Improving Practice in Special Education: The Evaluation Process as a Development Tool

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IMPROVING PRACTICE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: THE EVALUATION PROCESS AS A DEVELOPMENT TOOL

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Abstract

Throughout the country, schools are using new teacher evaluation systems as a tool for professional development with the goal of improving teaching quality and students' outcomes. However, not all teacher evaluation rubrics specifically address or encourage evidence-based practices for special education teachers, and many principals report that they are unsure how to evaluate special education teachers. This article provides an overview of teacher evaluation and special education teacher evaluation, and presents a strategy, based on existing research on effective teacher coaching and performance feedback, goal setting, and self-monitoring, to assist special educators in leveraging the evaluation process as a professional development opportunity.

Improving Practice in Special Education: The Evaluation Process as a Development Tool

Recent federal educational policies (e.g., Race to the Top, No Child Left Behind waivers) incentivized the development and adoption of new teacher evaluation systems focused on teacher development and student outcomes. Previous generations of teacher evaluation that were often perfunctory in nature and did not focus on professional development (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009). In contrast, the newest iteration of teacher evaluations are intended as a tool for identifying effective teachers and improving teaching effectiveness (Papay, 2012). Further, research suggests that teacher evaluation can be used to improve teaching effectiveness (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015; Steinberg & Sartain, 2015; Taylor & Tyler, 2013).

Teacher evaluation serves as a professional development tool by helping teachers learn new skills or by increasing teacher awareness of desired instructional practices (Taylor & Tyler, 2013). Observation rubrics, specifically, are a key component of evaluation frameworks and most states and large districts have adopted evaluation systems that rely on direct observation of teaching (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015; Steinberg & Sartain, 2015).

These observations serve to (a) provide feedback to teachers, (b) incorporate a collaborative process between teachers and administrators for developing professional development plans, and (c) help guide teachers to set aligned professional learning goals (Holdeheide, Goe, Croft, & Reschly, 2010; Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). These evaluation systems provide a framework for helping teachers improve instruction and, in turn, improve student outcomes.

However, challenges exist for evaluating special educators with current evaluation systems. For example, observation rubrics may not be particularly helpful to special educators who teach across multiple settings, may not capture instructional strategies that are tailored to individual students, and may not include explicit language regarding how to use effective practices (Gilmour, Majeika, Sheafffer, & Wehby, 2019; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014; Jones & Brownell, 2014; Jones, Buzick, & Turkan, 2014). Moreover, a lack of evaluator expertise in special education practices may further complicate the evaluation process (Lawson & Cruz, 2018a; Lawson & Cruz, 2018b). Further, not all states and districts provide guidance to schools on evaluating special education teachers, and the guidance they do provide does not usually focus on special education teacher instruction (Jones & Gilmour, 2019). As a result, existing evaluation rubrics provide limited support to special educators using the evaluation process as a tool to improve their practice.

Recently adopted teacher evaluations do, however, provide greater opportunities for teacher input and collaboration between administrators and teachers than the previous generation of evaluation systems (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017; Papay, 2015; Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). Teacher evaluations are linked to professional development opportunities, often in the form of teachers setting personal learning goals as part of the formal the evaluation system. For example, 83% of states and 74% of the 25 largest districts include policies that require the use of professional development plans for teachers (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). An earlier survey of special education administrators found that 62% of administrators stated that professional development plans were used when evaluating teachers (Holdheide et al., 2010). The requirement for linking professional development to evaluation, and the incorporation of teacher professional development goals, presents a unique opportunity for special educators to collaborate with their administrators to develop a personalized learning plan within existing evaluation systems.

Some evidence suggests that administrators already recognize the need for individualization in the evaluation process for special educators (Holdheide et al., 2010). Nearly 56% of state and district administrators surveyed by Holdheide and her colleagues reported that they modified classroom observation rubrics when evaluating special education teachers, even if this modification was not explicitly sanctioned. Additionally, 22 states provide information to evaluators about accounting for the unique needs of special education teachers in evaluation systems typically designed for general educators (Jones & Gilmour, 2019). However, states provide little or insufficient guidance to teachers and administrators for creating individualized professional development plans within evaluation systems.

Researchers are currently developing evaluation rubrics that aim to specifically capture effective teaching practices in special education (Johnson, Zheng, Crawford, & Moylan, 2019; Jones, Brownell, & Bell, 2015). Until these tools are validated and adopted, special education teachers must work within the confines of existing evaluation systems. This paper begins by outlining the existing research regarding coaching and performance feedback, goal setting, and self-monitoring that together provide a framework for supporting evaluation's goal of improving teaching effectiveness. These bodies of research help to delineate a plan to assist special educators in the use of the evaluation process as a collaborative professional development opportunity by incorporating evidence-based practices in special education into professional goals within mandated evaluation systems.

