inequities evident in American public schools. Additionally, around this time, the Hawthorne Studies were being discussed. The main point from these studies was that production improved when workers were observed performing their roles (Jewell, 2017, p. 380). This model also suggested that teachers should be considered valued partners in the educational process rather than subordinates.

By the 1960s, during the time of the Civil Rights Movement, there was a continued call for appropriate access to quality education for disadvantaged students of color who were being denied. Education, according to Jewell (2017), “was blamed for everything, from perpetuating cycles of poverty to the lack of qualified science and math graduates” (p. 382). During this time, the Elementary and Secondary Education Assistance Act of 1965 provided federal funding to help education but required, as a condition of the funding, for there to be standardized tests.

By the 1970s, evaluation systems were developed using a model known as clinical supervision. This model required the supervisor and the teacher to observe, examine, and discuss the teacher’s professional practice (Jewell, 2017, p. 383). This required administrators to strengthen their data and their managerial skills. This was the evaluation system of choice by the 1980s, according to Jewell (2017).

In 1983, with the publication of a Nation at Risk, there was a call for “the professionalization of teachers” (Jewell, 2017, p. 384). This is when it was stated that evaluation processes needed to meet the needs of students and “align with the stated educational goals of districts” (Jewell, 2017, p. 384). Teachers were called on to help develop evaluation standards. It was at this point that concern was expressed by teachers about the lack of school principals possessing the competence to review teachers accurately, the lack of appropriate evaluator training, and the need to close the loop between teachers receiving but not utilizing feedback for their own professional development (Jewell, 2017, p. 385). It was apparent that there was a need for further development and training to evaluate well.

By the 1990s, model teacher standards had been developed and a national teacher licensing had been proposed. The debate continued about how to achieve high standards and high test scores.

In 2002, NCLB was enacted. With it came accountability for student achievement in schools. Holding teachers accountable, according to Jewell (2017), was the next step in the process (p. 388). With NCLB, there was a shift from supervision to evaluation. Also included in NCLB was holding individual teachers accountable for student learning, measured by standardized tests.

By 2011, President Obama stated that states could discontinue compliance with NCLB provided they adopted college and career-ready standards and improved their teacher evaluations to include measures of student achievement as measured by standardized testing. The concern during these years, with evaluations tied to standardized testing and student achievement, was that they ran the risk of focusing too

narrowly on one aspect of effective teaching while neglecting other important components.

As teacher evaluation continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, accountability had become the accepted mode for promoting change in teacher performance. The idea that was becoming widely accepted was that teacher effectiveness could be measured by student test data. Value-added models measured students against themselves to determine whether learning was increasing over the course of time. Specifically, value-added models tell us how much of a positive or negative effect individual teachers have on student learning over the course of a school year. Value-added models could also help school districts place their most effective teachers where they are needed most to benefit student achievement. In summary, while improved test scores, according to advocates of value-added models, were not the end goal in and of themselves, value-added models did help measure teacher competence. They also, according to their proponents helped administrators target specific areas for improvement for both teachers and students.

In conclusion, while teacher evaluation has evolved over the years, attempted to engage teachers in the process, and attempted to be evaluative and valuable rather than simply inspection and supervision for the purposes of fulfilling bureaucratic requirements, much of the research indicates that the more evaluation has changed, the more it has become a tool for accountability rather than one for teacher growth. If many teachers do not find the teacher evaluation process helpful or transformative, perhaps we must revisit the purpose behind teacher evaluation to see whether our methods align with our true purposes. If they do not, is up to us as educational leaders to write the prescription to transform our teacher evaluation programs into something that will make



us all better.

## **Summary of Chapter 2**

The focus of this literature review was an examination of research demonstrating correlations among many different factors, both preservice and in-service, that ultimately have an impact, either positive or negative, on the professional growth of special educators working in public schools. Specifically, the literature suggests positive correlations between a comprehensive teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity and the success, growth, and longevity of teachers. The research also advocates for comprehensive training for instructional leaders, for them to be able to become the benefactors of a successful teacher evaluation program that will transform educators and schools for the betterment of all stakeholders.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology for the study including the research design, purpose for the study, research questions, and procedures for data collection and analysis. Chapter 3 concludes with limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations for the study.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

A common theme that emerged from my preliminary research was that the capacity of educators at all levels was challenged when it came to implementing the components of the teacher evaluation program, as designed, in such a way that the components would grow teachers professionally. This study examined the implementation of each component of the teacher evaluation process with middle school EC teachers to see if the components of the process were implemented with fidelity and examined the perceptions of the impact of these components on the professional growth of this subgroup of educators. It also identified recommendations to improve the impact of each component of teacher evaluation for special education teachers.

This chapter begins with the purpose of the study and research questions, followed by a description of the study's participants. The chapter then describes the research design, instruments, data collection, and analysis procedures. The chapter ends with the study's assumptions, limitations and weaknesses, ethical considerations, and chapter summary.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study, as a process program evaluation, examined the six components of the North Carolina teacher evaluation program including teacher self-assessment, pre-observation conferences, observations, post-observation conferences, summary evaluations, and PDPs, examining current implementation practices and comparing those practices to the actual program design.

The research sought to examine to what extent the teacher evaluation process is

implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers. It also examined the perceptions of middle school special education teachers to learn the extent to which each component of teacher evaluation is beneficial to the specific professional development needs of this group of teachers. By determining whether components of the teacher evaluation program are implemented with fidelity and examining teacher and administrator perceptions regarding component efficacy as well as suggestions for improvement, the goal of this study was to make recommendations regarding evaluation of middle school special education teachers. The specific research questions that were explored within this study are below.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent are the components of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - a. To what extent is the teacher self-assessment component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - b. To what extent is the teacher pre-observation conference component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - c. To what extent is the teacher observation component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - d. To what extent is the teacher post-observation conference component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle

school special education teachers?

- e. To what extent is the teacher summary evaluation process component of the middle school special education teacher evaluation process implemented with fidelity?
  - f. To what extent is the teacher PDP process component of the middle school special education teacher evaluation process implemented with fidelity?
2. How do middle school education teachers perceive the impact of the teacher evaluation process on their professional growth?
  3. What suggestions do middle school EC teachers have for improvements to the teacher evaluation program and process to best impact their own professional growth?

Table 3 provides an alignment of the research questions in the study. The table breaks down the instruments that were used to collect data, the type of methodology for each question, and the method of analysis.

**Table 3***Research Question Alignment*

Research question	Instruments and item alignment to research questions	Method of analysis
1. To what extent are the components of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?		
a) self-assessment	Survey 2 Focus Groups Items 1, 2 Administrator Interviews 2, 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a priori coding</li> <li>• in-vivo coding</li> <li>• convergent design</li> </ul>
b) pre-observation conference	Survey Questions 3, 4 Focus Group Item 3 Interview Items 4, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a priori coding</li> <li>• in-vivo coding</li> <li>• convergent design</li> </ul>
c) the teacher observation component	Survey Items 5, 6, 7 Focus Group Item 4 Interview Items 6, 7, 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a priori coding</li> <li>• in-vivo coding</li> <li>• convergent design</li> </ul>
d) the teacher post-observation conference component	Survey Items 8, 9 Focus Group Item 5 Interview Items 9, 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a priori coding</li> <li>• in-vivo coding</li> <li>• convergent design</li> </ul>
e) the teacher professional development plan component	Survey Items 10, 11 Focus Group Item 6 Interview Items 11, 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a priori coding</li> <li>• in-vivo coding</li> <li>• convergent design</li> </ul>
f) the teacher summary evaluation component	Survey Items 12, 13 Focus Group Item 7 Interview Items 13, 14, 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a priori coding</li> <li>• in-vivo coding</li> <li>• convergent design</li> </ul>
2. To what extent is each component of the teacher evaluation program beneficial to the professional growth of middle school special education teachers?	Survey Items 14, 15 Focus Group Items 8, 9 Interview Items 1, 16, 17, 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a priori coding</li> <li>• in-vivo coding</li> <li>• convergent design</li> </ul>
3. What suggestions do middle school special education have for improvements to the teacher evaluation program and process?	Survey Items 16, 17 Focus Group Items 9, 10 Interview Items 17, 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a priori coding</li> <li>• in-vivo coding</li> <li>• convergent design</li> </ul>

Table 3 demonstrates how each question is addressed by various data sources to achieve triangulation.

## **Procedures and Methodology Design of the Study**

This research was a mixed methods program evaluation designed to determine the level of fidelity of implementation of each component of the teacher evaluation process and perceived professional growth of middle school special education teachers teaching in the public schools in North Carolina. Both qualitative and quantitative measures were utilized to examine the perceptions of teachers, principals, and assistant principals regarding the implementation of each component of the evaluation process and the recommendations or suggestions middle school EC teachers and their evaluators had for improvements to the teacher evaluation program and process. Approval for this study was obtained by the researcher from the Institutional Review Board for Gardner-Webb University and the district-level administration for the school district that was the subject of the study.

## **Terms and Definitions**

Throughout this study, teachers will be referred to as special education teachers. Occasionally, the subjects in this study will refer to special education teachers as EC teachers. These are the terms used interchangeably in the district that is the subject of this study.

## **Participants**

I invited all 35 middle school special education teachers from the nine middle schools in the focus district to participate in the survey. The survey concluded with an invitation to participate in a focus group (Appendix A). The district employs a total of 514 middle school teachers. The 35 middle school special education teachers comprised 6.8% of the total teacher population at the middle school level. Of the 35 invited

participants, 21 (60%) completed the survey. Ten teachers (28.6%) participated in a total of two focus groups. In addition, nine principals and assistant principals representing administrator evaluators from all the district's middle schools were interviewed during the summer of 2022 (Appendix B).

### **Instruments and Data Collection**

A collection of quantitative and qualitative data was used in this study to answer the research questions. A survey (Appendix A) was administered to middle school special education teachers examining perceptions regarding fidelity of implementation of each component of the teacher evaluation process. Two focus groups (Appendix B) were conducted with a total of 10 participants. The focus groups with middle school special education teachers examined perceptions regarding fidelity of implementation of each component of the evaluation process and recommendations for changes to better meet the needs of special education teachers at the middle school level. Interviews (Appendix C) were conducted with both principals and assistant principals charged with implementing the components of teacher evaluation for middle school special education teachers.

#### ***Quantitative Data–Survey (Appendix A)***

The survey in this study included questions developed in close reference to the logic model and the study research questions. In planning survey items, I drafted my protocol making sure my questions limited cognitive load (Robinson & Leonard, 2019) so there was a greater likelihood that respondents would answer all questions and complete my survey. One way I sought to accomplish this was to include 17 multiple-choice items and only one open-ended item, as the research suggests that the former lessens cognitive load and encourages completion. Qualtrics recommends that a survey

be less than 5 minutes in length. Qualtrics says that this translates into about 15 survey items. Taylor (2018) recommended that the length of a typical online survey is 15 to 20 questions which should take 3 to 5 minutes to complete. My survey of 17 questions is within the range of acceptability and preferability for research.

I used simplified language and structure to help decrease any satisficing behaviors (Robinson & Leonard, 2019) on the part of respondents, such as answering too quickly, choosing neutral responses, or engaging in other behaviors that would result in poor-quality data.

Other strategies I employed in the design of my survey items included what Aarons (2021) referred to as avoiding ambiguity, avoiding double- and triple-barreled questions, reducing verbosity, and working to ensure that I was not asking leading questions. To reduce ambiguity, I made sure that I was explicit with each survey item, not leaving it up to my respondents to determine what my terminology meant or what I was asking. I avoided double- and triple-barreled questions by simplifying my questions, referring to my research questions, and making certain that each item specifically addressed one and only one component of the teacher evaluation program. I reduced verbosity by avoiding jargon as well as limiting the number of words in each survey item. I recognized that the more complex an item was, the less likelihood that a respondent would answer the question or answer it with complete understanding of the data I was attempting to collect. Finally, I reviewed each of my survey items to make sure they were not leading a respondent to respond in a certain way. Leading questions, as Aarons wrote, promote a biased vision of the topic in your participants. and would, if not mitigated, invalidate my data.



I limited the number of open-ended items to one, as I understood that open-ended items, while valuable in the data that they provide, require a higher cognitive load than multiple choice responses. Furthermore, I adjusted my response options for my multiple-choice items, creating a 4-point Likert scale and eliminating the mid-point option which could reduce the usefulness of my data. Boone and Noltemeyer (2017) expressed similar ideas to Robinson and Leonard (2019) when they discussed the Rasch model for measurement stating that test takers are more likely to correctly answer easy items than they are difficult items. I also understood that Likert item stems, which are more closed-ended, are more likely to mitigate survey fatigue issues than open-ended questions.

The reasons I chose to use primarily Likert stems in my survey items rather than using more open-ended questions stemmed not only from the desire to reduce survey fatigue, but according to Aarons (2021), Likert scales are an effective and efficient way of asking related questions concerning a particular concept that can be adapted to scale for later analysis. In short, for the analysis phase of my research, including more Likert items would provide greater efficiency in data analysis. Aarons also noted that classic Likert scales consist of five response choices including strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. I opted for four response choices acknowledging, as Croasmun and Ostom (2011) wrote, that a forced choice influences respondents to take a certain position even if their opinion is not fixed. Forcing a choice, according to Croasmun and Ostom, threatens the validity of the data. However, Robinson and Leonard (2019) wrote that by removing a midpoint selection, respondents tend to share their truest feelings. I also agree with Robinson and Leonard that very few people are neutral or feel genuinely indifferent about topics. Robinson and Leonard continued

that most, if pressed to do so, would lean one way or another. Agreeing with Robinson and Leonard about neutral responses when surveying special education teachers regarding aspects of their evaluation process, I do believe that most if not all these educators will have an opinion on their teacher evaluation process. I also believe that a neutral response will not provide me with valuable data with which to begin to answer my research questions. Therefore, I stand by my decision, backed by research, to provide four response choices of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree as being the scenario that will provide me with the most useful data.

