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## **Teacher Evaluation in the Special Education Setting: Voices from the Field**

**Ann Sledge, Ed.D**

**Barbara L. Pazez, Ph.D**

*The University of Texas at Austin*

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## **Teacher Evaluations in the Special Education Setting: Voices from the Field**

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### **Abstract**

*National policy mandates have placed greater accountability on districts and schools to improve the outcomes of every student, including students with disabilities. Teacher evaluation systems that accurately identify effective teachers and their impact on student learning have resulted in the widespread design and implementation of new teacher evaluation systems. Nevertheless, limited exploration related to the evaluation of special education teachers exists. Using a qualitative, multi-case study research design, we sought to gain insight into the perceptions and experiences of special education teachers and administrators to better understand (a) the relationship between teacher evaluation and teacher effectiveness; (b) the ways in which educators approach the challenges of applying teacher evaluation systems for special education teachers; and (c) the ways in which teacher evaluation processes support the professional growth and development of special education teachers. The challenges involved in evaluating special education teachers with a uniform teacher evaluation protocol instrument are presented. The need to be able to accurately appraise special education teachers within an inclusive classroom setting, apply criteria from the observation protocol to special education students, and lack of appraisers' knowledge of the roles and expertise of special education teachers were identified. Recommendations for improvement are provided.*

*Keywords:* special education, students with disabilities, special education teachers, school administrators, teacher evaluation, teacher quality, teacher effectiveness

For more than 20 years, national policy mandates have placed greater accountability on schools and states for the educational outcomes of every student, including students with disabilities (Educate America, U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 1994; No Child Left Behind, 2002; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA], 2004; Race to the Top [RTT], USDOE, 2009). Despite the incorporation of more inclusive instructional practices, students with disabilities continue to lag behind their non-disabled peers with regard to academic achievement, graduation rates, college attendance, and post-graduation employment (Altman, Vang, & Thurlow, 2012; Center on Education Policy [CEP], 2009; McLaughlin, Smith, & Wilkinson, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009). Attempts to ameliorate these effects and improve social and academic outcomes for students with disabilities must be firmly grounded in comprehensive performance management systems capable of identifying high-quality instruction and, ultimately, providing every student access to effective, high-quality teachers (Steinberg & Sartain, 2015).

Research related to teacher effectiveness has shed light on the wide variances in teacher quality, revealing a lack of alignment between the ratings teachers receive on traditional teacher evaluation protocols and their impact on student achievement (Glazerman et al., 2010; Little,

2009; National Council on Teacher Quality [NCTQ], 2011; Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009). This realization, along with advances in technology, the widespread use of standardized tests, and the availability of value-added models, has led policymakers and practitioners to reconsider what it means to be an effective teacher (Sledge & Pazey, 2013; Braun, 2005; Carey, 2004; NCTQ, 2011; Steinbrecher, Selig, Cosbey, & Thorstensen, 2014). Consequently, reimagining and improving teacher evaluation systems that more accurately identify effective teachers and their impact on student learning has become the focus of state and national efforts. As a result, nearly two-thirds of the states have redesigned their teacher evaluation process since 2009 (USDOE, 2009, 2010).

While widely publicized research, reports, and recommendations on teacher evaluation proliferate (using the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Educational Administration Abstracts, PsycARTICLES, ERIC, Education Source, PsycINFO), the words special education and/or special education teacher(s) are rarely found. Efforts to reform teacher evaluation systems are typically guided by an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of general education teachers, often ignoring the differences in the teaching assignments and tasks required of special education teachers as well as their specialized expertise (Brownell, Billingsley, McLeskey, & Sindelar, 2012; Holdheide, Goe, Croft, & Reschly, 2010; Jones & Brownell, 2014).

The knowledge and skill sets required for special education teachers, however, do not necessarily correspond with what general education teachers are expected to know and be able to do. The specific skills required of teachers who serve students with disabilities are delineated in the preparation and credentialing process, as described by The Advanced Preparation Standards (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2012a). The wide range of tasks for which special education teachers are responsible have been documented through numerous studies over time (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010) and confirmed by practitioners who overwhelmingly agreed that the knowledge and skill sets of special education teachers are distinct from that of general education teachers (Holdheide, et al., 2010). These differences are heightened by the great variability in the roles assumed by special education teachers, the heterogeneous student populations they serve, and the expectation that each student's instructional plan is highly individualized (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014a). Moreover, special education teachers are expected to be both proficient in the use of instructional strategies that benefit students with disabilities and to possess academic content knowledge on par with general education teachers (Blanton, Pugash, & Boveda, 2014).

To address the lack of research regarding the evaluation of special education teachers, this article provides the results of a multi-case study conducted in a large, urban school district in Texas. We begin by presenting the teacher quality framework (Goe, 2007) used for analysis and discussing the current context of teacher evaluation reform and teacher evaluation protocols, highlighting the one-size-fits all approach that fails to differentiate or recognize the unique roles and responsibilities that special education teachers fulfill in their assigned schools. We then provide the purpose, methodology, and findings of the study that emanated from our intent to gain insight into the perceptions and experiences of special education teachers and administrators regarding (a) the relationship between teacher evaluation and teacher effectiveness; (b) the ways in which educators approach the challenges of applying teacher evaluation systems for special education teachers; and (c) the ways in which teacher evaluation processes support the professional growth and development of special education teachers. An account of the complex roles and particular tasks carried out by special educators is followed by a description of their

experiences and beliefs related to the tools and processes of the teacher evaluation system. We identify four challenges in evaluating teachers who serve students with disabilities. To conclude, we offer recommendations for administrators and policy makers to consider in creating teacher evaluation systems that are more sensitive to the complexities of the daily responsibilities and assignments of teachers who serve students with disabilities.

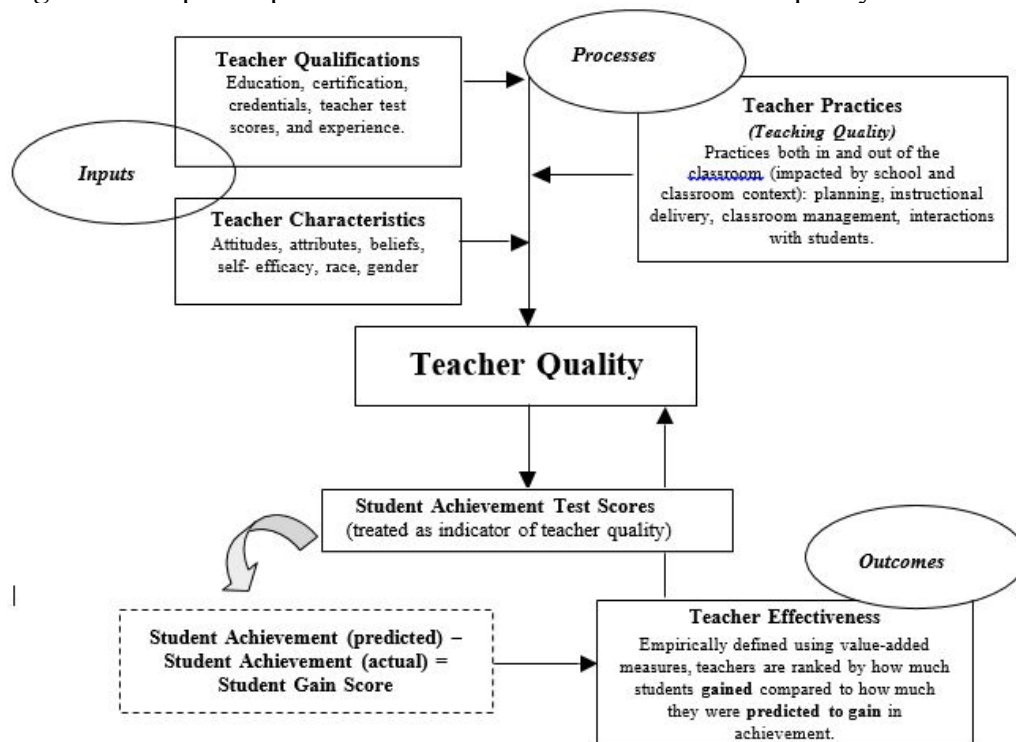
### Teacher Quality

To link teacher quality and student outcomes, Goe (2007) compiled a comprehensive research synthesis of more than 50 studies. Based on her analysis of the many ways that researchers have measured teacher quality, Goe developed a framework to illustrate three distinct ways to look at teacher quality:

1. Teacher qualifications and characteristics are considered “inputs,” as they describe the resources that teachers bring with them as a result of who they are and the qualifications they have for entering the profession.
2. Teacher practices are considered “processes,” as they focus on what happens in the classroom and how instructional practices are linked to student learning.
3. Teacher effectiveness is considered an “outcome,” as it is determined by student progress on standardized achievement tests.

This model makes a distinction between *teacher quality*, a general term used to describe the degree to which a teacher is successful in the classroom, and *teacher effectiveness*, a term that is directly tied to student academic gains. Figure 1 illustrates how the components of an effective teacher evaluation system are designed to define teacher quality

Figure 1. Graphic representation of a framework for teacher quality.<sup>1</sup>



### **The Forgotten Words: *Special Education***

The inadequacies of current teacher evaluation systems, as well as the possibility of implementing more comprehensive and meaningful processes for assessing teacher quality, became widely known through the publication of value-added research, the release of reports such as *The Widget Effect* (Weisberg et al., 2009), the *MET Project* (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010), and the introduction of RTT (2009) incentives. Yet, the words, *special education*, are seldom found in these reports (Brownell et al., 2012). In their comprehensive review, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation aimed to “provide a new knowledge base for practitioners and policymakers” (p. 4) but made no mention of teachers who serve students with disabilities. Likewise, applications for RTT funds required states that implemented teacher evaluation systems to incorporate measures of student progress into their assessments, but they made no distinction between general and special education teachers (NCTQ, 2011, 2012). The summaries included extensive recommendations for suggested changes in teacher evaluation policies, as well as a thorough state-by-state update on the policy changes that have taken place, yet they barely mentioned special education, or the more than 450,000 special education teachers who instruct students with disabilities (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2015).

Ease and facilitation of implementation are important considerations for a state or school district adopting a new teacher evaluation system. Yet, a teacher evaluation system that is not sensitive to the subtle, and not so subtle, differences between general education and special education can negatively impact both students and teachers. Regrettably, the vast majority of current reform models for teacher evaluation have not been validated with teachers who instruct students with disabilities and have not been designed to take into account the unique nature of the special education setting (Brownell, et al., 2012; Fenner, Kozik & Cooper, 2014; Jones, Buzick, & Turkan, 2013). A lack of consensus exists among states and districts in how to address the teacher evaluation process for special education teachers and the empirical research base is non-existent (Blanton, Sindelar, & Correa, 2006; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Jones & Brownell, 2014).

More recently, researchers investigating teacher evaluation systems have questioned the validity and equity of applying the same teacher observation protocol to all teachers regardless of the student populations they serve (Jones & Brownell, 2014; Mihaly & McCaffery, 2014; Whitehurst, Chingos, & Lindquist, 2015). In their research on classroom observations, Whitehurst, Chingos, and Lindquist (2015) concluded, “the current observation systems are patently unfair to teachers who are assigned less-able and –prepared students” (p. 68). Additionally, Driver (2013) maintains the primary focus on student outcomes should be balanced with a consideration of the other essential components of special educators’ jobs such as “academic and behavioral instruction, collaboration with general educators, case management, and professional growth” (p. 43). Furthermore, Jones and Brownell (2014) echoed this concern, arguing that the validity of the system used to observe and evaluate teachers must “attend to the contextual features of special education instruction” (p. 113).

Collectively these issues point to the challenge of identifying a single evaluation system that can be utilized effectively in a wide array of classroom settings with varied student populations, including students with disabilities. For example, a system that does not address the unique and diverse roles of special education teachers or one that is not flexible enough to account for the daily responsibilities of those teachers who serve students with disabilities may fail to accurately identify effective and ineffective teachers. The system may also fail to

incentivize critical duties and unique expertise required of special education teachers *outside* the classroom, such as time spent communicating with parents, sophisticated levels of collaboration with general education teaching partners, or the organizational and interpersonal skills, as well as knowledge of special education law needed to lead a productive individual education plan (IEP) meeting. Observation protocols designed for the general education population may fail to recognize and reinforce the use of instructional strategies that have been shown to benefit students with disabilities, such as evidence-based practices (EBPs).

Given the importance placed on teacher evaluation in tenure and contract decisions (Thomsen, 2014a, 2014b), the failure to design a system that accurately and fairly differentiates special education teachers can have devastating consequences (Benedict, Thomas, Kimerling, & Leko, 2013). Since 2009, a number of states have developed and are now implementing new teacher evaluation systems fueled by incentives from the USDOE's Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) and Race to the Top (RTT) initiatives (Shakman, Breslow, Kochanek, Riordan, & Haferd, 2012; USDOE, 2015). Special education teachers and their appraisers are encountering a number of challenges relative to the appraiser's insufficient training, knowledge, and skill set in terms of (a) practices that contribute to improved student outcomes for students with disabilities; (b) the ability to judge between effective and ineffective special education teachers; (c) the interpretation of students' performance on standardized tests when factoring the use of accommodations for students with disabilities; and (d) lack of knowledge about special education in general (Holdheide et al., 2010). To date, the implementation effects of new teacher evaluations on special education teachers and their appraisers have not been recorded or studied. As such, policymakers responsible for the design of evaluation systems can benefit greatly from listening intently to the voices of teachers and administrators, the practitioners who are intimately familiar with the challenges and nuances of teacher evaluation.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative, multi-case research design focused on the implementation of a teacher evaluation system at two large middle school campuses within a large urban school district in Texas. Through the use of a qualitative approach, we were able to elicit in-depth accounts of the teacher and administrator practices, making it possible to construct a holistic picture of their experiences and beliefs, while also providing insight in to underlying issues (Mertens, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Using a qualitative case study approach allowed us to uncover new information with the potential to extend or explain connections and relationships among variables that were previously unknown. This approach provides the opportunity to gain new understandings of how events unfold and why they do so in a particular manner (Merriam, 1998). We decided to examine the perspectives of both teachers and administrators at two different school sites, allowing us to conduct cross-case comparisons (Eisenhardt, 1989), thereby strengthening the validity of our results. As noted by Yin (2009), "[a]nalytical conclusions independently arising from two cases, as with two experiments, will be more powerful than those coming from a single case alone" (p. 61).

## **District and Site Selection Process and Criteria**

Site selection consisted of two steps. First, a school district was identified that had implemented a new teacher evaluation system aligned to research that supported teacher evaluation reform measures. Second, two school sites were identified that met the criteria outlined below.