Coaching and Performance Feedback

Coaching is an integral part of how the evaluation process can result in changes to teachers' instruction (Papay, 2015). In the research literature, coaching is defined as ongoing, targeted feedback to teachers following observation (Collins, Cook, Sweigart, & Evanovich, 2018; Stormont, Reinke, Newcomer, Marchese, & Lewis, 2015). Coaching may improve classroom outcomes for both special education teachers and students with disabilities (SWDs; Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010), supporting this element of the evaluation process for special education teachers. Researchers have also studied the use of performance feedback to change teachers' practice (e.g., Dufrene, Lestremau, & Zoder-Martell, 2014). Performance feedback is often incorporated into teacher coaching but typically focuses more narrowly on providing teachers with feedback on their implementation of a specific intervention or evidence-based practice (Fallon, Collier-Meek, Maggin, Sanetti, & Johnson, 2015). Feedback sessions usually include a discussion of data often presented in graphs (e.g., the components of the intervention that the teacher completed successfully), and a discussion of methods for changing implementation in the future (Fallon et al., 2015). Coaching forms the basis for feedback from evaluation. However, the more specific use of performance feedback presents a research-based practice that special educators can use to support their professional development goals and plans.

Research supports the use of coaching and performance feedback to improve teachers' use of behavior specific praise (Dufrene et al., 2014; Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000), teachers' use of intensive behavior interventions (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, & Stecker, 1990), and teachers' adherence to functional analysis procedures (McKenney, Waldron, & Conroy, 2013). Research suggests that coaching can lead to changes in teacher behavior that then facilitate improvements in SWDs' on-task behavior and decreases in their disruptive behavior (Myers, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2011; Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, & Merrell, 2008; Stormont, Smith, & Lewis, 2007; Sutherland et al., 2000). Though much of this work has focused on improving teachers' use of classroom management practices or behavioral interventions, additional research finds that performance feedback can improve teachers' implementation of math and reading interventions yielding subsequent improvements to students' academic outcomes

(Duhon, Mesmer, Gregerson, & Witt, 2009; Gilbertson, Witt, Singletary, & VanDerHeyden, 2007; Mortenson & Witt, 1998).

Goal-Setting

Goal-setting is the process through which an individual has a noted level of achievement to obtain (see Bruhn, McDaniel, & Fernando, 2016 for a review). Goal-setting is frequently incorporated into teacher evaluation systems within a professional development plan (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). A broad literature that has examined goal-setting, not as part of coaching or performance feedback, suggests that individuals perform better when they have specific, achievable goals in mind (Locke et al., 1981). However, goal-setting is often a component of teacher coaching and performance feedback (Dudek, Reddy, Lewka, Hua, & Fabiano, 2018; Fallon et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2000). For example, Sutherland and his colleagues (2000) worked with teachers to set achievable goals for using behavior specific praise. In another example, Fabiano, Reddy, and Dudek (2018) used visual performance feedback to help general education teachers set goals to improve their classroom management practices.

Self-Monitoring

Coaching and performance feedback may also incorporate self-monitoring, suggesting the potential of using self-monitoring within the professional development plans developed during an evaluation cycle. The process of self-monitoring involves (a) choosing an area in need of improvement, (b) tracking implementation of a certain intervention or classroom practice, and (c) monitoring data (Nelson, Oliver, Hebert, & Bohaty, 2015). Self-monitoring of teacher behavior has been successfully used to improve teachers' praise rates (Kalis, Vannest, & Parker, 2007; Simonsen, MacSuga, Fallon, & Sugai, 2013), implement behavior intervention plans (Mouzakitis, Codding, & Tryon, 2015; Pelletier, McNamara, Braga- Kenyon, & Ahearn, 2010), and implement academic interventions (Allinder, Bolling, Oats, & Gagnon, 2000).

Framework for Supporting Teacher Development through Evaluation

Current teacher evaluation systems include classroom observations, conferences, and goal setting or the development of professional development plans (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). Thus these systems provide an opportunity for coaching and performance feedback and special education teachers can use evaluation systems as an opportunity to improve their practice. Based on research, the process presented in this paper aims to assist special education teachers with improving their practice by choosing an area to target, collecting data, and soliciting explicit feedback from an evaluator.

See Figure 1 for an Educator Worksheet that can serve as a planning template for the framework. Special educators should use the professional development planning or

goal development sheets that may be a part of their evaluation system. This Educator Worksheet is intended to supplement not supplant and may not be necessary if a system already includes a planning form.