As the designer of this survey, I validated the instrument in a couple of ways. First, I enlisted cohorts and colleagues to review my survey and provide feedback related to the connection between my survey items and my research questions. I also employed an alignment table to ensure that each item in my survey was clearly aligned to a research question or sub-question so that the resulting data were as useful as possible.

### ***Qualitative Data–Focus Group (Appendix B)***

When planning for and conducting focus groups, Morgan (1997) recommended not exceeding six to 10 participants per focus group. Hall (2020) wrote that the optimal number of participants in a focus group is between six and eight. Morgan recommended purposively selected samples in which participants are recruited from a limited number of sources. In contrast, random sampling, Morgan contended would make it extremely unlikely to obtain a sample size adequate to represent a large population. The challenge with purposively selected samples is that when interpreting data from a limited sample, it is sometimes difficult to represent the full spectrum of experiences and opinions. For the focus groups in this study, I utilized purposively selected samples to include middle

school special education teachers, so that I knew, at least within the school district that is the subject of this study, participants share dissimilar experiences in relation to the research questions. This is what Hall referred to as homogenous sampling or utilizing a predetermined set of criteria when selecting participants. In this case, the criteria for selection in the focus groups included participants being special education teachers at the middle school level working at a school in the district that is the subject of this study. This is an example of what Davis (2017) referred to as inclusion and exclusion criteria, which I have used to define the population for the study. This helped ensure some meaningful discussions in our focus groups.

While my focus groups were five participants per group, I adhered to Morgan's (1997) suggestion to over-recruit by 20% to compensate for participants who may not attend on the day of the focus group. Additionally, I conducted two focus groups to ensure that I generated enough data to answer my research questions. Morgan also stated that having multiple groups allows for useful comparisons of your data as well as a better determination of when saturation has been achieved.

The focus group protocol in this study included questions developed in close reference to the research questions and the logic model. Specifically, each focus group sought to examine the perceptions and experiences regarding the fidelity of implementation of each component of the evaluation process with middle school special education teachers. I examined each component of the process including the teacher self-assessment, pre-observation conference, observation, post-observation conference, PDP, and the summary evaluation. We discussed how each component of the evaluation program was implemented from their perspectives, looking at their perceptions of

implementation and helpfulness of the components to their own professional growth, examining both strengths and challenges to the process. I also asked the focus group participants about their recommendations for improvements to the different components that comprise teacher evaluation. Thinking about the number of questions in my focus group protocol, Hall (2020) stated that in contrast to interview protocols, a focus group protocol covers fewer topics and questions, allowing all focus group participants an opportunity to share. My focus group protocol, including warm-up questions, questions related to the topic, and closing questions consists of 10 questions. The literature recommends a range between 10 and 12 questions to be ideal.

A final consideration for my focus groups was ensuring clarity and validity of my protocol questions prior to the actual focus groups. To do this, Hall (2020) suggested gathering several individuals with demographics like my population of interest to sample the questions with them. I enlisted the assistance of three individuals, including doctoral cohort members and colleagues, to review the focus group questions and provide feedback and suggestions for improvement. I asked them to review the focus group questions alongside my research questions to help ensure validity. Detailed feedback helped me to make revisions that ensured clarity of each focus protocol item before I conducted my focus groups.

### ***Qualitative Data–Interviews (Appendix C)***

As I prepared and developed my interview protocol, I read a description of the interview process by Ritchie et al. (2013) that summarized beautifully what I hoped my interview journey would be. Ritchie et al. wrote, “The interview traveler walks along with local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of

their lived world...the journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveler may change as well” (p. 16).

In planning for conducting interviews, I refined my interview protocol keeping in mind Gillham (2000), who wrote that shorter interviews are less burdensome to analyze. In the creation and revisions of my interview questions, I acknowledged Gillham when he stated that questions need to be distinct, each dealing in this case with separate research questions. I revised questions and eliminated questions that were found to be repetitive in nature. Additionally, as I reviewed my questions, I kept at the forefront ways in which I could encourage people to talk rather than asking direct questions, as it was my goal for them to teach me about my topic. Gillham noted that most interviewers talk too much. Gillham wrote that it is the interviewees who hold the information. Therefore, skilled interviewers utilize economy with what they say. Therefore, I structured my questions to be brief and specific permitting the subjects to tell me a story, which would answer my research questions. Ritchie et al. (2013) put it another way when they suggested that the best way of finding out about a participant’s experience is to ask open-ended questions and allow participants to construct a picture with their words, which will also serve as a map of the direction of the interview.

A second way Gillham (2000) suggested structuring effective social interaction was through active listening. Gillham stated that we can accomplish this by concentrating on what our subjects are saying, not what we will say, becoming a listener, not a talker. In this way, I left space for my subjects to respond.

Ritchie et al. (2013) also emphasized active listening when they wrote that active listening is fundamental to the interactions consistent with a successful interview. One

must not simply listen to the words but rather, attempt to hear the meaning of what the participant is saying, understanding where exploration is necessary through follow-up questions, to get to the nuances of the participant's experiences.

To aid the interviewer in their active listening, audio recording of interviews produces more accurate and better interviews and as such produce more valid and trustworthy data. Harvey (2011) wrote that an advantage of a recording device is that it provides a transcript verbatim of the interview so the interviewer can focus and more authentically engage with the respondent.

A third way I encouraged my subjects to talk is by appreciating what Gillham (2000) referred to as the active role of silence. Gillham recommended allowing for silence within an interview to allow for comfortable thinking time for both you and your subject. Finally, a point Gillham made was that by really listening, you will be able to direct the interview more effectively in the right direction and at the right pace, because you allow your participant to do most of the talking.

In designing my research question protocol, one question I wanted to answer was how many questions were appropriate for an interview in a qualitative study. Kriukow (2022) stated that the target of an interview should be to answer your research questions; therefore, the number of questions should not be your starting point. Kriukow went on to say that your aim should be to answer your research questions, exhaust your topic, and do so with as few questions as possible. Kriukow emphasized that as few as possible does not suggest as short a time as possible, but rather what is necessary to complete your research. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the total number of interview questions should be between five and 10. Still, other sources said that qualitative

interviews should not exceed 15 questions. My interview protocol contained 15 questions.

Another consideration when designing my interview protocol was how to structure the questions. Recommendations from Ritchie et al. (2013) included designing interview questions in a way that achieves breadth and depth. Ritchie et al. provided four basic recommendations that I incorporated. They included asking open questions, asking non-leading questions, asking clear questions, and avoiding double questions. Ritchie et al. wrote that asking open questions requires the participant to supply the content of the answer in contrast to closed questions that simply supply yes or no answers using single words or phrases. Asking non-leading questions does not influence the responses you receive or bias your data. Ritchie et al. also suggested that interviewers monitor their own responses, so they do not lead future responses by the interview participant. Asking clear questions involves asking short and clear questions so the interviewee is certain about the sort of information being sought. Finally, I avoided double questions. These types of questions make it difficult for the participant to understand both halves and answer both halves with clarity and accuracy.

Of 37 administrators and evaluators in the district, nine middle school administrators from the nine middle schools agreed to be interviewed. The interview questions examined instructional leaders' perceptions regarding the fidelity of implementation of each specific component of the teacher evaluation process, the strengths and opportunities for improvement in the teacher evaluation process, as well as their own capacities when it came to implementing all components of the evaluation program with fidelity when evaluating middle school special education teachers.

## **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

### ***Surveys***

The first step I completed was creating a data set from my returned surveys. Once the surveys were completed, I created alignment tables from my coded data to organize my data according to research questions to begin my data analysis.

Once the data were entered into an alignment table, I checked my data for completeness and accuracy, correcting any errors. Aarons (2021) referred to this as cleaning and preparing the data. Aarons also suggested with a small response size (under 50 respondents), the tasks should not be overly burdensome. Aarons recommended that when cleaning and preparing the data be on the lookout for outliers or things that do not make sense, as this may be a red flag to check data entry, coding, or missing data.

Analysis of the survey data included examination of both frequency distributions and mode. Hall (2020) wrote that with Likert scale data, the best measure (of central tendency) is the mode, or the most frequent response. Hall also recommended simplifying response categories for analysis, such as combining four response categories of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree to two nominal categories such as agree/disagree. Lavrakas (2008) wrote that frequency distribution is the foundation of statistical analytical methods and should be the primary step when analyzing survey data.

I presented the distribution of responses in the way suggested by Lavrakas (2008) when he suggested that graphic representations such as a bar chart for each response category can be a helpful visual for others to understand your data. In this case, I utilized frequency distribution tables.



### *Interviews and Focus Groups*

The data for my focus groups and interviews were collected by video recording through Google Meet and transcribed utilizing an Apple app called Otter, which records and transcribes voice for ease of transcription and coding. By recording and transcribing via technology, I was able to be fully present in these conversations. I reviewed all recording methods, including the transcription app, the Google Meet video recording, and my own notes to ensure accurate interpretation.

Upon completion of my focus groups and interviews, I reviewed each of the transcripts with either audio or video to ensure the accuracy of my data and correct any errors prior to further coding of the data. I utilized a hybrid method of in-vivo coding and a priori coding for both the interview and the focus group data.

Although in my program evaluation I knew what the teacher evaluation system implemented with fidelity should look like, I first utilized in-vivo coding, an inductive approach to do a first run-through of the raw data simply to see what themes, ideas, or patterns emerged before I applied my codes to the data based on my research questions. Saldana (2021) supported my decision to utilize more than one method for coding when he contended that typically it takes more than one attempt to code your data successfully and comprehensively. Utilizing different coding methods helped ensure that I gathered the best information from my raw data and remained open to what my data may show me that was unexpected. Saldana advocated coding inductively as an initial method for coding qualitative research because it helps the researcher enter analysis open to what a participant has to say rather than force-fit(ing) your data into pre-existing codes. Beginning with in-vivo coding, I remained, as Saldana stated, open to new discoveries

that perhaps I was neither looking for nor expecting. Saldana also maintained that after decades of qualitative research, in-vivo coding remains his first method of coding for research regardless of methodological approach.

I then conducted a priori coding or deductive coding. I began with specific codes in mind based on my research questions and worked to match data points to my research questions. Saldana (2021) recommended developing a provisional list of codes beforehand to be able to most effectively answer your research questions, but he also recommended remaining open to other categories that may emerge. Saldana's assertion that qualitative researchers, to yield a substantive analysis, remain open to the most appropriate coding methods supported my decision to utilize both in-vivo and a priori coding in my data analysis. I did winnow the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 192) as I conducted a priori coding, focusing on the parts of the data that were specific to my research questions. Finally, as data were collected, I revised or modified my provisional codes and added new codes as the data unfolded.

Following the individual coding and analysis of the data from the surveys, the focus groups, and the interviews, my next task was to triangulate my data. Triangulation of data, as explained by Fitzpatrick et al. (2011), increases the validity of the results of your research by combining the results of three different measures intended to address the same construct. To triangulate my research, I examined different perspectives on the same questions. In the case of my research, I wanted to understand both teacher and administrator evaluator perspectives on the fidelity of implementation and the usefulness of the teacher evaluation program in the professional development of middle school special educators. I compared responses in the surveys, the focus groups, and the

interviews with what the evaluation manual stated regarding fidelity of implementation. I narratively described my findings and identified implications for both change in practice as well as future research.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations of the Study**

#### ***Assumptions***

There were several assumptions in this study. A first assumption was that there was a relationship between a well-executed teacher evaluation program and perceived teacher professional growth. A second assumption was that both instructional leaders and special education teachers wanted a more comprehensive and transformative evaluation process. Finally, a third assumption was that participants would answer questions honestly and accurately.

#### ***Limitations***

First, participation in the study was voluntary, which could have been a limitation. There could have been a difference in participants' and nonparticipants' answers to the survey and interview and focus group questions. Those who chose to participate could have very strong feelings about the teacher evaluation program or vice versa. This could have skewed the data in one direction or another in my sample. An additional limitation is that the study took place in a single school district. The results may or may not be generalizable across different school districts.

#### ***Delimitations***

One delimitation of this study was the selection of only middle school special education teachers as teacher participants for this study. I believe an examination of the evaluation program would have implications for all EC teachers regardless of grade level.

Excluding special education teachers who were not also middle school teachers helped gather more focused data relative to my interest in middle school special education. This was also true for my selection of instructional leaders from the middle school level I chose to interview. It is very likely that instructional leaders at the elementary school and high school levels would have provided some insightful data regarding my research questions since I believe, based on experience, discussions with professionals, and the literature, that teacher evaluation programs are subject to challenges in public schools regardless of grade level. However, my specific interest was middle schools, and limiting my research to middle schools kept my research focused and specific.

Another delimitation of this study is that I decided to conduct my study in the district in which I work. The fact that participants may know me may have had an impact on the type of data I received.

A final delimitation may be caused by the fact that this study is mostly qualitative and nonexperimental in nature. While there may be correlations in this study, no cause-effect relationship will be determined based on the data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All research participation presents risks. Fitzpatrick et al. (2011) stated that ethical behavior in research involves protecting the rights of people from whom they collect data. Ethical considerations for this study included ensuring that all participants provided informed consent to participate in the study.

One way I ensured protection for my participants was through both anonymity and confidentiality. I accomplished this in my surveys by not requiring participants to provide their names or email addresses on the survey. Participants were only required to

provide information that identified their position, education level, and years of experience. For interviews, I ensured confidentiality by including only a code, without an administrator's name or school name on transcriptions of interviews. I followed the same protocol to protect the confidentiality of teachers who participated in my focus groups. I also provided instructions to focus group participants that what was discussed in the focus group should remain in the focus group to protect individual participants and hopefully allow them to speak more freely.