**School district selection.** In 2011, a large, urban school district in Texas created a new teacher evaluation system to make the teacher appraisal process more rigorous and meaningful. The evaluation system was collaboratively designed through a partnership between the school district and a national nonprofit organization, with input from teachers, administrators, and community members. Key components were aligned to recommendations for improved teacher performance models: (a) teachers receive regular feedback and individualized support for their professional growth regardless of where they are in their career; (b) teachers are appraised every year; (c) the appraisal cycle includes a self-reflection and goal-setting conference, supported by observation and feedback during the course of the year; (d) appraisal scores are based on multiple measures of performance including instructional practice, professional expectations, and student performance; (e) teachers are rated on four levels of performance (i.e., unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, distinguished, [Danielson, 2010; 2011]); and (f) performance evaluations have a significant bearing on employee-related decisions such as tenure and termination (Danielson, 2010; 2011; Goe, Holdeheide, & Miller, 2011; Jiang & Spote, 2015; Papay, 2012; Weisberg et al., 2009).

During the 2013-2014 school year, the system was in its third year of implementation. We sought to gain insight into the perceptions and experiences of individuals who were directly involved in and/or were impacted by the implementation of the new teacher evaluation system: specifically, special education teachers and administrators responsible for their evaluations.

**School site selection.** The site selection process was predicated on the underlying assumption that positive student outcomes are related to effective teaching practices, including effective school organization and culture. A key component of effective school organization and culture is a meaningful teacher evaluation process (Stronge, 2006). The following criteria were used to guide the site selection process:

1. The campus had a minimum enrollment of 25 special education students for each year in the past three years for which data were available.
2. The passing rates for special education students in math and reading on state assessments were 70% or better for the last three years for which data were available.
3. The participation rates for special education students in math and reading on state assessments were 90% or better for the last three years for which data were available.

Potentially eligible campuses were identified through an online public state database. The final selection for the two school sites was made through a purposeful, convenience sampling method. Two large middle school campuses were selected based on the campus's having met the stated criteria as well as each school's record of academic success, specifically with regard to meeting the needs of students with disabilities as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*State Assessment Results for Special Education Students*

<b>District and School Sites</b>	<b>Number of Students Assessed in Reading</b>	<b>% Meeting State Reading Assessment Standards</b>	<b>Number of Students Assessed in Math</b>	<b>% Meeting State Math Assessment Standards</b>	<b>Participation of Students in State Assessment</b>
<u>State Assessment Results 2013</u>					
School Site #1	99	71%	99	70%	92%
School Site #2	86	83%	86	80%	100%
<u>State Assessment Results 2011</u>					
School Site #1	101	80%	101	79%	94%
School Site #2	87	92%	87	82%	91%
<u>State Assessment Results 2010</u>					
School Site #1	121	82%	81	82%	*
School Site #2	81	87%	81	80%	*

\*Data are not available on state databases.

Note: State assessment results were not reported in 2012 due to the introduction of a new student assessment.

On both campuses, students with disabilities had passing rates on state mandated tests of 70% or better in reading and math for the last three years for which data were available. At least 80 students with disabilities were receiving special education and related services on each campus (ranging from 10 to 12 percent of the total student population for both campuses), with participation rates on state testing of 90% or better. While similar in student enrollment and academic achievement, the schools differed considerably with regard to student demographics, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Demographics of District and School Sites 2013*

<b>District and School Sites</b>	<b>Student Enrollment</b>	<b>African American</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Two or More Races</b>	<b>Econ Disadv*</b>	<b>EL**</b>
School District	202,586	25%	63%	8%	3%	N/A	80%	30%
School Site #1	1,418	6%	93%	0%	0%	0%	96%	29%
School Site #2	1,195	11%	34%	41%	11%	3%	32%	6%

\*Econ Disadv = Economically Disadvantaged

\*\*ELL = English Learners



## Description of the Participants

The number of special education teachers and special education service delivery models existing at both schools provided a range of viewpoints and perspectives concerning how special education teachers and administrators both approach and deal with the various challenges related to teacher evaluation in the general and/or special education classroom. Additionally, the ability to interview a number of appraisers contributed to a greater variety of perspectives and descriptors (see Table 3).

Table 3

### *Participants*

<b>Role</b>	<b>Assignment</b>
Teacher –Site #1	Resource Math & Inclusion
Teacher –Site #1	Resource Language & Inclusion
Teacher–Site #1	Inclusion
Teacher–Department Chair – Site #1	Self-Contained Life Skills
Teacher–Site #1	Resource Math & Inclusion
Teacher–Site #1	Resource Reading & Inclusion
Teacher–Site #1	Self-Contained Behavior Support
Teacher–Site #2	Inclusion & Study Lab
Teacher–Site #2	Self-Contained Life Skills
Teacher– Site #2	Inclusion
Teacher– Site #2	Resource Reading & Study Lab
Teacher– Site #2	Resource Reading, Resource Math, Inclusion
Administrator – Site #1	Assistant Principal
Administrator – Site #1	Assistant Principal
Administrator – Site #1	Principal
Administrator – Site #1	Assistant Principal
Administrator – Site #1	Special Education Coordinator
Administrator – Site #1	Assistant Principal
Administrator – Site #2	Principal
Administrator – Site #2	Assistant Principal
Administrator – Site #2	Assistant Principal
Administrator – Site #2	Assistant Principal
Administrator – Site #2	Special Education Coordinator
Administrator – District	Manager
Administrator – District	Assistant Superintendent

Special education teachers served students with disabilities through a variety of educational placements and service delivery models including the (a) general education

classroom/inclusion, (b) resource math and/or reading classroom, (c) study lab, (d) self-contained life skills classroom, and (e) self-contained behavior support classroom. School- and district-level administrators who were responsible for evaluating teachers at one or both school sites served in the capacity of (1) principal, (2) assistant principal, (3) special education coordinator, (4) special education chair, or (5) assistant superintendent.

**Special education teachers at site #1.** Site #1 housed eight special education teachers assigned as resource, inclusion, and self-contained teachers. Descriptive characteristics of special education teachers are offered in Table 4. Seven of the eight teachers participated in the research. The two self-contained classrooms serve students with severe to moderate disabilities and students who struggle with difficult behaviors. All of the teachers managed a caseload of students ranging in size from five to eighteen students, and had acquired between one and 19 years of experience in their positions as special education teachers at this school. Every teacher was certified in special education, and four also had a generalists' certification. One was certified in a core content area and two were certified to instruct English learners (ELs). Four teachers came to the profession through the traditional university course of study while three gained their certification through an alternative certification program. Each teacher was assigned to an appraiser, either the principal or one of three assistant principals.

Table 4

*Special Education Programs at School Site #1*

<b>Teacher*</b>	<b>Assignment(s)</b>	<b>Caseload/ No. of Students</b>	<b>Years in Position</b>	<b>Years with District</b>	<b>Areas of Certification*</b>	<b>Teacher Preparation</b>
Teacher 1	Inclusion	18	4	4.0	Sp Ed EC-12	Alternative Certification
Teacher 2	Resource Math Inclusion	13	1	1.5	Sp Ed EC-12 Gen EC-6, 4-8	
Teacher 3	Self-Contained Life Skills	10	11	14.0	Sp Ed EC-12 ESL	Alternative Certification
Teacher 4	Resource Lang Inclusion	15	9	Some prior experience	Sp Ed EC-12 Gen EC-8	Traditional
Teacher 5	Inclusion Resource	17	12	20.0	Sp Ed EC-12 Math Spanish Bilingual	Traditional
Teacher 6	Inclusion Resource	16	19	19.0	Sp Ed EC-1 Gen 6-8 Counseling Administration	Traditional
Teacher 7	Self-Contained Behavior Support	5	1	1.5	Sp Ed EC-12 Gen 4-8 Physical Ed	Alternative Certification

Note: Sp Ed = Special Education; Gen = Generalist.