Step 1: Make a list of practices to improve.

The special educator begins by reflecting on current practices and generating a list of practices or areas to improve. If prior evaluations are available, the special educator should review the scores received from classroom observations or comments from an evaluator. The practices identified should be relevant to the students and settings in which the special educator currently teaches. Examples include increasing opportunities for students to respond, incorporating more opportunities for fluency practice, using more behavior specific praise, or implementing a group contingency. For additional resources on evidence-based practices for special educators to implement, special educators can consult What Works Clearinghouse (https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/), National Center for Intensive Intervention (https://intensiveintervention.org), or the Council for Exceptional Children's High Leverage Practices (McLesky et al., 2017)

Step 2: Choose one observable area aligned with the observation rubric.

Next, equipped with the list, the special educator chooses *one* practice to improve. By narrowing the focus, the special educator clearly defines one specific area to target for improvement. When thinking about which area to choose, the special educator aligns their choice with the teacher evaluation rubric by choosing a standard from the rubric and a corresponding or aligned practice. For example, Danielson's Framework for Teaching (1996) rubric includes a standard for "Managing Student Behavior." The choice of implementing planned ignoring of problem behavior paired with behavior specific praise for appropriate behavior would align with this standard on the rubric. This step aligns with research on evaluation implementation; many principals report selecting a single rubric component or indicator to focus on when evaluating teachers or developing improvement plans (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016, 2017).

Step 3: Develop an action plan.

After the special educator chooses an area of focus, the next step is to develop a written action plan to present to the evaluator. The plan should include (a) the observable teacher behavior, (b) the goal for how the teacher practice will improve, (c) how progress will be measured, and (d) related student outcomes. Teachers in the majority of districts that require professional development plans or goals as part of their teacher evaluation systems should use any district or state provided templates. See Figure 1 for a supplementary Educator Worksheet that may be used as a template in addition to tools already included in an evaluation system. Special educators may also benefit from asking a fellow teacher or para-professional to observe some lessons and take baseline data. This will allow for a plan with actionable steps and data-based goals.

Observable teacher behaviors include the actions that are associated with the targeted practice to improve. For example, when implementing differential reinforcement, teacher actions include behavior specific praise for appropriate behavior paired with planned ignoring of problem behavior. An example of a goal would be to increase the behavior specific praise to reprimand/redirect ratio. To measure progress of improved teacher practices, the special educator may ask the evaluator to tally the number of behavior specific praise statements and the number of reprimands/redirects provided to students. Finally, an example of related student outcomes may be a reduction in problem behavior and increase in prosocial behavior.

Step 4: Set up a pre-observation conference.

Once a clearly outlined plan is completed, the special educator schedules a pre-observation conference with their evaluator. If a pre-observation conference is not already scheduled by the evaluator, it is recommended that the special educator schedules one prior to the formal observation. These pre-observation conferences are required as part of the evaluation systems used in more than 50% of states and 50% of the largest districts (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). The pre-observation conference provides an opportunity for the educator to clearly state their professional goals, to communicate about specific areas for feedback, and to review and receive feedback on their professional development plan. As suggested by the research on performance feedback, it may be beneficial to come prepared with data collection sheets to further guide the evaluator's feedback and look-fors during the observation (Collins et al., 2018). This is especially important if the actions are more specific than those included in the classroom observation rubric. For example, if the special educator is asking for feedback on rates of behavior specific praise and reprimands/redirects, she may choose to provide the evaluator with a tally sheet for recording the frequency of those behaviors.

Step 5: Track progress.

Even though the special educator has provided the evaluator with the plan, observations may be more infrequent than the coaching and performance feedback literature recommends. Tracking progress is an important development tool even when an administrator is unavailable for providing frequent feedback. The special educator can track progress on the goal by collecting data with the assistance of a colleague, para-professional, or using self-monitoring. This can be accomplished by using tape recordings, a self-monitoring checklist, a simple rating scale to note how well the plan is used, or video self-monitoring (Hager, 2018). Aside from collecting data, the special educator's school may already collect useful data (e.g., curriculum-based measures, absences, office referrals, timeouts, or points earned through a token system). In sum, the special educator finds a feasible way to collect data to monitor progress toward meeting the goal, graphs data to track progress, and makes changes when necessary. For example, a special educator could use a tally sheet record the number of behavior specific praise statements and the number of reprimands/redirects provided to students and then graph these data weekly.

Step 6: Elicit feedback.