Participants were asked and each provided informed consent before participating in this study. Participants were informed in writing about the purpose of the research, potential risks and benefits to them, the confidentiality of information, and other pertinent information concerning the handling and protection of data as well as what participation meant for them as the participant.

No data were collected for the study until full approval was obtained from Gardner-Webb University's Institutional Review Board and the Office of Accountability for the school district that was the subject of this study. The application to conduct research was submitted to the director for accountability and research for the school district and subsequently approved. Email addresses for potential administrator and teacher participants were obtained and specific, individualized emails were sent to prospective participants for the survey, the focus groups, and the interviews with information about the study and informed consent.

### **Summary**

The data were collected, analyzed, and reported, and the findings are presented in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Chapter 5 of this dissertation contains results, implications

for middle school special education teachers and the instructional leaders who serve them, and recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine the perceptions of middle school evaluators as well as middle school special education teachers about the fidelity of implementation of each component of the teacher evaluation program. Additionally, this study examined special education teacher and administrator perceptions of the effectiveness of the evaluation system and both teacher and evaluator recommendations for improvement to the program. The study was completed from the summer of 2022 through the fall of 2022. Participants included 21 of 35 middle school special education teachers completing surveys, 10 special education teachers participating in two focus groups, and nine school-based administrators participating in interviews. This chapter outlines the research questions, data collection process, and findings. Three research questions guided this study.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent are the components of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - a. To what extent is the teacher self-assessment component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - b. To what extent is the teacher pre-observation conference component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - c. To what extent is the teacher observation component of the teacher

evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?

- d. To what extent is the teacher post-observation conference component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - e. To what extent is the teacher summary evaluation process component of the middle school special education teacher evaluation process implemented with fidelity?
  - f. To what extent is the teacher PDP process component of the middle school special education teacher evaluation process implemented with fidelity?
- 2. How do middle school education teachers perceive the impact of the teacher evaluation process on their professional growth?
  - 3. What suggestions do middle school EC teachers have for improvements to the teacher evaluation program and process to best impact their own professional growth?

### **Demographic Information From My Study**

Teachers who participated in this study's survey ranged in experience from novice teachers with as little as 1 year of experience to those having more than 10 years of experience. Table 4 shows survey participants and their levels of experience.



**Table 4***Experience of Survey Participants*

Years in education	Number and percentage of participants
0-2 years	4 (19%)
3-5 years	1 (4.7%)
6-10 years	6 (28.5%)
More than 10 years	10 (47.6%)

Specifically, 10 (47.6%) of the 21 participant teachers had more than 10 years of experience. Six (28.5%) teachers had between 6 to 10 years of experience. One (4.7%) teacher had 3 to 5 years of experience, and four (19%) teachers had 0 to 2 years of experience.

My focus group demographics included 10 middle school EC teachers from the district that is the subject of this study. Table 5 shows focus group participants and their levels of experience.

**Table 5***Experience of Focus Group Participants*

Years in education	Number and percentage of participants
0-2 years	1 (10%)
3-5 years	0 (0%)
6-10 years	1 (10%)
More than 10 years	8 (80%)

Teachers who participated in my focus groups were teachers in co-teaching classrooms, small group resource rooms, and self-contained classrooms. Their experience ranged from first-year teachers to teachers with as many as 29 years of experience.

My evaluator demographics included two principals and seven assistant principals from the district that is the subject of this study. Table 6 shows evaluators and their levels

of experience.

**Table 6**

*Experience of Interview Participants*

Years in administration	Number and percentage of participants
0-2 years	1 (11%)
3-5 years	2 (22%)
6-10 years	3 (33%)
More than 10 years	3(33%)

Evaluators who participated in my interviews were middle school administrators. Their experience ranged from first-year administrators to administrators with as much as 17 years of experience in education and leadership and up to 29 years of experience in education.

**Data Collection Process**

The methodology used for this study was a mixed methods design. I sought participants' perceptions, experiences, and memories regarding participation in or implementation of the teacher evaluation process. The survey, designed in Qualtrics, was administered in the fall of 2022, and contained 17 questions, with 15 multiple-choice items, one open-ended question, and one question designed to collect demographic data. The surveys were sent to 35 actively employed middle school teachers with a completion rate of 60% (n=21) at the close of the 2-week survey window. All respondents completed the close-ended questions, while 71.4% (n=15) completed the last open-ended question in which they were asked to provide suggestions for improvement to the evaluation process. While all 21 surveys were used in my quantitative analysis, only the 15 surveys with the completed open-ended question were used for my qualitative analysis. Virtual focus groups were conducted with middle school special education teachers during the fall of

2022 with 10 participants split evenly across two focus groups. Virtual interviews were conducted with nine middle school principals and assistant principals who evaluate middle school special education teachers during the summer of 2022.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the 21 survey responses for participant demographic and quantitative data and the 15 open-ended responses for commonalities and themes. In my analysis of Research Question 1 and the six sub-questions in my survey, I utilized alignment tables to organize my coded data by research questions. Initially, I examined the survey data looking at the mode or the most frequently occurring responses for each survey item to help determine which direction my data pointed regarding each research question. I examined the frequency distribution for each survey item to determine both the number of respondents and the percentage of respondents responding a certain way. For this analysis, I combined the four response categories of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree to the two nominal categories of agree and disagree for most questions.

Alignment tables were utilized in my analysis of the survey open-ended questions, aligning participant responses with my research questions, looking for similarities and differences in responses for a comprehensive list of suggestions and recommendations from special education teachers on ways to improve the teacher evaluation program.

Focus group response analysis included questions designed to answer each of my three research questions and sub-questions contained within those questions. I designed alignment tables to organize my focus group raw data by research question for in-depth analysis to develop themes and conclusions from the data.

I analyzed interview responses to questions designed to answer each of my three

research questions and sub-questions contained within those questions. I designed alignment tables to organize my focus group raw data by research question for in-depth analysis and coding to develop themes and conclusions from the data. My coding for all my data consisted first of in-vivo coding, as described in Chapter 3, where I identified patterns and ideas in the data without specific questions in mind. I then turned to a priori coding where I matched specific codes related to my research questions enabling me to answer my research questions with the data.

Finally, I triangulated my data by creating alignment tables to present my data from my three data sources, the surveys, focus groups, and interviews, side-by-side to make comparisons and contrasts among data points on the same research questions.

## **Findings**

### ***Research Question 1***

Research Question 1 asked to what extent the components of the teacher evaluation program were implemented with fidelity.

**1a.** Sub-question 1a specifically examined whether the self-assessment allowed special education teachers to reflect upon their performance.

**Survey.** The survey contained one question that specifically addressed the teacher self-assessment component of the teacher evaluation program.

Table 7 shows the results of the survey item that asked about the self-assessment and reflection.

**Table 7**

#### ***Self-Assessment Encourages Reflection***

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
1 (4.8%)	3 (14.3%)	17 (81%)	0 (0%)	21 (100%)

Of the 21 respondents, four (19%) either strongly disagreed or disagreed, while a total of 17 (81%) respondents agreed that teacher self-assessment is a useful tool for self-reflection.

***Focus Groups.*** In the focus group conversations, only one (10%) of the 10 participants expressed that the self-assessment could be useful in reflection leading to teacher growth. Others focused more on their perception that the self-assessment component of the evaluation process was, in most instances, completed for compliance. One teacher reflected, “We get it done just to check it off our list and then it’s gone.” Another teacher commented, “I finalize it. It’s turned in to my observer and then usually it’s not referenced again.” All agreed that the self-assessment was rarely if ever talked about after the beginning of the school year. One teacher referred to the self-assessment as “meaningless.” A clear contrast was identified in comparing survey and focus group responses.

***Interviews.*** There was a range of responses regarding the teacher self-assessment from school-based administrators and evaluators. Of the nine respondents to this research question, only one respondent stated that the process for the self-assessment component was any different for special education teachers than it was for general education teachers; 66.6% or six of the respondents described the self-assessment process using the terminology “check box” regarding the process, suggesting that many, if not most, of the evaluators in the study have their teachers complete the self-assessment for compliance rather than as a truly reflective piece designed to encourage professional growth. Only 44.4% or four of the respondents used any terminology regarding the teacher self-assessment that was suggestive of this being a component designed for reflection or

learning of any kind.

In summary, while a clear majority of teachers indicated the potential for self-assessment to encourage reflection in the survey, conversations with focus groups and interviews with evaluators indicated this potential is not realized, as the self-assessment component is completed to demonstrate compliance rather than to foster growth.

***Commonalities in Evaluator Interview and Teacher Perceptions for 1a.***

Virtually all the nine principals and assistant principals interviewed, when asked about their perceptions of the teacher self-assessment, stated that the process was completed more for compliance, more “an act of formality and checking a box than anything else.” One evaluator commented, “As a school administrator, you have so much to do. It's more of the same thing for teachers. It's just I've got to get this done and it's gotta have a check on it.” One assistant principal reflected, “My experience working with other administrators; I think they just don't even care about the self-assessment.” Other significant comments included the fact that schools are not really using the self-assessment to have deep conversations with lots of feedback. Another evaluator commented that administrators and districts could do a better job of using it as a tool to help teachers grow instead of just checking boxes. What does happen, as an evaluator noted, is that “teachers check boxes because they don't have time and administrators don't have time.”

***Discrepancies in Evaluator Interview Perceptions for 1a.*** There were three principals and assistant principals, or 33% of administrators, who were interviewed and saw the self-assessment as a tool teachers can use to see growth. One principal stated, “When used properly...it is a good way to kind of compare where you are versus where

the administration sees you on that first evaluation and even at the end of the year.” Two evaluators mentioned that the self-assessment, when utilized properly, “orients the teacher to the evaluation rubric and gets them accustomed to the structure and all the indicators” on the rubric for their evaluations. None of the teachers in the two focus groups mentioned any of these things about their self-assessment process, suggesting there exists a disconnect between what some administrator evaluators believe and what teachers believe about self-assessment.

**1b.** The survey contained three questions that addressed Research Question 1b focusing on the frequency of pre-observation conferences as well as the content covered within those pre-observation conferences. Table 8 graphically presents both agreement and disagreement from special education teachers who participated in the survey regarding fidelity of implementation of pre-observation conferences as designed and intended.

**Table 8**

*Pre-Observation Conference Survey Results*

Item	Disagree	Agree
PDP discussed in pre-observation	12 (57.1%)	9 (42.7%)
Pre-observation discusses lessons to be taught	13 (61.9%)	8 (38%)
Pre-observation conferences occur at least once a year	9 (42.8%)	12 (57.1%)

The first question asked for special education teacher perceptions of a connection between the pre-observation conference and the PDP. A majority (57.1%) of the respondents, disagreed that PDPs were discussed during pre-observation conferences, suggesting that among different middle schools in this study, this process was not being implemented with fidelity. The second question asked if the lesson to be observed was

discussed in the pre-observation conference. Again, a majority (61.9%) disagreed that the lesson to be observed was discussed. Finally, a question asked if pre-observations occurred at least once a year. Of the 21 respondents, a majority, 12 (57.1%), agreed that these meetings were occurring.

***Focus Groups.*** Information from the focus group conversation underscored these data in revealing a lack of consistency in the process as far as what individual administrator evaluators do as a part of the pre-observation conference process. It was also indicated by one focus group participant that pre-conferences lacked fidelity of implementation depending upon the administrator who was facilitating the process. They commented, “Some have been more formal; some have been more informal.”

Most comments focused on the pre-observation conference feeling rushed as administrators worked to submit documentation for compliance. For example, a participant stated, “There's no preconference because it's like all of a sudden it's you know the day before Christmas and they're running late.” Other comments suggested that these conferences have been more meaningful in the past. One teacher stated,

I felt like pre-conferences were always very meaningful and the admin would always look for lesson plans. Then it kind of evolved into just give me an idea like what's your topic of instruction tomorrow blah blah blah. And then it led into OK I'm going to come in and observe you during this time period and there weren't any questions to go along with that. So, I do wish pre-conferences were a little more meaningful.

While the majority of special education teachers indicated that pre-observation conferences are not conducted with fidelity, some do experience meaningful



conversations with evaluators during this time. One teacher indicated a consistent effort by an evaluator to communicate with the teacher before an observation: “I’ve had a pre-observation there have always been like a couple of times where the administrator couldn’t meet with me, but they would either call and talk to me or they would do some form of pre-observation meeting.” Another stated that in one experience, “the administrator was very intentional about that pre-observation conference wanting to know what she should expect, what kinds of kids were gonna be in there, and what she was facing.” These positive reflections on the pre-observation conferences appeared to be the exceptions rather than the rule as teachers described their pre-observation experiences.

**Interviews.** There was a range of interview responses regarding the teacher pre-observation conference from school-based administrators and evaluators. Of the nine respondents to this research question, only one did not specifically address pre-observation conferences in their interview. With this evaluator, upon reviewing the interview transcripts, our conversation drifted from pre-observation conferences to a discussion of observations and feedback. While it provided useful data, this digression limited my data from evaluators regarding pre-observation conferences to eight respondents. Of nine respondents, five (55.5%) indicated that the pre-observation conference process was different for special educators than for general education teachers. Some of the distinctions for special education teachers included discussions of explicit instruction, student-focused dialogue rather than content-based discussion, and questions designed based on the specific classroom setting. All the respondents indicated that their pre-observation discussions with special education teachers involved a

discussion of the lesson to be observed in preparation for the observation.

While evaluators all confirmed that pre-observation conferences are completed and focus on discussing the lesson and previewing specific behaviors and activities that might be observed, no administrator evaluator mentioned discussing the teacher's PDP. Data from teachers seem to indicate that a thorough completion of this component of the evaluation process is dependent on the individual effort of evaluators.