**Special education teachers at site #2.** Site #2 employed special education teachers serving as resource, inclusion, study lab, and self-contained teachers (see Table 5). Five of six teachers participated in the research. The two self-contained classrooms supported students with severe to moderate disabilities and students with autism spectrum disorder. Every teacher managed a caseload of students ranging in size from nine to 20 students, and had earned between one and eight years of experience in their position as a special education teacher at this school. All were certified as special education teachers and generalists. One was certified in core content; two were certified to instruct ELs. Four teachers came to the profession through an alternative certification program, and one completed the traditional university course of study. Each teacher was assigned to an appraiser, either the principal or one of the three assistant principals.

Table 5

*Special Education Programs at School Site #2*

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Assignment(s)</b>	<b>Caseload/ No. of Students</b>	<b>Years in Position</b>	<b>Years with District</b>	<b>Areas of Certification*</b>	<b>Teacher Preparation</b>
Teacher 1	Inclusion Study Lab	20	2	2	Sp Ed EC-12 Gen 4-8	Alternative Certification
Teacher 2	Self-Contained Life Skills	9	2	13	Sp Ed EC-12 Gen EC-4 Reading 4-8 ELA 4-8 Soc Studies 4-8	Alternative Certification
Teacher 3	Inclusion	17	6	6	Sp Ed EC-12 Gen K-6	Alternative Certification
Teacher 4	Resource Reading Study Lab	12	8	37	Sp Ed EC-12 Gen K-8 ESL	Traditional
Teacher 5	Resource Reading Resource Math Inclusion	10	1	1	Sp Ed EC-12 Gen 4-8 ESL	Alternative Certification

Note: Sp Ed = Special Education; Gen = Generalist.

**Data Sources**

Multiple data sources were used, including interviews, document review, and observations. Face-to-face interviews served as the primary data source. A semi-structured interview protocol with pre-determined questions provided flexibility and the ability to adjust questions, or ask additional probing questions to clarify participants' responses and/or gain additional insights when necessary.

Documents and such as copies of policies and observation protocols used for evaluating teachers; master schedules and district/school-generated reports to confirm teachers' roles and responsibilities and provide evidence of special education teachers' areas of expertise; and

quantitative data assessing the academic progress of students with disabilities were examined. Classroom observations were conducted to monitor, firsthand, the daily practices of special education teachers.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with (a) seven teachers from School Site #1, (b) six administrators from School Site #1; (c) five teachers from School Site #2; (d) five administrators from School Site #2, and (e) one administrator from the district office. One teacher at each of the two school sites declined to participate.

## Data Collection

Documents were collected from district and school sites and from individual teachers and administrators. Interviews lasted from between twenty minutes and one hour. Twenty-one participants agreed to be tape-recorded. Their interviews were then later transcribed. A copy of each transcript was emailed to the participants for their review. None provided any additions or corrections. Three participants declined to be tape-recorded, so the researcher took notes during the interview and then shared the notes with each of them via email. None provided any editions or corrections. One administrator from the district office provided a written response to the interview questions.

Participants were asked to describe:

- their specific job responsibilities and the teacher evaluation process, as they experience it;
- the degree to which they believe the teacher evaluation system fulfills its intended twofold purpose to accurately identify effective special education teachers *and* support their professional growth; and
- the capacity of the teacher evaluation system to account for the unique roles and responsibilities of special education teachers.

## Data Analysis

Initially, the first author analyzed the data, breaking down the data into categories and subcategories, and recombining the categories into common themes and features. The primary goal of data analysis was to uncover the expressed perceptions of special education teachers and the administrators about the evaluation system, focusing on whether they believed it (a) identified effective teachers; (b) presented challenges in evaluating special education teachers; and (c) supported professional growth. Categories were assigned codes, or labels, which were compared to identify similarities, differences, and connections. The data were reorganized or recombined based on the connections between the disparate pieces (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in order to understand the specific features of the categories and identify relationships among categories.

Findings were validated through the process of triangulation by identifying common themes or categories that appeared in multiple data sources. Emerging relationships helped guide the data analysis process, facilitating a better understanding of the context, causes, and consequences of various phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The process included reading and rereading interview transcripts, consolidating data, making connections between research data, finding similarities and differences among sites and participants, and toggling between concrete bits of information and larger, more abstract concepts. The second author cross-

checked the categories and codes, emerging themes, and final categories to confirm and question findings until agreement was reached.

## Findings

### Roles and Responsibilities of Special Education Teachers

Special education teachers chronicled their typical school day, both *inside* and *outside* the classroom. In addition to their instructional assignments and duties they performed within a variety of classroom settings and learning environments, teachers described responsibilities outside the classroom that were time-intensive and required high levels of proficiency. Responsibilities included collaborating with other professionals, overseeing the implementation of students' IEPs, communicating with parents, and developing and administering student assessments.

**Instructional assignments and duties.** Special education teachers and campus administrators detailed the wide range and scope of special education teachers' responsibilities as well as the demands and complexity of their daily schedules. Every teacher was required to teach multiple subjects and/or multiple grade levels. Over half of the teachers were given two or three distinct teaching assignments: resource, inclusion, and/or study lab teachers. Inclusion teachers taught multiple grades and, for some, multiple subjects that required teachers to possess a wide range of pedagogical content knowledge that varied from year to year. Inclusion teachers typically covered as many as eight classes. More than half of the inclusion teachers were expected to split their time between assisting and providing support in two different classrooms during the same class period. Self-contained teachers were also responsible for delivering instruction across multiple subjects (core subjects of reading, language, math, science, and social studies, as well as vocational skills) and multiple grade levels, as their students functioned on a wide range of academic levels.

**Collaborating with other professionals.** Special education teachers routinely worked closely with other teachers and campus-based service providers such as general education teachers or school nurses, as well as district-level support staff. By far, the most critical and challenging relationships were among inclusion teachers, assigned as co-teachers within the general education classroom, and their general education teacher partners. According to one teacher, "It just varies, really, from teacher to teacher." Another teacher attributed more challenging arrangements to "insecurities" due to some general education teachers' concerns about being "judged". On the other hand, one teacher spoke about the "joy" of being able to "piggyback on each other" to help clarify instruction or demonstrate strategies if necessary. Another teacher compared co-teaching to a "dance" contingent on the ways in which general education teachers perceived them:

My analogy is Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire when it's really working well, and then, sometimes, it's just like Dancing with the Stars . . . like when they were dancing with that guy and he was kind of yanking and dragging her across the floor. So it just really depends on how the teachers perceive you. You have teachers that they perceive you as an ally.

Clearly, sharing responsibility for students' academic growth as well as space, resources, and instructional time required a sophisticated level of collaboration, as supported by previous research (Dieker & Hines, 2014; Shin, Lee, & McKenna, 2016).

**Overseeing the implementation of students' IEPs.** All of the teachers carried an average caseload of between five to 20 students, with lower number caseloads being assigned to teachers working with students with low-incidence disabilities and/or students receiving the majority of their instruction in a resource or self-contained classroom. They prepared and led IEP meetings, safeguarded the development of appropriate IEPs; monitored their implementation; and ensured that legal requirements were met.

According to one teacher, the amount of time needed to prepare for the meeting took “about an hour and a half” because “you have to collect teacher input forms, you have to fill everything out, have everything printed up already.” In reference to preparing for an annual review meeting to discuss students' IEPs for the following year, another teacher replied, “Oh my goodness, days” because she had to “go and get their teachers' input” to find out “How are they doing? What are they doing” and “see if they are progressing or regressing” in regard to achieving their IEP goals. In the case of “behavior” IEPs requiring “behavior support” and a “behavior plan”, a math resource and inclusion teacher compared the length of time required for a “behavior” IEP meeting to a regular IEP meeting:

Sometimes we have to have a failure ARD (Admission, Review, and Dismissal Meeting), and if they have behavior support, we need a behavior plan, all ARD forms. [It takes] maybe two hours if it's a behavior ARD. If it's simple, not any behavior plan, one and a half to one hour and 15 minutes, assuming there's nothing unusual.