After the observation or period of self-collected data, the special educator solicits specific feedback from the evaluator on how the plan was implemented. During this post-observation conference, the special educator shares the graphed data with the evaluator, describes successes, and collaborates with the evaluator to plan a path forward. This is an integral component of most evaluation cycles. For example, if the special educator did not meet her goal, perhaps the special educator will continue to work on the targeted area (i.e., increasing the praise to reprimand ratio). If the special educator did meet her goal, perhaps she will incorporate an additional area to improve based on evaluator feedback and begin the process again.

Conclusion

States and districts have adopted teacher evaluation systems that aim to improve teaching effectiveness through an iterative professional development process. However, questions remain regarding the extent to which these systems support special education teachers. This article provided an overview of research that suggests the evaluation process could be helpful for supporting special education teachers and presents a framework for incorporating these lines of research (i.e. performance feedback, goal-setting, and self-monitoring) into the professional development plans and goals required of many evaluation systems. This article does not, however, test the effectiveness of this framework, though prior research on general education teacher evaluation suggests that teachers' instruction improves when the components presented here are in place (Taylor & Tyler, 2013).

Teacher evaluations hold great promise for improving teaching effectiveness, particularly when the process is collaborative and focused on professional development. Most evaluation systems are designed as development opportunities (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016) and most principals view evaluations as focused on professional development (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). Unfortunately, a limitation of using evaluation for development is that much relies on the capacity of the school administrator and the relationship between the teacher and their school leader. When special education teachers do not have access to a supportive administrator, the evaluation process may not result in a development opportunity. In these situations, special educators can rely on self-monitoring or peer coaching to still obtain feedback on their professional goals (for a practitioner guide on self-monitoring see Hager, 2018; for a practitioner guide on peer coaching see Collins et al., 2018). Special education teachers may need to request support from school or district special education administrators who may be more familiar with their instructional needs and the needs of SWDs.

Districts and states are investing in teacher evaluation systems as a tool for improving teachers' instruction, but evaluation rubrics may not align to the needs of special educators (Jones & Brownell, 2014; Jones & Gilmour, 2019). Luckily, a rich body of research in special education suggests that teachers can improve their practice through

coaching and performance feedback, goal setting, and self-monitoring, all tools that special educators can incorporate into the evaluation process.

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Framework for Development: Educator Worksheet

Educator:

Evaluator:

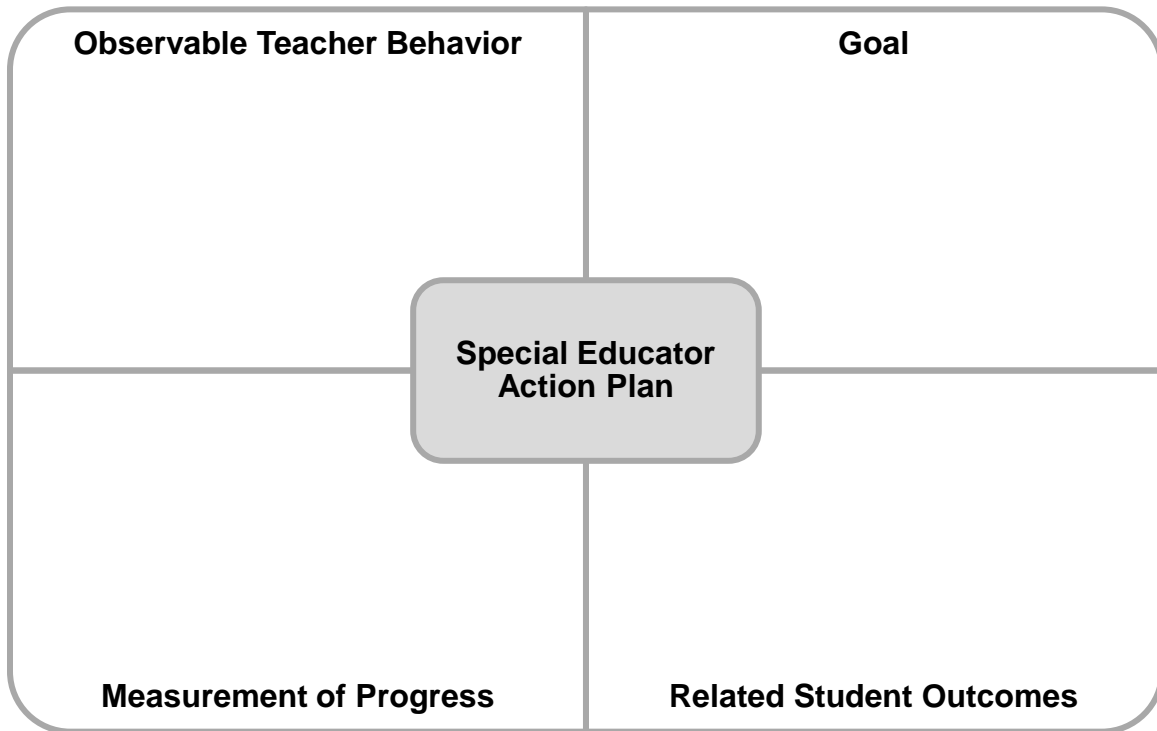**Step 1: Make a list of practices to improve.**

Practices to Improve
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Step 2: Choose one observable area aligned with the observation rubric.