***Commonalities Between Teachers and Evaluators on Research Question 1b.***

Some points where teachers' perceptions and their evaluators' perceptions aligned included the sentiment that often pre-observation conferences were simply procedural rather than meaningful. One evaluator stated, "It does kind of fall into the checking box just like the other ones do. Did we have this preconference that I marked off you know...I gotta get this checked." Many teachers in the focus groups agreed that the pre-observation conference lacked fidelity across evaluators. One commented that pre-conferences lacked meaning. She said, "They just don't have the meaning that they used to," suggesting that for some teachers, the process has changed over the course of their careers, not necessarily for the better. When pre-observation conferences did occur with fidelity, both evaluators and special education teachers had positive similar things to say. There was agreement that when implemented with fidelity, pre-observation conferences were a time for the evaluator to learn what the lesson would look like and an opportunity for information gathering before the evaluator walked into the classroom. There was an opportunity for administrator evaluators to offer support to their special education teachers and, as one special education teacher stated, give an evaluator a "glimpse into what's going on in the classroom."

***Discrepancies Between Teachers and Evaluators on Research Question 1b.*** In analyzing the data on pre-observation conferences from the evaluator interviews and the special education teacher focus groups, it was evident that while there were no clear discrepancies between the evaluator and teacher groups, fidelity of implementation seemed to be inconsistent across schools, evaluators, and special education teachers. Both teachers and evaluators echoed the sentiment expressed by one evaluator when she stated, “They [special education teachers] just need that time with you.” It was clear, however, from talking with both the evaluators and the special education teachers that some schools and administrators implemented the pre-observation conferences with fidelity, while others were completing the process simply for compliance.

**1c.** This sub-question focused on fidelity of the observation component of the teacher evaluation process. Table 9 graphically represents responses to survey items related to this component.

**Table 9**

*Observation Survey Results*

Item	Disagree	Agree
Formal observations last at least 45 minutes	14 (66.6%)	7 (33.3%)
Observations provide feedback for professional growth	13 (61.9%)	8 (38%)

When respondents were asked if formal observations last at least 45 minutes, a majority (66.6%) disagreed. A total of 13 respondents, or 61.9%, did not believe they receive feedback to promote professional growth.

***Focus Groups.*** Focus group participants indicated that formal observations varied in duration from between 5 to 45 minutes. Other impressions of the observation process were that the duration of an observation is connected to the cycle a teacher is on and their

career status. Specifically, teachers are evaluated on either a comprehensive, a standard, or an abbreviated evaluation cycle depending on their employment status. Teachers with 3 or fewer years of employment are evaluated on the comprehensive cycle. For the comprehensive cycle, three full formal observations are required. For teachers with more than 3 years of employment with their license due to be renewed in the current school year, one formal observation is required. Finally, teachers with more than 3 of years employment, not in a renewal year, are placed in the abbreviated cycle. For teachers on an abbreviated cycle, only informal observations are required. Teachers in my focus groups ranged in experience from those with less than 3 years of experience to as many as 29 years of experience; therefore, teachers in my study represented teachers taking part in each of the cycles.

One teacher felt that evaluators are not in their classrooms enough to get an accurate picture of what is happening in terms of instruction. One teacher spoke of the observation and follow-up when they stated, “I really want feedback. I want to be like, am I doing this right? Is this what you have envisioned for this?” This second-year teacher desired feedback that she was not receiving.

***Interviews.*** There was a range of responses regarding the teacher observation component from school-based administrators and evaluators. Of the nine interviewees, three indicated that the observation process is conducted differently for special education teachers. Distinctions that were noted for special education teachers included not needing to observe rigor and not gauging developmental appropriateness because “the EC teacher has to figure that out for themselves.” Other dissimilarities noted when observing an EC teacher included more of a focus on classroom management than in a general education

observation and looking at interactions with individual students as compared to whole class engagement. Whether they indicated that observations of special education teachers were different or not, most talked about looking for best practices, relationships, and quality teaching. It was evident from data collected in our interviews that evaluators attempt to implement teacher evaluation with fidelity, as designed and intended, although time and capacity became an issue with the competing responsibilities of a school-based administrator. When asked if their observations lasted at least 45 minutes, all evaluators interviewed suggested that the length of their observations ranged from 15 minutes to 45 minutes, depending on the teacher and the given situation. Other school-related issues often impacted the length of observations and the amount of time they were able to remain in a classroom during a given observation period.

*Commonalities in Evaluator Perceptions for Research Question 1c.* The one commonality between teacher and evaluator perceptions for Research Question 1c was that most of the evaluators commented that their formal observations lasted from 20 minutes to 45 minutes. This was reflected similarly in many but not all of the special education teacher comments.

*Discrepancies Between Evaluator and Teacher Perceptions for Research Question 1c.* No evaluator stated that their observations lasted less than 20 minutes, in contrast to special education teacher perceptions. Many special education teachers in the focus group perceived their observations to be “short and sweet,” stating that evaluators “just come in and do their thing and leave.” Several evaluators described their process very differently. One told me,

I sit in the classroom amongst the kids usually. And I take a notepad or a laptop

out and I'm looking for and writing down what's happening...I'm jotting down what I'm observing...I'm observing the population, class setup, observing where the teacher [is] and how the teacher delivers [instruction]. Are they at the front? Are they walking around to kids? Are they waiting for the day or are they already ready when they walk in, do they have a task ready?...just like a routine.

Another evaluator stated that she always talks to kids when doing an observation.

Another evaluator described her process when she said,

I typically take notes on my computer; what's going on and normally just kind of general notes about what the lesson was and then I normally for myself do a plus-minus kind of you know whatever is called plus delta whatever points I thought were really amazing and the minus not as bad just to give feedback.

Overall, most special education teachers in the study felt that if there was feedback given following an observation, it was usually observational rather than feedback for growth.

Clearly, there are discrepancies between how evaluators perceive their observation process and how these processes are perceived by middle school special education teachers.

**1d.** This sub-question focused on the implementation fidelity of the post-observation conference process. Table 10 is a graphic representation of teacher responses.

**Table 10***Post-Observation Conference Survey Results*

Item	Disagree	Agree
Post-observations are connected to professional development plans	12 (57%)	9 (42.8%)
Post-observations include a discussion of my strengths	7 (34%)	14 (67%)
Post-observations include a discussion of my areas for growth	12 (57%)	9 (43%)

The survey asked three specific questions about post-observation conferences. As with pre-observation conferences, nine (42.8%) indicated they were connected to plans for professional development. While a majority (67%) indicated that these conversations included a discussion of strengths, only nine (43%) indicated the conversations covered areas for growth.

**Focus Groups.** Focus group participants agreed that post-observation feedback lacks substance. Five of the 10 focus group participants stated that most of their feedback contained the words “Good job” but not much more. One teacher commented that when she requested a redo on an observation that she did not feel went well, she was denied and told, “We know you do a good job.” A first-year teacher said,

The only time I've ever gotten really good feedback is when I ask the questions...it's usually just, “Whatever you think is right,” or they pass the buck off to someone else like, “Why you don’t go ask this person?” Then why are you observing me?

Still another teacher commented,

It makes me feel like I'm doing a good job. Keep doing what you're doing, but it

also makes me feel like I'm patted on the back like a baby and saying you know keep walking you know you're going to get there. They don't know where I'm going. But you know, they're at least encouraging.

In summary, the teachers in my focus groups seemed to suggest that they do not receive much substantive feedback for professional growth in the post-observation conference process.

**Interviews.** There was a range of responses regarding the teacher post-observation conference component from school-based administrators and evaluators. Of the nine respondents to this research question, none of the respondents indicated there was any distinction in the way post-observation conferences were conducted for middle school special education teachers as compared to their general education counterparts. Other themes that emerged in our evaluator interviews included an emphasis on the importance of dialogue, providing feedback, and facilitating teacher growth. Another theme that developed was many of our evaluators designed their post-observation conferences based on the needs of their teachers and the capacity of their special education teachers to engage in dialogue. It was suggested that at times, special education teachers simply lack the capacity to sit for a long conference due to competing responsibilities. It was evident from my interviews that the evaluators in this study, at least from what they stated, enter the evaluation process with the best intentions to implement post-observation conferences with fidelity, in the best interest of their teachers. There is, again, a sharp contrast between what evaluators describe the post-observation process to be and how special education teachers describe that same process, suggesting a disconnect between special education teachers and their evaluators.



***Commonalities in Evaluator Perceptions for Research Question 1d.*** In

examining the administrator evaluator perceptions of the post-observation conference process, one commonality seemed to be that for the evaluators in this study, their teacher observations focused more on describing processes observed in classrooms than examining specific teacher strengths and areas for growth and providing feedback in those areas.

***Discrepancies in Evaluator Perceptions for Research Question 1d.*** The post-

observation conference process appeared to have the most discrepancies between evaluator and teacher perceptions of the process, suggesting both a need for fidelity of implementation and a better connection between what teachers need from this process and what evaluators give through this process. One evaluator stated that feedback on what went well and what could be improved upon was core to their post-observation conference process. Another evaluator stated that “genuine dialogue” was very important for them to have as they build relationships with their teachers. Another evaluator emphasized the importance of having a conversation about things both instructional and noninstructional with her special education teachers. One principal stated, “I offer feedback because I’m a big believer in just making sure that I’m growing my teachers, so I offer them a way I’d like to see them improve.” It was evident from my evaluator interviews that every evaluator desired to have rich professional developing dialogue with their special education teachers. The perceptions of the middle school special education teachers suggest that something is being lost in translation, and while evaluators desire to implement post-conferences with fidelity, most of the teachers at the same schools as these evaluators do not believe they are consistently conducted in the

way their leaders intend.

**1e.** The survey contained five questions that addressed fidelity of implementation of the summary evaluation process within the teacher evaluation program. After teachers are rated, they are supposed to be placed on either an individual growth plan, a monitored growth plan, or a directed growth plan.

Table 11 contains a graphic representation of the participant responses regarding implementation of different aspects of the summary evaluation process.

**Table 11**

*Summary Observation Survey Frequency Distribution*

Item	Disagree	Agree
Teacher participates in the summary evaluation at least once per year	13 (61.9%)	8 (38%)
Summary evaluation was clearly connected to performance	11 (52%)	10 (47.6%)
There is a connection between summary evaluation and PDPs	11 (52.4%)	9 (42.8%) 20 responses
The summary evaluation contains feedback to support professional growth	11 (53%)	10 (47%)
The self-assessment is revisited at the summary evaluation	16 (76.2%)	5 (23.8%)
My evaluator has experience to provide me meaningful feedback	11 (52.4%)	10 (47.6%)

The survey asked six specific questions about the summary evaluation process. The first question asked if the summary evaluation process was a process teachers participated in with their evaluator(s) at least once a year. Most respondents stated that they do not participate in this process, while less than half of the respondents stated that

they did participate in this process with their evaluator(s). Roughly half of the respondents believed that their summary evaluations were connected to their performance. Participants were almost evenly split, some agreeing and some disagreeing that their summary evaluation was clearly connected to the PDP. These percentages suggest that while evaluators are implementing summary evaluations with fidelity in some circumstances, it is by no means consistent across all schools and for all special education teachers. When asked whether special education teachers believe that the summary evaluation process contained feedback that supported their professional growth, roughly half of the participants agreed, while the other half disagreed. Since professional growth is one of the main goals of the teacher evaluation system, it appears that fidelity of implementation could be contributing to the inconsistency of feedback for continuous improvement. Finally, regarding whether special education teachers revisited their self-assessment at the end of the year summary evaluation, most respondents indicated that the self-assessment was not discussed after the beginning of the year. It appears fidelity of implementation for the summary evaluation process is inconsistent among the school sites that were a part of this study.

It appears from the data that while some middle school teachers are satisfied with the summary evaluation process, many are not. It is also evident that fidelity of implementation may be lacking across the middle schools in the district that is the subject of this study.

***Focus Groups.*** In discussing teacher perceptions of the summary evaluation process with focus group participants, a few themes emerged. Multiple teachers expressed that the summary evaluation seemed to be implemented for compliance rather

than teacher growth. For example, one teacher reflected, “My summary evaluations have usually involved an e-mail being sent to me saying your summary evaluation has been completed. Please review it and if you have any questions let me know and if not sign off.” One teacher very emotionally recalled her experience with an administrator evaluator when she asked for more feedback on her summary evaluation. The administrator walked into her room and said, “I don't understand why you're wasting my time with these ridiculous questions. You're not perfect. You have room to grow. Sign the paperwork and let's get this over with.” This teacher stated that she reluctantly eventually signed off, even in the absence of the process meeting any of her needs, simply because, “They were begging me at this point. You know they must have their green box checked.” One teacher, however, recounted a positive experience with summary evaluation with an interim principal one year. She recalled,

I can appreciate the very seasoned administrator who kind of sat down with me and just went by everything you know point by point. So that was very new to me. And so, it was the first time that someone had actually just gone through it with me and said ok well let's go over this.... That was just something new for me. And so maybe I had a sense that maybe that's how it probably should be conducted.

Based on these data from teachers, summary evaluations, at least in this sample population, are rarely implemented with fidelity, and this component in its current state of implementation meets neither teachers' desire for feedback nor their professional development needs.

***Interviews.*** There was a range of responses regarding the teacher summary

evaluation component from school-based administrators and evaluators. Of the nine respondents to this research question, while one evaluator indicated a desire for the process to be more specific to the needs of special education teachers, none of the respondents stated there was any difference in the way the summary evaluation process was conducted with special education teachers and their general education colleagues.

While time and capacity were themes that continually emerged throughout our discussions, these issues seemed most prevalent in the summary evaluation process. One evaluator stated that they (summary evaluations) are completed at the end of the year and most evaluators are just trying to get them done, “so they're very, very fast.” Another evaluator commented,

Now I will tell you the way the year ended last year because I oversaw testing and had eighth grade promotion. I was not as intentional with my summative conferences. I did not leave the feedback I wish I did.