Teachers responsible for IEP meetings for students in grade eight explained how they had to communicate with parents about transition to high school and coordinate with the high school staff to schedule and attend the promotion meeting held at the high school campus. They enumerated duties they had to perform to prepare for a student's IEP meeting: (a) gather input from each of the students' teachers, (b) review student progress, (c) obtain records, and (d) communicate with parents. As one self-contained teacher reported, it took at least “one workday” to prepare for an IEP meeting due to the time needed to draft individualized student learning goals and objectives in the seven required content areas as well as making sure she was able to get information from the school nurse for “students with medical issues”.

New special education teachers noted the considerable investment of time needed to learn the IEP process in terms of preparation, facilitation of the team meeting in concert with the school administrator, plus maintaining accurate minutes and completing online forms prior to and throughout the course of the meeting. The minutes and IEP team's input relative to the student's IEP goals are entered into an electronically created document. At the end of the meeting, the special education teacher must print out copies of the IEP for the parents and upload the IEP to the district's recordkeeping system.

The number of teachers who enter the profession each year makes this a significant, ongoing challenge, as evidenced by the fact that one third of the teacher participants in this investigation had less than two years' experience. The knowledge, expertise, and time needed to carry out the responsibilities related to the student's IEP is unique and critical to the success of the special education teacher. There are no parallel responsibilities in the general education setting that carry similar weight with regard to educational outcomes, legal ramifications, and relational (i.e. parent) impact.

**Communicating with parents.** Teachers reported they felt compelled to stay in touch with parents by communicating through frequent text messages, emails, phone calls, and parent visits to the classroom—in most cases, after school—to consult with the teacher about their child's progress. Regarding sending text messages, an inclusion teacher exclaimed:

Thank God for text messaging, because I'll throw them a quick message: "I need to meet with you," or, "I need to speak to you at a certain time. Is that okay?" "Yes." . . . So it's daily. It's a daily communication. "I am seeing something I don't like. Mom, I need your support with this. I am just letting you know that I am addressing this issue with your child right away." It's daily. It's daily and, definitely, these are communications that we have with our parents whenever we have to; every six weeks, we have to update our IEPs.

A different teacher working with students with more severe disabilities in a self-contained classroom maintained close contact with parents on a weekly basis:

So most of my parents bring their children. So if they come to see me, the door is always open. So they'll just come right in, and we will talk for a few minutes. Most of it is face to face.

A math resource and inclusion teacher placed a high priority on maintaining parent communication, devoting "about 15 minutes a day" to "call parents to remind them" of an upcoming IEP meeting and, in some cases, spent weekends making home visits:

I send ARD invitations; call parents to remind them of the date. I have all their phone numbers in my cell. I try to keep close contact so I can communicate with them about behavior, tutorials. Even on weekends, I spend time with them: signing papers, home visits, getting signatures. I know they are busy, and sometimes they don't have transportation. I try to make it as easy as possible for them to be involved.

In addition to these informal means of communication, special education teachers were responsible for reporting academic and social progress to parents each grading period. Throughout the interviews, teachers and appraisers emphasized that being accessible to parents and responsive to their concerns was especially important for parents of students with disabilities.

**Developing and administering student assessments.** Self-contained teachers who served students with more severe disabilities encountered the most significant and challenging responsibilities related to student assessment. These teachers characterized the administration of alternative assessments as a complex and time-consuming process in which they are required to develop assessment items unique to each student and aligned to the required state objectives in all core subjects that are tested at a given grade level. According to one self-contained teacher:

We've got to develop all of those pieces to that test. Now if it is a graph or a chart, we have to develop that. If it's a story, we have to find something that's on their level, that's not grade level, but on their level, reading level, so that they can identify with the story. So that might include adding some visuals to that story or it might just include, you know, spacing so that they are bolder, bigger print for my vision-impaired student. So it's just a variety of things that we have to include depending on the need of the child.

She then described the number of required assessment items and the expertise needed to develop them appropriately.

[I have] 10 students and four different subject areas, and so they have to be tested in all of them--just the state assessment areas, right? It's the same as if the regular kids, so sixth grade has two tests. They have reading and math. Seventh grade has three; they have reading, math and writing. Eighth grade has four, so and then within those four, it would be so wonderful if you say, "Okay, we're going to pick this one objective," but, no, they are tested in four objectives. Okay? So that's four tests for each objective per

student, and when you calculate how many that is, you just don't want to hear the end of that number because I think one year I was, like, at 96 tests.

The requirements for administering one-on-one assessments and recording students' results took more than one full day per student. Additionally, creating the alternative assessment required in-depth knowledge of the curriculum and student evaluation as well as the identification of appropriate modifications and accommodations.

Each of these responsibilities--collaborating with other professionals, overseeing the IEP process, communicating with parents, and developing and administering student assessments--are subsets of the many responsibilities special education teachers must fulfill and are critical attributes of the position when monitoring the progress and success of the students in their caseload. Competent execution of these responsibilities requires knowledge, skill, and insight that may vary widely among teachers, making it necessary to account for the ability and facility with which each responsibility is executed when designing a meaningful performance management system.

### **Consistency and Fidelity in Teacher Evaluation Processes**

When asked to describe the typical teacher evaluation process, both teachers and appraisers linked each of the key processes with consistency. There were no important differences based on campus, teacher role, or appraiser assignments. Teachers and appraisers described a strong commitment to the implementation of the teacher evaluation process as it was designed: (a) teachers experienced and appraisers conducted frequent classroom observations followed by both formal and informal feedback; (b) teachers met regularly with their appraisers to receive instructional coaching advice and to monitor progress toward professional goals; and (c) requirements for 30-minute and 10-minute observations were faithfully carried out, as were requirements for periodic teacher-appraiser conferences. Moreover, teacher and appraiser descriptions of their ongoing communication and its relation to improved instructional practices demonstrated a commitment to continuing professional growth.

The district's teacher evaluation rating system contained three major components: Instructional Practice, Student Achievement, and Professional Expectations. Incorporating the student performance component, however, stood out as the single discrepancy between the design of the teacher evaluation system and its implementation when evaluating special education teachers. In fact, the teachers involved in this study rarely mentioned the student performance component. Teachers discussed *student goal setting* as an important indicator contained within the rubric of the Instructional Practice component and the Student Achievement component in terms of the *bonus reward program* the district offered. However, in terms of student achievement as a component of the teacher evaluation rating system, teachers offered few comments.

According to a district-level administrator responsible for the oversight of the teacher evaluation process, "Currently, we do not have 100% of the teachers participating in that component." He further explained that a specific set of criteria were used to determine which teachers would be expected to participate in the Student Achievement component, based on each teacher's class assignments and available assessments. Most special education teachers in this research study were not evaluated on the student performance component. Their resulting teacher evaluation ratings were based only on instructional practice and professional expectations.