Selected Practice	➡	

Corresponding Standard	➡	

Step 3: Develop a plan.

Observable Teacher Behavior	Goal
Special Educator Action Plan	
Measurement of Progress	Related Student Outcomes

Step 4: Set up a pre-observation conference.

Pre-Observation Conference	
Date	Time
Meeting Notes	Materials Provided

Step 5: Track progress.

> **Data Collection Plan**

Step 6: Elicit feedback.

> **Post-Observation Conference**

> **Date**

> **Time**
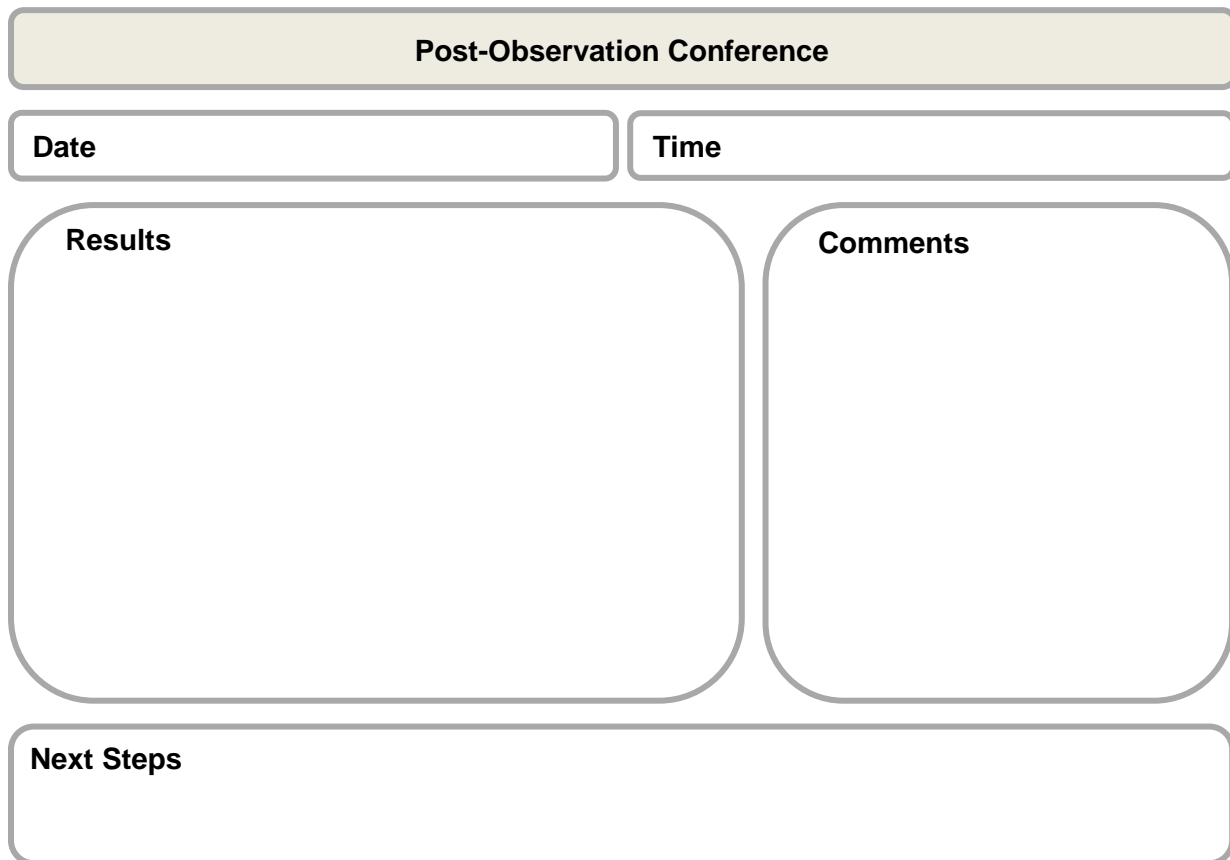
> **Results**

> **Comments**

> **Next Steps**

Figure 1. Educator Worksheet template for creating an aligned professional development plan.