One evaluator noted, “I think we don't always have those conversations that we should have around then because it's the end of the year and it's crazy and we got to get it done.” While every evaluator admitted that the summary evaluation had the potential to serve a valuable purpose for the learning and growth of all our teachers, the consensus was the time and capacity of school administrators and teachers to participate in the process were limiting factors. All evaluators who were interviewed except for one who was a new administrator demonstrated a solid understanding of what summary evaluations were supposed to be and do when implemented with fidelity. A final observation was that only one of the nine evaluators interviewed mentioned a connection between the summary evaluation and teachers’ PDPs, a connection that a director for the North Carolina

Department of Public Instruction who helped design the evaluation program stated was an essential part of the design.

***Commonalities in Teacher and Evaluators Perceptions About Research***

**Question 1e.** In examining evaluator perceptions on the summary evaluation, six of the nine evaluators (66.6%) concurred and aligned with my teachers when they stated that the summary evaluation process, in their experience, lacks fidelity of implementation.

***Discrepancies in Teacher and Evaluator Perceptions About Research Question***

**1e.** One evaluator stated that they used the summary evaluation process to talk about what they can improve upon for next year. One evaluator noted that they used the summary evaluation process to get teachers to start thinking about PDPs for next year. Another evaluator stated that they used the summary evaluation as a dialogue to discuss a teacher's ratings and to make any changes before it is finalized. Most all the teachers in the focus groups, when asked about their summary evaluation process, stated that it was a process completed mostly for compliance. Only one teacher recalled an experience where the summary evaluation process was utilized for professional growth, as designed and intended. Approximately 42.8% or nine of 21 survey respondents recognized a connection between the summary evaluation process and their PDPs.

**1f.** This sub-question, in Table 12, examines whether the professional development component of the evaluation system is implemented with fidelity.

**Table 12**

***PDP Implemented With Fidelity***

Item	Disagree	Agree
PDP meets my needs as a special educator	8 (38.1%).	13 (61.9%)

The survey asked one specific question about PDPs. The question asked teachers if they perceived the PDP process to be tailored to their professional development needs. The majority (61.9% or 13) of special education teachers agreed that PDPs met their professional development needs. Once again, the survey data suggest that with PDPs, good things are happening inconsistently across all middle schools in the district that is the subject of this study, according to the perceptions of our middle school special education teachers.

***Focus Groups.*** While some teachers in the focus groups described a very elaborate PDP process at their site, others, approximately four of 10, described an unfocused process. All focus group participants concurred that they get no real feedback or support for their PDPs after their creation at the start of the school year. A first-year teacher stated,

I had no idea what I was doing. So, there was no guidance. I was like fill out the paperwork the correct way. I guess. I just made up some goals with my mentor. And I think my observer went over it. And he just said that they were good and passed off the buck to me and the mentor to figure it out.

Another teacher stated that she has never gotten any feedback on her PDP, while another teacher stated that she got no feedback or support from school administration. Much like the other components of teacher evaluation, most of the teachers felt like it was a process simply completed for compliance rather than one focused on teacher growth.

***Interviews.*** There was a range of responses regarding the teacher PDP component from school-based administrators and evaluators. Of the nine interviewees, none indicated that there was any distinction in the PDP process for special education teachers.

Six evaluators indicated that PDPs, for the most part, are completed for compliance, rather than with the purpose of professional growth. All the respondents echoed that the intent is to create both school-wide goals and personal goals, to move individual teachers and the staff toward greater professional development. One evaluator stated, “PDP goals have never been taken very serious...so to me it's that kind of uh let's just check a box and move on so we can get through this.” Another evaluator commented, “I think that admin and teachers could do a better job of you know really taking it seriously like what do I really want to work on this year and try to use it to grow.” When I asked one evaluator how a PDP in his experience was followed up with over the course of the year, his response was, “In my experience, it's really not.” Finally, an evaluator noted, “[PDPs are] not revisited...we don't tie it into our evaluation. We don't tie it into any actual professional development that we do for teachers. So, it becomes super meaningless.” So, while all respondents stated that they believed in the importance and potential of PDPs to promote professional growth, none suggested PDPs in their current implementation realize their potential. The themes that continued to emerge, unprompted, were a lack of time and capacity to do it in the way it was designed and intended.

***Commonalities Between Teacher and Evaluators Related to Research Question***

***If.*** Much like the comments that evaluators shared on other components of the teacher evaluation process, six of the nine evaluators (66%) interviewed stated that the PDP process was not implemented with fidelity once PDPs were completed at the beginning of the year. All the evaluators who were interviewed, while they were less than optimistic about the fidelity of implementation of PDPs, seemed to agree that both administrators and teachers could take the process more seriously and use it as a tool for professional



growth. So, while the desire is evident from all the administrator evaluators in this study to implement PDPs with greater fidelity, the reality, as acknowledged by both the evaluators themselves and the special education teachers whom they evaluate, is that PDPs are not where they need to be in terms of fidelity.

***Discrepancies Related to Research Question 1f.*** There were some school evaluators who stated that PDPs are revisited actively during the school year. One administrator evaluator stated that at the time of the summary evaluation process, they revisited the PDP with their teachers to use data from the school year to design a PDP for the upcoming school year. This was a part of the process that is also part of the design and intent of the program, according to one director from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. This connection was made by one (11%) of the school evaluators in this study. None of the special education teachers in this study described an elaborate summary evaluation process or one that contained the discussion of goals and their PDP plans for the upcoming school year.

#### ***Summary for Research Question 1***

In summary, there appear to be discrepancies in the fidelity of implementation of the different components that comprise teacher evaluation for middle school special education teachers across the different middle schools in the district that is the subject of this study. Survey, focus group, and interview data all indicate that this is impacting the perceived impact of the different components of the teacher evaluation program on professional growth of middle school special education teachers.

In the next section, I discuss findings from the survey, focus group, and interview data related to Research Question 2.

### ***Research Question 2***

Research Question 2 qualitatively examined the perceived impact of the different components of the teacher evaluation program on the professional growth of middle school special education teachers. When this study was being designed, Research Question 2 was simply examining perceptions of middle school special education teacher evaluation processes on their own professional growth. As I carried out the study, I recognized that evaluator perceptions of the process on teacher growth were equally important to study, given that evaluators and teachers must collaborate to implement this process with fidelity. I revised Research Question 2 to include evaluator perceptions as well to gather my data. The question is, “How do middle school special education teachers and their evaluators perceive the impact of the teacher evaluation process on their professional growth?”

**Survey Results.** The two survey items that addressed Research Question 2 examining the impact of teacher evaluation on professional growth were Items 14 and 15. Table 13 shows those items.

**Table 13**

#### *Survey Measures of Teacher Evaluation on Professional Growth*

Survey measure	Percent disagree	Percent agree
In the summary evaluation process, I receive feedback that supports continuous improvement for me.	11 (52.3%)	10 (47.6%)
My professional development plan is specifically tailored to my professional development needs as a special educator.	8 (38%)	13 (61.9%)

From the responses to the survey questions, roughly half of the respondents

disagreed that they received feedback from their summary evaluation process that supports their continuous professional development, while half believed the process did provide them with the necessary feedback. More than half of respondents felt that their PDPs did meet their professional development needs. From the data, it appears there are discrepant perceptions of the impact of the summary evaluation process from school to school and from evaluator to evaluator, suggesting that perhaps fidelity of implementation is not as designed and intended in all cases.

**Focus Group Results.** Focus group participants were asked for Research Question 2 to reflect upon the impact of each component that comprises teacher evaluation on their own professional growth. All focus group participants agreed that despite the perceived lack of support and fidelity of implementation, the PDP was the component that the majority of special education teachers felt was most impactful to their professional growth, followed closely by the post-observation conference. Teachers expressed that they use PDPs to personalize professional learning to their own needs. One teacher stated,

Over the last couple of years, I've taken time to really think about what it is that I want to improve on—what I want to get better at—and so I'm trying to do those things throughout the year that will bring me closer to that goal.

Another teacher noted of the PDP, “It's kind of like a New Year's resolution to look at what I can do differently each school year and it's meaningful to me as far as what I'm able to fit into my schedule to accomplish.”

Three teachers believed that post-observation conferences held the most potential for their personal professional growth. A critical component of this potential is for

evaluators to take the time to intentionally enter into dialogue with teachers and provide valuable feedback. Table 14 shows which components of teacher evaluation both evaluators and teachers believe are most impactful to professional growth.

**Table 14**

*Evaluator Interview Versus Teacher Measures of Teacher Evaluation on Professional Growth*

Evaluator perceptions regarding the most impactful component to professional growth	Number of evaluator respondents	Number of teacher respondents
Post-conferences are most impactful (feedback)	6	3
Pre-conferences are most impactful	1	0
Observations are most impactful	1	0
Professional development plans are most impactful	1	6

**Administrator Evaluator Interview Results.** Evaluators provided a range of responses regarding their perceptions of which components of the teacher evaluation program are most beneficial to the professional growth of special education teachers. Of the nine interviewees, five indicated that the post-observation conference was the most important component, one indicated the pre-observation conference, one noted observations as being most important, one mentioned PDPs, and one mentioned feedback in general as being most important to a special education teacher's professional growth. While there was a lack of coherence in identifying the most important component, providing feedback across all the components tended to be a unifying theme for evaluators. Time and capacity emerged once again as themes when discussing the importance of these components. Evaluators recognize the need to implement components of evaluation with fidelity, but as one evaluator stated, it is "time-consuming."

Some of the important findings in this study include comparing perceptions of special education teachers and their evaluators. Of the nine evaluators interviewed, opinions as to which component of the teacher evaluation was most beneficial to special education teacher professional growth widely varied. While most teachers stated that their PDPs were most beneficial, only three evaluators agreed. Those who agreed had this to say:

[PDPs] allow teachers to be reflective of their practices. So, with a professional development plan it allows them to kind of reflect from maybe the previous year in looking at their evaluations from previous years to set goals...whichever standard they feel they need to improve.

Another administrator evaluator commented, "It's an honest kind of communication tool between administrators and teachers. It's a way for them to set goals and develop expectations."

Three evaluators specified that they felt post-observation conferences were the most important component of the teacher evaluation process to support special education teacher professional growth when implemented with fidelity. One evaluator commented that "when taken seriously, [post-observation conferences] can be really beneficial." Two evaluators noted that the post-observation conference is a chance to sit down and have a conversation. It allows for collaboration and sharing thinking. In a post-conference, the teacher has a chance to share how they feel they did and then reflect. Post-conferences give an administrator the opportunity to provide feedback and opportunities for growth. However, aligning with teacher comments, one administrator stated, "I don't think the post-conference...we don't give enough time to feedback, and that really inhibits teacher

*growth.”*

### ***Summary for Research Question 2***

It was clear, based on the responses, that there exists a discrepancy among evaluators as far as which component of teacher evaluation is the most important to benefit special education teacher professional growth. Special education teachers appeared more unified in their perceptions that PDPs, followed closely by their post-observation conferences, had the greatest potential to impact professional growth when implemented with fidelity. Most evaluators stated the post-observation component was the most impactful component to the professional growth of teachers when implemented with fidelity.

### ***Research Question 3***

Research Question 3 examined suggestions middle school special education teachers and their evaluators had for improvements to the teacher evaluation program to best impact professional growth of special education teachers. Table 15 shows themes derived and suggestions made to improve teacher evaluation for middle school special education teachers in the survey.

**Table 15**

*Survey Themes Derived and Suggestions Made to Improve Teacher Evaluation* (open-ended responses may contain more than one recommendation)

Themes and suggestions from survey	Number of respondents (of 13 responses)
Provide specific feedback for growth	4
Follow-up after observations	1
Increased time spent with evaluators	3
Include specific duties of a special education teacher in the evaluation process	2
More evaluator special education professional knowledge	4

**Survey Results.** The survey included one open-ended item focusing on this topic. Thirteen of 21 respondents provided an answer to this item. According to the survey responses, the themes for recommendations to improve evaluation for middle school special education teachers included specific feedback focused on growth, follow-ups after observations, and increased time spent with evaluators on the self-assessment and professional development goals. A final theme that emerged from the data was specific suggestions related to the evaluation program better addressing the unique roles of special education teachers. Suggestions included shifts to the evaluation process to include specific duties of special education teachers such as development and implementation of IEPs and facilitating meetings related to IEPs. Aside from noninstructional special education responsibilities, the respondents of my survey were looking for evaluators to possess more experience in and understanding of the differences between a special education classroom and a general education classroom when they come to do an

observation. The teachers surveyed wanted their evaluators to understand differentiation of instruction and be more familiar with the content they are observing in a special education classroom. Table 16 shows themes derived and suggestions made to improve teacher evaluation for middle school special education teachers in the focus group discussions. A specific number of responses was not recorded from our dialogue, rather themes were noted in the coding of the focus group data.

**Table 16**

*Focus Group Themes Derived and Suggestions Made to Improve Teacher Evaluation*

Themes and suggestions from focus groups
Improve the observation rubric to include special education teacher responsibilities
Improve administrator knowledge of special education
Provide feedback that supports learning and growth
Provide additional time for administrators to devote to evaluation.

**Focus Group Results.** Special education teachers in the two focus groups had four overall suggestions for improving the teacher evaluation process to promote their professional growth. These suggestions included improving the observation rubric to include special education teacher responsibilities, improving administrator knowledge of special education, providing feedback that supports learning and growth, and supporting administrators with additional time and improved capacity to devote to the evaluation process.

Special education teachers suggested revamping the evaluation rubric with specific sections, standards, and questions that address responsibilities like paperwork, communication with parents, and facilitating IEP meetings, responsibilities that are unique to special education teachers and a large part of what they do.