Several possible scenarios can be suggested for the student performance component as it relates to special education teachers. Resource teachers whose students participated in standard state assessments could have had the student performance component included in their evaluation if other requirements were met, such as minimum class size and the availability of multiple assessments for specific subject(s) taught by the teacher. Similarly, self-contained teachers whose students participated in the state alternative assessment could have had the student performance component included in their evaluation if similar requirements were met. Co-teachers, however, did not participate in the student performance component. In addition, special education teachers were typically appointed to multiple teacher classroom assignments, e.g., serving as both a resource teacher and a co-teacher. It is possible, therefore, that the student achievement component for a special education teacher would be calculated for a *portion* of the teacher’s students, e.g., resource students, while excluding the remainder of the teacher’s students, e.g., students enrolled in inclusion classes.

### An Evaluation Process They Can Believe In

Having established that the teacher evaluation process was grounded in research-based practices and implemented with fidelity in terms of both process and intent, teachers and appraisers were asked to respond to the question, “On a scale of 1-10, how well does the teacher evaluation system accurately differentiate between effective and ineffective teachers?” Participants responded positively, expressing their confidence in the system’s ability to accurately identify effective teachers as shown in Table 6.

Table 6

#### Responses Regarding Teacher Evaluation System

Scale 1-10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	No Response
<b>Teacher Responses</b>		1			2		4*	1			4
<b>Administrator Responses</b>						1	4	1**			2
*The researcher marked 7 for three teachers who said “7 or 8.”											
**The researcher marked 8 for an administrator who said “8 or 9.”											
Two teachers declined to respond based on their lack of experience.											
Two teachers and two administrators declined to give a specific number.											

Among the twelve teacher participants, seven rated the system at the mid-point or higher, and five of those seven rated it as very high. No discernible differences were noted in the teacher

responses at the two school sites and both novice and experienced teachers rated the system positively. Four of the five teachers who rated the system very high have more than ten years' experience in the district. Administrators were similarly positive.

Many of the teachers and administrators based their confidence in the teacher evaluation process on the instructional practices component; more specifically, the rubric used for classroom observation and feedback. Teachers were pleased that the teacher evaluation document spelled out clearly established expectations for instructional practice and delineated specific criteria for meeting the four levels of teacher ratings, offering guidance for those who wanted to improve their practice in order to achieve "effective" or "highly effective" scores. One teacher explained how the Instructional Practice rubric clarified standard expectations:

I can tell I know the difference between a level, like the level 2 teacher who knows what she is supposed to do but doesn't implement it all of the time. And then a level 3 teacher knows what to do and implements it but is not student centered. And a level 4 teacher knows what they want to do, and its student centered.

Another teacher outlined the feedback she received from her appraiser after classroom observations:

We look at the evidence that he saw for every criteria [in the Instructional Practice rubric]. If he didn't see it, that's the part that he'll tell me, "I need to see this next time." "Yes, sir, I will. I will make sure that I show you this." So it's very fair. Very fair, like I said; whatever grade he gives me is between the 1 and the 4. He is very fair. If he didn't see it, he will tell me, "I didn't see this, and this is why I gave you this score." It's a one-on-one and it's open to discussion.

An administrator highlighted the value of the Instructional Practice Rubric in providing guidance to appraisers in evaluating teacher performance.

The observation, that piece where it has where you actually have some criteria to look at, all of the criteria that's in the little handbook is also online. And I use that constantly. And I start with a 3 [a teacher that is rated "effective"]. I have some very strong teachers up here. So I start with 3, and then I look to a 4 [a teacher that is rated "highly effective"], and I see a lot of my teachers doing 4 on a lot of their categories. So . . . when it comes to the observation, it gets a lot more detailed.

### **An Evaluation Experience that Promotes Professional Growth**

Understanding the dual purpose intended for this teacher evaluation system, participants were asked to respond not only to the question of its accuracy in identifying effective teachers, but also the question of its support for professional growth. Teachers were asked, "On a scale of 1-10, how would you describe the extent to which the teacher evaluation process with your supervisor helps you to improve as a teacher?" Their responses are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

*Responses Regarding Extent to Which Teacher Evaluation Process Helps Teachers Improve*

Scale 1-10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	No Response
<b>Teacher Responses</b>		1*			1		3*	3	2	1	1
<b>On a scale of 1–10, how would you describe the extent to which the teacher evaluation process helps teachers improve?</b>											
<b>Administrator Responses</b>				1	1	2	1	1	2		
*The researcher marked 2 for a teacher who said “2 or 3,” and a 7 for a teacher who said “7 or 8.”											
One teacher declined to give a specific number.											

**Teacher responses.** Ten of the twelve teachers gave a rating of five or higher and eight teachers rated the process as very helpful. One teacher rated the process a 10. There were no discernible differences in the response patterns between the two schools or for teachers in various assignments (resource, self-contained, study lab, inclusion).

Both beginning and veteran teachers rated the teacher evaluation process as very helpful. For example, a first-year teacher appreciated the clear path the system provided for improvement: “I like seeing exactly what I need to work on. It’s very honest with her [my appraiser]. My scores will reflect what she saw. I know exactly what I need to improve on.” One second-year teacher described how the process influenced his desire to become better: “When the system tells you that you are not very whatever, then you’re like, okay, there’s a road you can take.” A different second-year teacher disclosed the process highlighted the need “to continue to grow” and admitted, “there is no plateau or standstill.”

A teacher with 10 years of experience admitted, “If you really look at it as an opportunity to get better, it’s a really good tool” while another experienced teacher appreciated how the tool provided a road map for making improvements: “It does help me make improvements as far as, like I said, with the rubric and being able to see exactly what I need to do to get the number [rating] I want.” Another teacher described how her appraiser encouraged professional growth: “My gosh, I *have* to grow. I don’t have a choice. My supervisor would not allow me to stay stagnant, so I love that challenge. I love it.”

On a less positive note, one veteran teacher rated the system as “not helpful” except when the evaluator had prior experience in special education: “I just saw a huge difference when I had somebody that had worked in special education or just knew a lot about it because I got good feedback and it did help me improve.” Another veteran minimized the impact the system had on promoting professional growth, characterizing the system as serving a “watchdog-ness” function rather than being “helpful” to teachers.

**Administrator responses.** Similarly, administrators were asked to what extent the teacher evaluation process helps teachers improve. Their responses, which are also presented in Table 7, ranged from a low of 4 to a high of 9, with scores clustering near 6 and 7. One pattern, however, emerged with regard to years of experience. The two administrators who rated the process the highest, with an 8 and a 9, were first-year assistant principals. The three most experienced administrators with nine or more years of experience, gave the lowest ratings, a 4 and two 5s.

A novice administrator spoke of the value of ongoing coaching and feedback: “You know, if you give them enough feedback on the form and then you sit down and have a conference, then it does help them improve. I mean, it’s just right there in black and white.” On the other hand, a more experienced administrator shared her frustration with the process required by the district’s formal evaluation system that, when compared to the school’s evaluation form she used previously, slowed her down:

I feel like I could give feedback with our school evaluation form. With my own system, I could do it really, really quick and give feedback, right? Organizing it, inputting it, and the thought process takes me a much longer time. I like to give detailed feedback. I like to be sure that they know where to go, and what they could do better, what they could. And I know my team: they give a lot of feedback. So the inefficiencies of the system [making reference to the online technology tool appraisers use to enter teacher data] keep it from being as effective as it could be.

**Contribution to continuous improvement.** Practices named by teachers and appraisers on both campuses that contributed to special education teachers’ professional growth included (a) the development and on-going support for the teacher’s individual professional development plan; (b) frequent and timely feedback following classroom observations; and (c) specific appraisal tools such as the instructional practice rubric used in teacher observations. Teachers from both campuses articulated their commitment to continuous improvement, and appraisers voiced their commitment to supporting teachers, saying, “It’s my job to support them.” In effect, the campus culture of the two schools supported a commitment to continuous improvement, and the teacher evaluation system provided tools and processes to facilitate job-embedded professional development.