Teachers suggested personnel who evaluate them should have at least a working



knowledge of special education. One special education teacher stated regarding an evaluator's lack of special education knowledge and their ability to provide substantive feedback, "It seems that they don't have that kind of expertise to offer." Another teacher noted, "Because the job of special educators is so complex, if you haven't actually walked in their shoes, had enough time to really understand it, I think it's really hard to value it to the level that it is." Therefore, a suggestion was to increase knowledge capacity in addition to job capacity by providing evaluators with professional development in teaching special education or perhaps involving school system personnel in the evaluation process who have the knowledge and experience to provide specific feedback to this subgroup of teachers for professional growth.

Elaborating on the need for feedback, teachers indicated on more than one occasion that they would really like to get more feedback and more special education-specific feedback than they get through the evaluation process. Their feedback, if they did receive any at all, was observational only, rather than a discussion of strengths and areas for growth. When asked what these teachers would suggest to improve feedback, one indicated, "I might recommend my school to have someone who has EC [special education] knowledge; definitely has to be one of the people who does my observations and provides feedback." When asked a follow-up on how this could happen, one responded,

I think there need to be more diverse administrators. I know that we pull administrators from this administrator pool, but I think my current staff has three PE [Physical Education] teachers and an English teacher. What do they know about differentiating lessons?

When reflecting upon her own feedback experiences with her evaluator, this special education teacher had this to say: “I’ve always wondered like really what’s the purpose of it and I hate to feel that way.... Like I always ask questions what I can do to improve, and they’ll say oh no nothing you’re doing a wonderful job.” Another special education teacher said, “I need someone to say, hey listen there’s something that can help.” One first-year teacher stated that she was desperate for suggestions, mentoring, and feedback to know if she was doing the job right and to know how she could improve. She stated that she has gotten none of that from her evaluators.

The special education teachers in my focus group reflected upon the capacity and time constraints of administrators to enable them to implement the components of teacher evaluation with fidelity. They also spoke of capacity related to professional knowledge and the ability of administrator evaluators to engage in meaningful dialogue and provide meaningful feedback. So, for the special education teachers, capacity meant two things: time and knowledge. The teachers in the focus groups unanimously agreed that regarding time, they understand that school administrator evaluators have things pulling them from all different directions and that they have multiple competing priorities and responsibilities. One teacher commented, “I totally understand that their time is spread thin. I just wish there was more planning effort. I think there needs to be more planning involved. I think that would be more effective.” One more teacher stated,

I think it’s more of an excuse. Everybody has a busy schedule. We all have things that we have to try to fit into our day. And so, if it’s something that is truly going to benefit us, and that’s going to help us in the long run of course we’re going to make time for it so there is with you know with some planning, scheduling we can

make it work.

Table 17 shows themes derived and suggestions made to improve teacher evaluation for middle school special education teachers in the evaluator interviews.

**Table 17**

*Evaluator Interview Themes Derived and Suggestions Made to Improve Teacher Evaluation*

Themes and suggestions from interviews	Number of respondents (of 9 responses)
Involve other personnel to assist with evaluation	2
Engage in genuine dialogue and provide substantive feedback	9
Give principals more discretion on how to implement evaluation	1
Provide more support to veteran teachers	1
Designate more time specifically for evaluation	2
Modify the observation rubric to include special education teacher-specific responsibilities.	2

**Evaluator Suggestions to Improve Teacher Evaluation.** In interviews, administrators primarily focused on time and capacity as serious inhibiting factors to implementing the components of teacher evaluation with fidelity. For evaluators, capacity was focused both on time within their role to implement the components of teacher evaluation with fidelity, as well as, for many, the professional knowledge to provide meaningful, actionable feedback. One administrator acknowledged a lack of knowledge capacity in his interview when he said, “I am more of a cheerleader” for special education teachers because he did not really have the knowledge to support a special education

teacher pedagogically. As a result, one evaluator stated, “It just becomes for compliance. I checked it off. I did the evaluation. I met with the teacher. We signed off. I met the deadline for meeting the evaluation timeline.” Every evaluator’s comment resonated the same concerns and the same frustrations about wanting to implement teacher evaluation with both fidelity and integrity but simply lacking the time and capacity to do so. These are the suggestions evaluators made in my study to improve teacher evaluation.

Some of the suggestions evaluators had to improve teacher evaluation included involving instructional coaches and other school personnel in the evaluation process or perhaps hiring a dean of students to free evaluators from discipline issues to allow them to focus on instruction.

Others suggested that genuine dialogue with teachers must occur outside of the evaluation instrument to truly be authentic and transformative. Another concern was inter-rater reliability or finding the best and most valid way to observe teachers over the course of the year to gain consistent, meaningful results. Most evaluators suggested the importance of getting feedback to staff. One evaluator felt that informal dialogue is more effective than conversing through the evaluation instruments with a special education teacher “because they’re able to share how they’re working on IEP goals [and] how they’re collecting data. It lets us have more of a glimpse into what’s going on in the classroom.”

One evaluator suggested giving principals the discretion to choose which teachers are placed on evaluation cycles, so they have the time and capacity to reach the teachers who really need the attention.

One evaluator noted that the frequency of observations for veteran teachers needs

to be greater to meet their needs. The discussion did not provide further elaboration on this question, according to the transcripts.

Two evaluators included dedicating entire days or more of uninterrupted time to make teacher evaluation, all components, a priority.

Specifically for special education teachers, one evaluator believed that while the tools themselves are fine, they recommended more specific questions be added to meet the needs and recognize the diverse responsibilities of a special education teacher.

Another evaluator commented,

[The evaluation] needs to incorporate case management and record keeping. The way we expect our EC teachers to work with several different groups of people should be reflected in the rubric. On the other hand, things like modifying content do not need to be measured for an EC teacher. We hire our teachers to do that work so it's not something I need to assess. If it is, that's not who you should have hired to be or EC teacher.

The instruments themselves should be more specific to what a special education teacher needs.

In summary, all these evaluators appeared to have a good working knowledge of how the components of teacher evaluation were supposed to be implemented with fidelity for *all* teachers, not just special education teachers. While it appears that time and capacity are the resounding problems, it seems that these instructional leaders themselves have some of the solutions, if they could only implement them.

In conclusion, from the data gathered in my survey and focus groups, recommendations for improvement to the process to benefit the professional growth of

our special education teachers include modifying the observation rubric to include more special education-specific responsibilities and skills, providing professional development for our evaluators to help grow their professional capacities as evaluators of special education teachers, improving the quality of feedback for professional growth provided by our evaluators, and working to increase the time management and role capacity of our administrator evaluators to better equip them to engage in the evaluation process with fidelity.

### ***Specific Recommendations From Research Question 3***

**Modify the Observation Tool.** Evaluators and special education teachers agreed that while the observation rubric is a good and useful tool, it must be modified to include standards and questions that are specific to what a special education teacher does and how they teach. Specifically, the administrators interviewed agreed with the special education teachers that the instrument should contain standards that measure paperwork completion, parent communication, and IEP meeting facilitation.

**Provide Evaluators With Special Education Knowledge.** Without background or experience in special education, it is hard for evaluators to know what to look for, and it is hard for them to provide feedback to these teachers. Teachers in the focus groups agreed that possessing some knowledge of teaching EC would be beneficial when evaluating special educators. Many of the administrators and evaluators suggested this knowledge would allow them to provide more substantive feedback.

**Engage in Dialogue and Provide Feedback.** Evaluator comments suggested that dialogue is important to help new teachers learn and understand the process of evaluation. Providing feedback takes time and effort, according to evaluators in this study. They

stated that feedback is necessary for teachers to know they are supported and are doing a good job. Many of the teachers in the focus groups also agreed that dialogue and substantive feedback were important to them, though very few stated that they currently receive that type of feedback from their evaluators.

**Improve Capacity of Administrators.** Newer evaluators were particularly but not exclusively challenged with the capacity to deliver the components of teacher evaluation with fidelity. One newer administrator commented,

We have to devote time to other things and that is taken away from instruction.

I'm not able to develop those [supervisory/evaluative] skills because I'm developing managerial skills rather than instructional. I'm the principal of instruction and I'm actually helpful coaching instruction rather than just checking some boxes. So therefore, it kind of creates a downward spiral of you're not getting better and I'm not getting better.

Solutions to capacity included scheduling and organizing, prioritizing, and devoting time to evaluation. One principal suggested that you find a point in your day that you are going to devote to evaluations only and you need to prioritize what you are going to do during your day. She stated that the emails and phone calls can wait until after school, but it is important to get evaluations done while teachers are in the building. She stated that being intentional was a solution to capacity challenges. She continued,

My team worked with me, and I wanted them to identify a full day of observations and post-conferences so essentially, I was unavailable for the entire day. I didn't do discipline. I did not check e-mail unless I had my computer pulled up. I turned my radio off and left it at the front office and said these are the

observations that I want to get done and I schedule them on my calendar...I was 100% fully focused just on the observation instrument.

Another evaluator cited obvious challenges to making evaluation work with fidelity:

My first thought was dedicating a day to sit and really work...but it's more than a day's work. It takes a lot of time even rushing and getting it done quickly and just with the signatures...20 staff members within a month or 2. That's a lot of staff to have pre-observations and then go sit in their classroom for 30 minutes and then have a post. I mean that's a lot of time, hours of time for each person.

So, there was a difference of opinion among administrators as to the feasibility of truly implementing teacher evaluation with fidelity in the current model.

One evaluator offered another solution to capacity. He suggested, "If there's a way to evaluate teachers on a smaller scale with a smaller instrument or something, that is not as time-consuming...when you look at it one evaluation process could take you a week." So, revising the process was a viable suggestion if the principals had a voice in revision and implementation, which they currently do not have. Another evaluator suggested that if post-conferences could be completed after school hours, there would be time to do it with fidelity. This evaluator acknowledged that he did not feel that this was a realistic solution, but he stated, "that's probably what should happen most appropriately."

**Involve Other School Personnel.** One principal stated that many times following a post-conference with a teacher she would have her instructional coach follow up with the teacher on whatever suggestions were made. Utilizing other personnel in the school ensured that she was able to provide the feedback and support that a teacher required



even when her capacity was challenged. Another evaluator suggested that if each school had a dean of students, as is the case in many surrounding school districts, evaluators could spend less time on discipline and more time on instruction.

### **Summary of Themes From the Research**

From the data gathered on Research Question 3 was a general agreement between evaluators and special education teachers that currently, the components of teacher evaluation are not implemented with fidelity and that if one of the goals of the evaluation program for teachers in North Carolina was professional growth, teacher evaluation's current implementation is not consistently attaining that goal. Special education teachers and evaluators agreed that a modification to the observation tool to better evaluate special education teacher-specific responsibilities was warranted. The two groups also agreed that substantive quality feedback was necessary to promote professional growth. They agreed that feedback was lacking and that when it did occur, it was more observational than a discussion of strengths and needs for growth. The two groups also agreed that time and capacity for school administrators were a challenge to administrators implementing components of teacher evaluation with fidelity. The two groups generally aligned regarding the definition of capacity to include both pedagogical knowledge on the part of evaluators as well as time within an administrator's day for implementation of teacher evaluation with fidelity. For evaluators, with one exception, most described capacity in terms of time as their only real challenge and suggested that if they had more time, fidelity of implementation would be possible. One evaluator cited his knowledge capacity as being challenged to provide substantive feedback to special education teachers. There was agreement on the part of 100% of the special education teachers participating in the

focus groups and some administrators that the solution to time capacity for evaluators included better time managing, scheduling, and prioritizing. Some administrators did not believe the solution was that simple.

### **Summary**

According to the responses, the themes that emerged from the research questions revealed inconsistencies regarding the fidelity of implementation of all components of teacher evaluation with middle school special education teachers. There were inconsistencies and discrepancies across different evaluators and different schools. There also existed similarities and discrepancies with how special education teachers and their evaluators perceived the effectiveness of each component of teacher evaluation to their professional growth. While both the teachers and the administrators desired for the evaluation program components to be implemented with fidelity, most administrators and teachers agreed that the components, as currently implemented, are not implemented with fidelity. As I suspected in my preliminary research, prior to conducting my study, it was confirmed by both administrators and special education teachers that the two factors most strongly correlated with fidelity of implementation, when it does not occur, in the district that is the subject of this study, are administrator time and administrator capacity. Both the teachers and evaluators offered interesting suggestions to begin remedying these obstacles from their perspectives. Chapter 5 examines these recommendations and the research that supports them with the hope that we offer some suggestions to improve the fidelity of implementation of the components of teacher evaluation for the benefit of both special education teachers, their administrators, and the schools in which they work.

Chapter 5 provides a conclusion to the study and recommendations for further

studies. Chapter 5 also connects the findings to literature on the topic and discusses applications and recommendations for findings.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of school-based administrators and middle school special education teachers regarding fidelity of implementation of components of the teacher evaluation system to promote professional growth. In this study, fidelity means the components that comprise teacher evaluation are implemented as designed with the end goal being professional growth for middle school special education teachers.

Research conducted by Hopkins (2016) stated, “More can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor” (p. 5), yet according to research by Cosner et al. (2014), with all the competing responsibilities of school administrators, principals in their study engaged in instructional leadership activities roughly 13% of the time, with 8% of that time spent in classrooms.

It is important to understand how both special education teachers and administrator evaluators perceive the fidelity of implementation of the components of teacher evaluation. Of particular interest are not only the commonalities, or what both groups of stakeholders believe is or is not working, but also discrepancies, or where evaluator and teacher perceptions differ regarding both the fidelity of implementation and the impact on teacher professional growth. It is within these discrepancies of perceptions that we must open dialogue to create the impetus for change.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guided this study.

1. To what extent are the components of the teacher evaluation program

implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?