**Administrative knowledge about special education.** Appraiser expertise in special education instruction was highly valued by both novice and experienced teachers. Teachers offered compelling examples of the ways in which an administrator with special education expertise helped them improve their practice and expressed their appreciation for a leader with skill and experience in educating students with disabilities. One veteran teacher commented:

It was really nice last year. We had Ms. W., and you know she was special ed. chair and knows everything about special ed. And she understands completely the co-teach[ing experience], so she knows what she is looking for. I got excellent feedback from her, really constructive feedback. And I found it really more helpful than any other year that I have been evaluated.

A self-contained teacher also expressed her appreciation for the expertise of her appraiser, a former special education teacher and department chair, particularly in terms of the subtle changes necessary in a life skills classroom:

She understands the spectrum of my classroom, and it’s not going to look like a typical lesson cycle. So she gets that, and so she is looking for, are the students learning? Are they comfortable? Are they happy? Is there some progress going on? And so that’s

what she is looking for versus maybe another observer or evaluator that really doesn't understand the dynamics of a life skills room.

She provided a potential scenario of a student who might be displaying challenging behaviors in the classroom:

We may have a student that is having a meltdown at the time and she understands that that's just his typical behavior and doesn't count that against me, versus someone who may not quite understand those typical behaviors that you see. So, that helps a lot.

### **The Challenges of Applying a One-Size-Fits-All Teacher Evaluation System**

When the teacher evaluation system was implemented with fidelity, and the teachers and administrators believed the system fulfilled its intended purpose to accurately identify effective teachers and support professional growth of all teachers, all was well, right? Well, not quite.

Appraisers were asked if they followed the same procedures for appraising general education and special education teachers: all of them answered "Yes." But, when asked if they ever found it challenging to evaluate a special education teacher, all of them gave specific examples of the difficulties they faced, acknowledging that at times they had to "tweak the process" or "change it up a bit." One administrator said, "I modify it" and another described the dilemmas she faced by saying, "So you are trying to kind of make it [the teacher evaluation process] work where it doesn't work, you know?"

#### **Gap 1: Appraising Inclusion Teachers**

Every campus administrator described the difficulties they encountered when they attempted to follow the appraisal guidelines when evaluating inclusion teachers. At the time of this study, the observation protocol was based on the assumption that the teacher being evaluated would be leading the classroom lesson. This assumption, however, did not hold true for most inclusion classrooms where the general education teacher led the lesson and the inclusion teacher facilitated student learning. Ideally, both teachers would be involved in planning and delivering the lesson, but in reality, this seldom took place. As one inclusion teacher pointed out:

A lot of times, it's difficult. I can't set the lesson for the class. It's already set. I have to follow along . . . we respect that that's the [general education] teacher's classroom. She is the one on record . . . So in times like that . . . I think it would be fair to modify the evaluation process.

As a result of these challenges, almost all of the appraisers admitted to ignoring policy that observations were to be unannounced and informed the teachers in advance of their intention to conduct a classroom observation. When this occurred, the inclusion teacher was expected to lead the lesson, even if this rarely occurred during the normal course of instruction. Unless they made this adjustment, administrators conceded it would be difficult and, in some cases, impossible to evaluate the teacher on key observation criteria such as pacing, student participation, and the design of an organized, student-centered and objective-driven lesson. Even though appraisers continued to provide feedback following the lesson, some expressed the sentiment that the authenticity of the coaching experience was lost and the quality of the feedback was diminished.

The shortcomings of the observation protocol have several important implications. First, the mismatch between the 'inclusion teacher as facilitator' and the observation protocol that

assumes the ‘teacher as leader’ was a critical concern, given the number of special education teachers who serve as inclusion teachers. For example, in this investigation, 75% of the special education teachers had co-teaching responsibilities. Second, in the absence of the student performance component, the classroom observation and instructional practice rubric served as a major determinant in the teacher’s overall evaluation rating. Therefore, it should have been a fair and credible reflection of the teacher’s actual responsibilities, as well as the teacher’s instructional skill. Finally, one of the major benefits was the professional growth teachers experienced as a result of the feedback and dialog following their classroom observations. When the teacher observation was compromised, as evidenced in the case of inclusion teachers, special education teachers were not afforded opportunities for an authentic coaching experience that could have considerable potential for improved instructional practices.

### **Gap 2: Applying Criteria of the Observation Protocol to Varying Student Populations**

Many of the campus-based participants described the difficulty they faced in applying various criteria from the observation protocol to different student populations. Of the criteria named, one-third of the participants identified one criterion as being especially troublesome: “Engages students in work that develops higher-level thinking skills.” While teachers and administrators expressed their desire to more effectively incorporate opportunities for higher-level thinking, they acknowledge that they were unsure how to apply the criterion fairly for students demonstrating varying levels of ability. One teacher said, “We try. We try really hard, but sometimes we’re not there yet.” Another concurred, saying, “That [higher order thinking] should be done in a special ed classroom, but it’s going to look different than in a general ed classroom.” An administrator echoed similar sentiment saying, “Higher-level thinking skills for a student in a resource class is not the same as higher-level thinking skills in a student in a gifted class.” The dilemma appraisers faced was articulated by one assistant principal who said, “So every time I get to that one [criterion] I go, ‘Ugh, how can I score this?’ You know, you don’t want to score it down because it’s not the teacher’s fault that the students aren’t there.”

### **Gap 3: Capturing the Specialized Roles and Expertise of the Special Education Teacher**

Special education teachers and their appraisers named instructional practices and professional expectations that are essential in the special education setting; however, these practices received little attention in the teacher evaluation system. For example, special education teachers must be able to manage student behavior, customize instruction, and support the social and emotional needs for students with disabilities. Self-contained teachers discussed the detail with which they must design individualized annual assessments for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

Inclusion teachers described their responsibility to modify assessments for students in as many as eleven classes. While one teacher chronicled how she met with a small group of students during her “off-period” to counsel them in social skills, others shared strategies they used to support students emotionally during classroom instruction. Even though teachers were evaluated on the degree to which they complied with policy, collaborated with colleagues, and communicated with parents, campus-based staff expressed the belief that the responsibilities and expectations for special education teachers were considerably more than what they were able to capture through the teacher evaluation process.

One administrator provided a rationale for why he thought the teacher evaluation system could not fully capture the full range of duties of a special education teacher, chronicling vivid examples of a teacher assigned to both an inclusion and resource classroom in terms of his position responsibilities:

This teacher has his caseload, his group of kids that he monitors and assists. In addition, he co-teaches. In addition to that, he has to prepare his own lesson plans for his [resource] class. He has to study the lesson plan of the teacher who he is co-teaching with. He has to learn the content. Then, he has to take that *same* content and find ways of adapting and modifying it, differentiating it for his own students.

He further described this teacher's time demands:

Sure, he has conference periods. But he has to do all of the paperwork for special ed. He has to prepare for the IEP meeting. Make sure he collects data from all of the teachers. Make sure he has been successful in scheduling the parent to come in; securing the data from the teachers, the feedback from the students regarding their grades or behavior; be able to find a [general ed.] teacher who is able to attend the IEP meeting. That all falls on him as well. And in addition to that, he has to spend that one hour in the IEP meeting so sometimes we're looking at three IEP meetings in a day. Whatever planning he had in mind for his lesson is going to have to be after school now or before school.