- a. To what extent is the teacher self-assessment component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - b. To what extent is the teacher pre-observation conference component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - c. To what extent is the teacher observation component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - d. To what extent is the teacher post-observation conference component of the teacher evaluation program implemented with fidelity for middle school special education teachers?
  - e. To what extent is the teacher summary evaluation process component of the middle school special education teacher evaluation process implemented with fidelity?
  - f. To what extent is the teacher PDP process component of the middle school special education teacher evaluation process implemented with fidelity?
2. How do middle school education teachers perceive the impact of the teacher evaluation process on their professional growth?
  3. What suggestions do middle school EC teachers have for improvements to the teacher evaluation program and process to best impact their own professional growth?

## Findings Summary

Chapter 4 presented an analysis of data based on a middle school special education teacher survey, nine administrator evaluator interviews, and two special education teacher focus groups. Literature around implementation of teacher evaluation, the fidelity of implementation, and the efficacy of the process suggests that fidelity of implementation is a challenge nationwide. Research examining implementation of teacher evaluation with special education teachers and literature examining possible causes for the fidelity challenges are limited.

I collected both qualitative and quantitative data from special education teachers and their evaluators and found common themes as well as interesting discrepancies in experiences with and perceptions of the same teacher evaluation processes. The prevailing themes that surfaced from the interviews, survey, and focus groups are described in the following paragraphs.

Research Question 1 and its sub-questions asked to what extent the specific components of the teacher evaluation program are implemented with fidelity. A theme that emerged from the interviews, survey, and focus groups was that fidelity of implementation and therefore professional growth attributable to the evaluation processes were limited because most of the components were completed for compliance or the *checkbox scenario* rather than completed with fidelity, as designed and intended. When asked what factors impacted fidelity of implementation, both special education teachers and their evaluators cited administrator capacity as the primary reason. Capacity was defined through my research as both the time school administrators have to complete all the components of teacher evaluation with fidelity and their professional knowledge of

special education pedagogy to provide quality feedback and fully engage in the evaluation processes. Both administrators and special education teachers stated that professional knowledge regarding teaching special education on the part of the school administrator helps an evaluator engage in the evaluation process more confidently and with more depth. The lack of that professional knowledge may contribute to comments and feedback as a part of the evaluation process becoming more “observational,” surface-level, and “meaningless,” as one teacher suggested.

Research Question 2 asked how middle school special education teachers and their evaluators perceive the impact of the teacher evaluation process on the professional growth of special education teachers. The prevailing themes that surfaced from the survey, interviews, and focus groups were that special education teachers recognized and acknowledged the lack of fidelity of implementation in their own evaluation processes and stated that the result of this lack of fidelity was that they did not receive meaningful substantive feedback on strengths or needs in any component of the process, and therefore their perceptions of professional growth were limited. All administrators agreed that improving the fidelity of implementation of all the components of teacher evaluation was warranted and that professional growth could be improved as a result.

For Research Question 3, the study asked what suggestions middle school special education teachers and their evaluators have for improvements to the teacher evaluation program and process to best impact professional growth of middle school special education teachers. A theme that emerged when each stakeholder group was asked for recommendations for improvements was to make components of the process more special education specific. A primary recommendation included revisions to the observation

rubric to include special education job-specific responsibilities such as facilitating IEP meetings, relationships with parents and families, and managing special education paperwork. Another theme that all stakeholders suggested was that administrators have more training in what special education teachers do to help them best facilitate the evaluation components with confidence, depth, and fidelity. Substantive specific quality feedback was a desire for both administrators and special education teachers who participated in this study. They all recognized the importance of substantive feedback to professional growth. Most administrators interviewed believed that they are trying to implement the components of teacher evaluation with fidelity to the best of their ability but believe they could do better if it were not for time and capacity challenges. Teachers in this study were divided. Some recognized the many competing responsibilities of a school administrator, while others said administrators need to prioritize and manage their time more effectively if they believe implementing teacher evaluation with fidelity is truly important.

### **Implications**

Findings in this study are supported by the literature on teacher evaluation. Kraft and Gilmour (2016) stated that while the purpose of teacher evaluation is geared toward professional development and quality assurance, historically these evaluations seldom fulfill either purpose. Part of the problem, according to the research, is as teacher evaluation systems have evolved over the years, the demands on principals' time in their role as instructional leaders have increased, in addition to the many other responsibilities a principal has as a school leader. Neumerski et al. (2018) spoke to the capacity challenges of school administrators in delivering teacher evaluation with fidelity.



Neumerski et al. wrote that while principals currently are expected to engage closely with teaching and learning, evidence suggests that few principals spend extensive amounts of time on instructional issues, and the time they spend in classrooms engaged directly with teacher instruction is only a fraction of this limited instructional time. The time they do spend in classrooms tends to be succinct, and their feedback to teachers is often “infrequent, superficial, or nonexistent” (Neumerski et al., 2018, p. 271).

Based on my findings, specific implications for practice center on improving the capacity of evaluators, improving the quality of feedback provided to teachers, and developing an instrument specific to the skills and knowledge required by special education teachers.

### ***Improving Evaluator Capacity***

Keeping in mind that capacity for evaluators refers both to time and specialized knowledge, the literature related to improving the capacity of evaluators has two main themes. These themes include sharing the responsibility for evaluation with additional knowledgeable staff and providing individuals responsible for evaluation with professional learning related to effective feedback.

**Engaging Other Professionals in the Evaluation Process.** In the teaching profession, it is difficult to reach and maintain high-performance levels on one’s own without proper support, despite how qualified people may be (Marzano, 2013). Dufour (as cited in Thiers, 2016) contended the way to improve schools is by creating a school culture where teachers are helping one another grow. Thiers (2016) suggested a principal’s job is to groom other leaders in the school building. This potentially increases capacity by sharing the responsibility of evaluation and feedback among qualified

professionals, reducing the demands placed on school administrators to provide evaluation and feedback by themselves. In schools within the district that is the subject of this study teacher leaders are utilized when teachers within PLCs implement peer evaluations, but to date, that is the only portion of teacher evaluation in which teacher leaders are permitted to engage.

Cosner et al.'s (2014) suggestions were similar to those of Dufour (as cited in Thiers, 2016) when they wrote principals can be supported in their teacher evaluation work by identifying and cultivating additional evaluators utilizing district and regional professionals. In addition, having multiple evaluators could result in more reliable evaluations and more credible feedback than feedback from the principal alone. They also suggested that teachers could be trained to support teacher evaluations. This not only supports the principal and increases capacity regarding teacher evaluations, but it also cultivates teacher leaders within the school building.

The literature indicates that the use of teacher leaders can improve the quality of the feedback provided. Comstock and Margolis (2021) examined the idea of teacher leaders filling the void, increasing principal capacity, and improving the evaluation process. Comstock and Margolis advocated for teacher leaders to support teacher evaluation with school administrators for several reasons. Comstock and Margolis explained that because of their classroom contexts and their current roles as teachers, teacher leaders are distinctively qualified to conduct evaluations because they understand what other teachers are going through.

Brinko's (1993) work further underscored the idea that feedback is more effective when it comes from a variety of sources. From the self-assessment to the pre-

and post-observation conferences, to the PDP, to the summary evaluation, the teacher evaluation program has the potential, as designed and intended, to provide feedback from a variety of sources. Brinko wrote feedback is more effective when the person delivering that feedback is knowledgeable and when the source of the feedback is lower or equal in status to the recipient or delivered from a peer or colleague.

**Professional Learning on Special Education.** Snyder and Pufpaff (2021) wrote most administrators lack the specific expertise and knowledge of special education to evaluate special education teachers effectually and accurately. Research by Snyder and Pufpaff suggested that 92% of principals are not licensed to teach special education, and almost 50% have completed no coursework in special education as a part of their professional preparation.

Lawson and Cruz (2018) studied knowledge of special education on the part of evaluators and the impact that knowledge or the lack thereof has on the evaluation of special education teachers. They wrote a lack of professional knowledge in special education may adversely affect an evaluator's ability to provide an accurate or meaningful evaluation of a special education teacher's performance. In a survey they did as a part of their study, Lawson and Cruz found 61% of respondents believed that those who evaluate special education teachers should have experience in special education, yet only 12.4% of respondents indicated their evaluators were provided any training specifically designed for evaluating special educators. Lawson and Cruz, while recognizing it may not be practical for all school administrators to have a background in special education, advocated for increased training on evaluating special education teachers' instructional practices. This is necessary so that evaluators truly understand

what to expect when walking into a special educators' classroom and so they understand what constitutes effective instruction for students with disabilities. In addition to supporting evaluator capacity, implications from my study indicate a need for improving the quality of feedback provided to special education middle school teachers.

### ***Improving Feedback Quality***

Reflecting on the literature review that was the foundation of my study, Glickman et al. (2018) explained that a focus on supervision of teachers, as opposed to a formative evaluation process with a focus on developing teachers as professionals, fails to provide teachers with all the support they truly need. Effective feedback provided through evaluation leads to increased levels of teacher self-efficacy. Adults have different ways of knowing, which means they need different types of support to fully understand and implement feedback to grow as educators (Drago-Severson & Blum-Stefano, 2019).

The administrators in my study stated it was their desire to provide rich, specific feedback for professional growth. The middle school special education teachers in this study suggested that the feedback they were provided with was mostly observational, nondescript, or nonexistent. Evaluator feedback is also associated with job satisfaction and higher self-efficacy, according to Smith et al. (2020). Smith et al. wrote that teachers who perceived feedback as highly specific reported higher self-efficacy compared with teachers who perceived the feedback they received to be low in specificity. Specific feedback, as defined by Smith et al., consists of relevant and detailed information regarding instructional delivery provided to the teacher elaborating on the teacher's performance, includes specific instances of instructional practices from observations, provides evidence collected during observations, and provides development strategies

directly related to areas of observed instructional deficits. This is what the special education teachers in my study stated was lacking and what they were looking for and needing in feedback from their evaluators. Implications for improving the quality of feedback for middle school special education teachers include professional learning for their evaluators with a focus on the components of effective feedback.

**Professional Learning for Evaluators.** Kraft and Gilmour (2016) stated evaluators lacked the skills to provide valuable feedback. Specifically, in the Kraft and Gilmour study, evaluating and providing specific feedback to teachers across subjects and grade levels presented challenges for principals. Providing meaningful feedback to all teachers in all disciplines and at all levels is difficult. As a result, principals and evaluators most often relied on their own teaching experiences as the primary source of ideas when supporting their teachers. Principals in the Kraft and Gilmour study also felt less comfortable and confident in their abilities to evaluate instruction accurately or provide meaningful support in contexts that were not areas of expertise for them. The result was feedback became narrowly focused on teaching standards and providing generic positive reinforcement. In the Kraft and Gilmour study, as well as in my study, the result of narrow and generic feedback was the same; it did not develop a teacher's core content or pedagogical knowledge, nor did the generic feedback lead to greater competence or feelings of teacher self-efficacy. Kraft and Gilmour suggested to improve teacher practice, principals and evaluators must gain the skill set to become instructional coaches. An increased and improved skill set on the part of administrator evaluators would allow evaluators to have difficult conversations more comfortably and confidently with teachers about their challenges rather than continuously reinforcing just the things

that are going well in the classroom. If evaluators are going to truly improve teacher practice and help teachers grow as professionals, it is sometimes necessary to have difficult conversations in the dual role of supervisor and instructional coach. This requires experience and/or training to be able to do this well.

**Components of Effective Feedback.** Brinko (1993) discussed the importance of feedback content. Specifically, Brinko wrote feedback is more effective when it is concrete and specific. It should be descriptive rather than evaluative, and it must contain models for appropriate behavior. According to most of the subjects of my study, they described their feedback as often abstract rather than concrete. Most times, according to the teachers who were subjects of my study, feedback was not focused and contained what Brinko would describe as a “shallow analysis” (p. 576) of their teaching.

Khachatryan (2015) wrote that the goal of feedback is to encourage teacher learning and improve teacher performance. Khachatryan distinguished two categories of feedback as process feedback and product feedback. Process feedback, according to Khachatryan, increases the recipient’s motivation and learning about a specific task or process that has been observed. Product feedback is more evaluative about how well someone performed a given task. Process feedback, therefore, is more formative, focusing on increasing motivation and learning, whereas product feedback evaluates how well the observed accomplished a given task. Product feedback, according to Khachatryan, has the potential to change teaching by motivating. Process feedback teaches teachers how to change their practice. Specific feedback that incorporates both process and product feedback, according to Khachatryan, had the greatest potential to enhance learning and affect future practice. Teachers in Khachatryan’s study identified

process feedback, feedback on a specific task or process that has been observed, as most influential in improving their own teaching. Two recommendations from this study included having ongoing professional development for leaders to develop their skills with process and product feedback. They also advocated for teacher leaders to be trained to assume hybrid roles within the schools because they already hold content and pedagogical expertise and could be very effective in providing useful actionable feedback.

Evaluators can be supported in the process of providing specific, actionable feedback with an instrument designed with the specific knowledge and skills required by special education teachers as criteria.

### ***Developing a Special Education Teacher-Specific Evaluation Instrument***

One of the ideas expressed by both evaluators and special education teachers in my study was to create a special education-specific observation tool or modify the one currently in place to better reflect the job responsibilities that are unique to a special education teacher. Johnson et al. (2019) argued that general education teacher observation systems may not be appropriate for special education teachers and that current instruments do not capture the fundamentals of explicit instruction. They advocated for, as my study participants suggested, a creation of a detailed rubric with specific categories for instructional methods, content organization, delivery, and individualization. The goal of this rubric, titled *RESET*, was to evaluate and provide feedback to special educators. Johnson et al. concluded that if the goal of teacher evaluation through instruments is professional growth, it is important to design a rubric that can lead to explicit professional development support. Johnson et al. also found that

using the *RESET* rubric in combination with evaluators with knowledge in special education had more success both using and providing feedback on the rubric.