Finally, the administrator recognized the special education teacher's level of expertise which went unrecognized through the teacher evaluation process:

Whatever support the [general education] teacher had requested at that moment is now on hold because Mr. H. can't be there because he has to attend an IEP meeting. Even after the IEP meeting, he has to complete the paperwork. So all of that doesn't fall anywhere near the appraisal system. I mean, at the most, 'following school policies'... so [it's] very limited.

#### **Gap 4: Limitations of Appraiser Skill and Expertise in Serving Students with Disabilities**

Both novice and experienced teachers underscored the benefit of being appraised and coached by an administrator with special education experience and/or specific training and expert knowledge about special education and evidence-based practices. However, only one of the eight appraisers had experience in special education. None of the others had experience, credentials, or graduate courses in special education and only two appraisers could recall any special education training they had received. Appraisers readily conceded they lacked knowledge or background in special education. Although special education chairs coached teachers and provided feedback that was valued by the teachers, they did not serve in the role of appraiser.

### **Discussion**

The findings in this investigation point to several successes in the new teacher evaluation system, echoing similarly positive responses from other districts that have implemented new evaluation methods (Shakman, et al., 2012). Both special education teachers and administrative appraisers characterized the process as consistent, enabling them to accurately identify effective special education teachers and support their professional growth and development.

Nevertheless, researchers question whether measures of teacher quality that are used to evaluate general education teachers can be used effectively to evaluate special education teachers, including the use of teacher observation protocols (Frudden & Manatt, 1986; Holdheide et al., 2010; Katims & Henderson, 1990; Moya & Gay, 1982). Holdheide et al. (2010) summarized the dilemma: “Few systems have the capacity to differentiate among specialty area educators, address the challenges in accurately measuring achievement growth for their students, and connect that growth to teacher effects” (p. 1).

Until now, research in the field of teacher quality, as it relates to special education, has concentrated more on pre-service preparation, certification, and content knowledge, with less attention focused on what happens to teachers after they enter the profession (Boe, Shin, & Cook, 2007; Brownell et al., 2009; Nougaret, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2005; Sindelar, Daunic, & Rennells, 2004). In some cases, researchers have been able to assess the efficacy of special education *programs*, yet “none of them investigates the role that *teachers* play in promoting the achievement of students with disabilities” (Feng & Sass, 2010, p. 7).

Research reports and policy recommendations for the reform of teacher evaluation systems have focused almost exclusively on general education teachers, leading the CEC (2012b) to state, “There is no consensus and almost no research about how these teachers [special education teachers] might be evaluated” (p. 2). Similarly, Brownell et al. (2012) described the challenges: “Unfortunately, there is little to guide states and districts as they consider evaluating special educators...as a field, we have limited research identifying the dimensions of teacher quality in special education” (p. 272). Four years after the CEC published its recommendations, there remains little agreement among states as to how they might best address the teacher evaluation process for special education teachers; further, the empirical research base is non-existent (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b).

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

Policymakers and practitioners must consider how evaluation systems might be improved to account for and be more sensitive to the complexities of the daily responsibilities and assignments of teachers who serve students with disabilities. The recommendations that follow can be implemented with relative ease, using a common framework to define effective teaching and developing appraiser guidelines to enhance processes and tools specific to special education. Little to no investment of funds is required, but strong communication systems and ongoing professional development are essential.

#### **Create Documents to Supplement Standard Observation Protocols**

Strengthen observation protocols by creating supplements to the standard observation protocols that (a) provide appraisers with guidance when evaluating special education teachers, (b) allow for a consistent implementation of the teacher evaluation system, and (c) support quality practices. Incorporate evidence-based practices (EBPs), so special education teachers recognize and view them as cornerstones to effective instruction for students with disabilities and teachers can develop skill in their implementation. Provide appraisers with ongoing professional development in order to improve their ability to observe and highlight EBPs. Demonstrate a commitment to special education by developing and implementing a comprehensive plan to



distribute supplements through multiple channels, followed by explicit training and opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of EBPs.

### **Modify the Requirements of the Evaluation Process**

Provide alternative observation requirements for co-teachers who are facilitating, not leading, the lesson. Rather than requiring one or two 30 to 45 minute observations, allow the appraiser to conduct a series of four to six 10- to 15-minute observations, providing ample opportunity for the appraiser to observe the teacher interacting with students with and without disabilities and provide authentic feedback without creating a disruption to the natural flow of the inclusion classroom. Develop supplemental documents that describe instructional strategies unique to the inclusion teacher as instructional facilitator or co-teacher. Documents could provide a detailed explanation, with examples, of similar versus unique roles and responsibilities of both the general education and the special education teacher, delineating clear expectations of quality inclusion practices. Make sure the development of EBPs and academic content are included when conducting teacher-appraiser conferences. When teachers meet with their appraisers to identify professional development goals, the appraiser would be able to focus more on EBPs, referencing specific ways in which the teacher further develops his/her understanding and use of pedagogical content knowledge appropriate to the students being served within the various classroom assignment.

### **Establish a Campus-wide Vision of Quality Teaching**

Establish a district- and campus-wide vision of quality instruction and expectation that all administrators will support the growth and development of the teachers they supervise, giving equal attention to general education and special education teachers. Since administrators must regularly engage in ongoing feedback and dialog with teachers, ensure such conversations extend beyond the minimum requirements of the teacher evaluation system that encourages teachers and administrators to work side by side for the teacher's success.

### **Provide Support and Ongoing Professional Development for Appraisers**

Ensure that at least one member of the administrative team has experience and expertise in special education, and leverage the skills of knowledgeable staff members by establishing systems of communication and support for administrators and teachers who have little or no experience in special education. Pair administrators with expertise in serving students with disabilities with administrators who have little knowledge and experience in special education, providing time for them to make informal classroom observations and engage in structured dialog.

### **Final Thoughts**

Ultimately, the driving force behind improving teacher evaluation must be motivated by the intent to ensure *every* student has access to an effective teacher, including the approximately 6.5 million students with disabilities in the U.S. who attend our public schools. To accomplish this aim, it is essential we design and implement teacher evaluation systems that are (a)

comprehensive, (b) capable of accurately identifying highly effective special education teachers, (c) useful tools for documenting the full range of responsibilities and daily activities of special education teachers, and (d) fully supportive of special education teachers' professional development needs and/or efforts to improve. The accuracy and legitimacy of teacher evaluation systems hinge on our ability to fully understand their roles and responsibilities and, ultimately, demonstrate our willingness to tailor our teacher evaluation systems, tools, and processes accordingly. This can only be accomplished as we engage in authentic dialog with special educators who, along with general educators, are living out the realities of school reform in our classrooms.

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**Ann Sledge** began a 33-year career in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) after obtaining her degree in Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois in 1980. While working in the HISD, she obtained her Master's degree in Bilingual Education from the University of Houston in 1984, and a Doctor of Education Degree from The University of Texas at Austin in 2014. With HISD, she served a teacher, Coordinator, Assistant Principal, Principal, School Improvement Officer, Executive Principal, and Assistant Superintendent of Talent Management. She then became the Head of Schools for Kipp Houston Public Schools, earning "educator's educator" status in the Houston community. Her passion and calling was to lead, reform, innovate, implement systems that measure, review, revisit, and rethink the process of teaching and learning in urban schools to ensure student learning success.

*\*This was her last educational research/report endeavor, as she died of cancer on January 16, 2016.*

**Barbara L. Pazey** is an Assistant Professor in the Departments of Special Education and Educational Administration at The University of Texas at Austin. She has served as a general and special education teacher, high school principal, and higher education administrator. Her research interests are focused on the development of socially just leadership and teacher preparation programs; ethical leadership and decision-making; and change made effectual through self-reflection and the empowerment of student voice.

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