Snyder and Pufpaff (2021) concurred with Johnson and Semmelroth (2014) when they wrote the goal of evaluating teachers is to improve overall teacher effectiveness, but that goal is rarely realized due to there being a weak fit between the evaluation systems used and the roles of special education teachers. The problem, as Snyder and Pufpaff wrote, is the evaluation system used with special education teachers has been retrofitted from those tools used with general education teachers, and the job roles and responsibilities of the two groups of teachers are drastically different. Snyder and Pufpaff continued that while providing instruction is the most important part of a special education teacher's day, research shows that instruction only accounts for 15.6% of their school day. Other role responsibilities not reflected on most observation rubrics include curriculum modification, behavior management, paperwork completion, assessments, documentation, collaboration, planning, and IEP meetings.

In discussing my study with one of the behavior specialists in the special education department for the district that is the subject of my study, she acknowledged the need for a special education teacher-specific rubric to evaluate and observe special education teachers. In fact, she had created one. This rubric was designed for teachers of communication behavior social skills self-contained classrooms for students with autism to better and more directly address the practices necessary for this subgroup of special education teachers. The rubric, unlike the rubric for teacher evaluations currently utilized throughout the district, addressed indicators such as the understanding and management of behavior, providing feedback to students, and alignment of instructional strategies for



individual students and their specific goals. Each indicator or descriptor is correlated to each indicator specified in the North Carolina teacher evaluation rubric under each of the five standards upon which teachers are measured and evaluated. While the behavioral specialist who designed the rubric sees its promise, she acknowledged it is a long journey from development to implementation.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations are items that affect the study but cannot be controlled by the researcher. Limitations of the survey included the fact that while distributed to all the middle school special education teachers in the district that is the subject of this study, only 21 teachers responded to the survey, and only 15 respondents completed the open-ended question, which limited the qualitative data gathered in the survey. Limitations in my administrator interviews included the fact that while I interviewed nine school administrators, seven were assistant principals and only two were principals. This limited the data I was able to collect on a principal's perspective on teacher evaluation with special education teachers. Limitations in my focus groups included the fact that while I facilitated two focus groups, there were only 10 participants. More participants would have provided more data from which to draw my conclusions.

Delimitations are variables the researcher chose to limit the study. I chose to limit the scope of the study to only middle school special education teachers, as well as restrict my study to teachers at schools within one district in North Carolina. It would have been interesting to compare experiences and perceptions of the evaluation process with elementary and high school special education teachers as well, but this was beyond the scope of my current study. Additionally, if I had included middle school special

education teachers from other districts in North Carolina, it would have provided a wider perspective on how teacher evaluation is implemented for special education teachers across the state to see who is doing it well, what they are doing differently, or what other districts are also facing challenges with fidelity of implementation, and the reasons why.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study sought to examine the fidelity of implementation of teacher evaluation for middle school special education teachers in one district in North Carolina. The findings of this study indicate that there is a multitude of opportunities where school-based administrators in our schools can work to improve their capacity through time management and utilization of other professionals in the school community to support teacher evaluation. There are also opportunities for school-based leaders to develop their knowledge of teaching special education so that they are better equipped to offer the specific actionable feedback that they desire to give their teachers that their teachers are asking for to help them develop as professionals. These are things that school leaders can implement at the school-based level, that will not require changes in legislation or mandates to change.

This study was conducted across nine different middle schools in one district in the state of North Carolina.

Additional studies examining all middle schools in more districts across the state would allow the research to be compared to different geographical areas. Alternatively, conducting research at elementary levels as well as high school levels would yield more in-depth information on fidelity of implementation of the teacher evaluation program regarding special education teachers.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate a need for increased evaluator knowledge of teaching special education. Specifically in this study, evaluating and providing specific feedback to teachers across all subjects and grade levels presented challenges for principals and assistant principals. Providing meaningful feedback to all teachers in all disciplines and at all levels is difficult. Principals in this study also felt less comfortable and confident in their abilities to evaluate instruction accurately or provide meaningful support in areas that were not areas of expertise for them. The result was that feedback became narrowly focused on teaching standards and providing generic positive reinforcement. An increased and improved skill set on the part of administrator evaluators would allow evaluators to have difficult conversations more comfortably and confidently with teachers about their challenges rather than continuously reinforcing just the things that are going well in the classroom. This requires professional development in special education knowledge and instruction when a background in teaching special education is not on an evaluator's resume. Allowing other educator professionals from within the district with more special education-specific knowledge to observe and evaluate special education teachers was also suggested and supported in the literature.

The findings of this study indicate a need to increase administrator capacity to implement the components of teacher evaluation with fidelity. Since it is not possible to change current legislation or mandates regarding teacher evaluation, the increased capacity must be the result of other actions schools and administrators can control, such as time management and effective utilization of other professionals to assist with feedback and professional development.

The findings of this study indicate a need for evaluators to provide quality, specific, and actionable feedback for professional growth to special education teachers. This feedback should elaborate on the teacher's performance, include exact instances of instructional practice from classroom observations, provide evidence compiled during classroom observations, and include improvement strategies directly related to certain areas of observed instructional deficiencies. Actions must occur to increase evaluator capacity while simultaneously providing administrator evaluators with the knowledge required to enable administrator evaluators to provide specific actionable feedback in a confident way.

These are not easy tasks, because change is hard; change takes effort, and change takes time. Sometimes, the status quo is comfortable, even if all participants agree that it is ineffective.

Implementation of these recommendations and adapting them to each individual school based on each school's, teacher's, and administrator's unique needs could assist schools in improving the fidelity of implementation of all components that comprise teacher evaluation, resulting in improved professional growth of special education teachers, increased competence, and improved self-efficacy.

The research is rich and comprehensive on how and why teacher evaluation does not work and is not effective in our nation's public and charter schools. Perhaps it is time that we address the challenges, seek actionable solutions, and write new studies on how teacher evaluation *can* work for teachers and evaluators in our public schools. The research suggests that when teacher evaluation works in public schools, teachers win; their administrators win; and in the end, students achieve.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Survey**

- 1) How many years have you been in special education?
  - A) 0 to 2 years
  - B) 3 to 5 years
  - C) 6 to 10 years
  - D) More than 10 years

Research Question 1a

For each of these statements, rate if you agree or disagree, and to what degree.

- 2) The teacher self-assessment provides me an opportunity to reflect upon my own performance.
  - A) Strongly agree
  - B) Agree
  - C) Disagree
  - D) Strongly Disagree

Research Question 1b

- 3) In my pre observation conferences we always review my PDP.
  - A) Strongly agree
  - B) Agree
  - C) Disagree
  - D) Strongly Disagree
- 4) In my pre observation conferences we always discuss the lesson to be observed.
  - A) Strongly agree
  - B) Agree
  - C) Disagree
  - D) Strongly Disagree
- 5) I have a pre-observation conference at least once a year
  - A) Strongly agree
  - B) Agree
  - C) Disagree
  - D) Strongly Disagree

Research Question 1c

- 6) When I am formally observed by my administrators, they observe me for at least 45 minutes:

- A) Strongly agree
- B) Agree
- C) Disagree
- D) Strongly Disagree

Question 1c and Question 2

- 7) My formal observations provide me individualized feedback that supports my professional growth as a special ed teacher
- A) Strongly agree
  - B) Agree
  - C) Disagree
  - D) Strongly Disagree

Research Question 1d

- 8) The post-observation conference with my school administrator includes a discussion of my strengths.
- A) Strongly agree
  - B) Agree
  - C) Disagree
  - D) Strongly Disagree
- 9) The post-observation conference with my school administrator includes a discussion my areas for growth
- A) Strongly agree
  - B) Agree
  - E) Disagree
  - F) Strongly Disagree
- 10) The post-observation conference with my school administrator is well connected to my professional development plan (PDP):
- A) Strongly agree
  - B) Agree
  - G) Disagree
  - H) Strongly Disagree

Research Question 1e

- 11) The summary evaluation process is a process I participate in with my evaluator or administrator at the end of each school year
- A) Strongly agree

- B) Agree
- C) Disagree
- D) Strongly Disagree

12) The summary evaluation process is clearly connected to my performance on observations.

- A) Strongly agree
- B) Agree
- C) Disagree
- D) Strongly Disagree

13) The summary evaluation process, completed at the end of each year is clearly connected to my professional development plan.

- A) )Strongly agree
- B) Agree
- C) Disagree
- D) Strongly Disagree

14) In the Summary evaluation process, I discuss my self-assessment with my evaluator.

- A) Strongly agree
- B) Agree
- C) Disagree
- D) Strongly Disagree

15) In the Summary evaluation process, I receive feedback that supports continuous improvement for me.

- A) Strongly agree
- B) Agree
- C) Disagree
- D) Strongly Disagree

Research Question 1f and Question 2

16) My professional development plan is specifically tailored to my professional development needs as a special educator:

- A) Strongly agree
- B) Agree
- C) Disagree
- D) Strongly Disagree



### Research Question 2

- 17) In my opinion, my school administrator has the skills and experience with **special education** to provide me useful and meaningful feedback for my professional growth:
- A) Strongly agree
  - B) Agree
  - C) Disagree
  - D) Strongly Disagree

### Research Question 3

- 18) As a middle school special education teacher, what suggestions would you make to improve teacher evaluation to be more beneficial to your professional growth as a special educator? (Short answer)
- 19) Would you consider participating in a 90-minute virtual focus group, to further discuss your experiences and perceptions of the teacher evaluation process, as it applies to middle school EC teachers? It will be after school hours and be conducted via Google Meet. If you are interested in participating in this next phase of the research, please complete the link to the google form here with your name and contact information. Your contact information is not connected to your survey results in any way, and your responses remain anonymous and confidential.

<https://forms.gle/s7TfWSn2FfSRLkj57>

**Appendix B**  
**Focus Group Protocol**

Thank you for joining this focus group. We are going to be talking about the NC Teacher Evaluation Process as it is implemented with middle school education teachers. I am interested in how you experience each of the components of the evaluation process and your perception of the process on your professional growth.

Many of you may already know each other. As you read in the informed consent, I will change your names and identifying information to maintain your confidentiality in the written report. I encourage all of you to keep our conversation confidential as well. Please remember as we speak to keep the things we discuss in the focus group confidential.

#### Research question 1 & 2

1. Before we get into each component of the teacher evaluation process, think about your own experiences. What typically happens as a part of your evaluation process during any given school year? *(allow for general responses, noting the activities they think of without prompting, don't spend much time here with probing as this is an activator)*

Let's take some time to consider each component. *Pause between each question to allow time for responses.*

#### Research Question 1a

2. The teacher evaluation process includes a teacher self-assessment. Think about what happens with this component. How is the self-assessment structured? When does it occur? How is it used?

#### Research Question 1b

3. Next, think about the pre-observation conference. When does it occur? What is typically discussed? What materials are brought to the pre-observation conference, if any?

Research Question 1c

4. Now, think about the formal observation. How long does a formal observation typically last? How many are there per year? What materials are used as part of the formal observation, if any? What does an administrator look for/do when they observe you?

Research Question 1d

5. After the formal observation, there is a post-observation conference. What happens during this time? How long does it typically last? What materials are used as part of the post-observation conference, if any?

Research Question 1e

6. At the end of the year, there is a summary evaluation. What happens during this time? What is discussed? What materials are used as part of the summary evaluation? What information does the summary evaluation provide you as an EC teacher?

Research Question 1f

7. Finally, the evaluation process consists of a professional development plan or PDP. What can you tell me about the your PDP?
  - a. What is the teacher's role in creating a PDP?
  - b. What is the administrator's role?
  - c. Talk to me about your process in completing a PDP and how it is used over the course of a school year.

Research Question 2

8. Of the components we have discussed, which would you say have been the most beneficial to your professional growth and why?

Research Question 2 & 3

9. Are there components or elements of the evaluation process that should be different for special education teachers? Which ones? Why?

Research Question 3

10. Any other thoughts/ideas related to the evaluation process for middle school special education teachers?

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Protocol**

The purpose of my research is to better understand how the teacher evaluation process and each individual component is being implemented, specifically to meet the professional development needs of middle school special education teachers. It is my hope that through this research we can make some recommendations to schools and districts to best meet the needs of middle school special education teachers.

1. Thinking about components of teacher evaluation as it applies specifically to middle school EC teachers, can you tell me what you believe are some overall strengths of the process and any challenges that come to mind? (Research Question 3)

**Each of the next questions will explore the different components of the teacher evaluation process/ program from your perspective as a school-based administrator and evaluator:**

**Self-Assessment** (Research Question 1a)

2. Describe what happens in the self-assessment component of the teacher evaluation program from your perspective?
3. While conducting the self-assessment component of the teacher evaluation for an EC teacher, how does this process differ from a regular-ed teacher?

**Pre-observation conference** (Research Question 1b)

4. Describe what happens during a pre-observation conference with an EC teacher.
5. Does the pre-observation conference happen any differently for EC teachers than for general education teachers? If so, how?

**Classroom Observations** (Research Question 1c)

6. Describe what happens in your formal observations for the EC teachers in your school.
7. Does the observation process look any different for EC teachers? If so, how?

**Post-Observation Conferences** (Research Question 1d)

8. Describe what happens in the post-observation component for the EC teachers in your school.
9. Is the post-observation process any different for EC teachers? If so, how?

**Summary Evaluation.** (Research Question 1e)

10. Describe what happens in the summary evaluation component for the EC teachers in your school.
11. Is the summary evaluation process any different for EC teachers? If so, how?

**Professional Development Plans.** (Research Question 1f)

12. Describe what happens in the PDP process for the EC teachers in your school.  
When do different parts of the PDP process occur?
13. Is the PDP process any different for EC teachers? If so, how?

(Research Question 2)

14. Of the components we have discussed, which would you say have been the most beneficial to professional growth of special educators and why?

(Research Question 2 & 3)

15. Are there components or elements of the process that should be different for EC teachers
16. Any other thoughts/ideas related to the evaluation process for middle school EC teachers?