ABSTRACT

PURVIS, TRACY THOMAS. A Qualitative Case Study of Educational Leaders’ Perceptions of the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance Fusarelli).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe/summarize the perceptions of the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES) for 10 educational leaders in two small rural school districts in eastern North Carolina.

This study was conducted through the problem definition lens. The 10 educational leaders for this study included two elementary principals, two middle school principals, two high school principals, two human resource representatives, and two superintendents.

The findings pinpointed areas of strengths and needs within the tool based on the educational leaders’ perceptions. Overall, the participants perceived the NCEES to be better than its predecessor. While the system was noted to have strengths compared to the previous system, the educational leaders identified changes needed to assist with implementation of the system, such as better training for evaluators and teachers. They also noted that the NCEES tool does not address the components of an effective lesson, and thus does not aptly assess a teacher’s actual instructional abilities. The educational leaders shared specific design elements they would include in their ideal teacher evaluation system. Additionally, they did not perceive the current system as having any impact on teacher retention in their respective districts.

This study provided some insight into what constitutes an effective teacher evaluation system in the eyes of educational leaders. Still, there continues to be a need to address effective teacher evaluation and classroom instruction to see student growth across all districts, whether rural or suburban, in the state of North Carolina.
A Qualitative Case Study of Educational Leaders’ Perceptions of the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System

by
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the loving memory of my grandfather, Francis Louis Thomas, Sr., who I promised on his deathbed that there would be a “Dr.” in the family. This work is also dedicated to my husband and my three sons, each of whom I encourage to pursue their dreams and be the great men they are ordained to be by God.
BIOGRAPHY

Tracy Thomas Purvis is a 46 year-old African-American female who resides in Raleigh, North Carolina. She was born in Bethel, North Carolina, a small town in Pitt County. After her birth, her family moved to Newark, New Jersey, and later relocated to Brooklyn, New York, where she attended school for her primary years. She moved back to North Carolina in the third grade when the family settled in a small town in Martin County called Hamilton, and completed her high school education in the Martin County Public School System. She moved on to attend North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, and graduated in 1993 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Special Education.

Tracy returned to the Martin County Public School System to begin her teaching career. For six years, she taught grades Kindergarten through 12 as a Special Education Resource Teacher. She joined the Wake County Public School System in 1999 as a Special Education Resource Teacher and later became an Instructional Resource Teacher. In 2007, she became the Assistant Principal of Reedy Creek Elementary School in Cary, North Carolina, and worked there for a decade. In October 2017, she began her current position as Principal of Banks Road Elementary School in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Through a cohort initiative between Wake Leadership Academy/Wake County Public School System and North Carolina State University, Tracy has earned a Master in School Administration. She has completed doctoral coursework at North Carolina State University for the Doctorate of Education program through the same cohort initiative.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This entire educational experience would not have been possible if it were not for my Savior, Jesus Christ, and the loving support of my husband, children, and mother—thank you from the depth of my soul.

I would also like to thank each of my committee members for their unwavering guidance and support.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Chapter Introduction

Across the country, teacher qualifications and teacher evaluation systems are interrelated. Teacher evaluation tools have been revised time and again to address and align with changes in the profession as well as the expectations for qualified teachers. Likewise, there have been revisions to the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (NCTEP) to address changes in the teaching profession. As Williams, McKinney, Garland, and Goodwin (2010) wrote:

In 2007, the North Carolina State Board of Education, recognizing these seismic shifts, adopted a new mission statement setting the expectation that every public-school student would graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary education or for work in a global society. Along with the new mission, the board charged the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to develop a new statewide teacher evaluation system. McREL, a nonprofit education research and development organization based in Denver, Colorado, was brought in as a partner in developing, validating, and implementing the new system. (p.16)

Moreover, according to the NCTEP manual, alignment between modern skills and teacher evaluation was needed:

The mission of the North Carolina State Board of Education is that every public-school student will graduate from high school globally competitive for work and postsecondary education and prepared for life in the 21st century. This mission requires a new vision of school leadership and a new set of skills that teachers must use daily in order to help their students learn 21st-century content and master skills they will need when they graduate
from high school and enroll in higher education or enter the workforce or the military.

(NCDPI, 2009, p. 4)

The state of North Carolina’s teaching evaluation instrument was changed from the Teaching Performance Appraisal Instrument – Revised (TPAI-R) to the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES). The North Carolina State Board of Education approved the policy in October 2008, adopting the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers and the NCTEP (NCDPI, 2009). In September 2011, the policy was updated to include abbreviated evaluations for career-status teachers. Created with the help of the education research firm McREL for implementation effective in the 2010-2011 school year, NCTEP was designed to align with modern-day skills needs and teachers’ evolving professional development needs.

The evaluation instruments are based on the Framework for 21st Century Learning and the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards. The instruments are designed to promote effective leadership, quality teaching, and student learning while enhancing professional practice and, ideally, leading to improved instruction. All of the instruments and processes are designed to encourage professional growth, to be flexible and fair to the persons being evaluated, and to serve as the foundation for the establishment of professional goals and identification of professional development needs. The intended purpose of the NCTEP is to assess a teacher’s performance in relation to the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards and to design a plan for professional growth. (NCDPI, 2009, p. 4)

The NCTEP mandates that the school principal or a designee should perform the evaluation while “the teacher actively participates using self-assessment, reflection, presentation of artifacts, and classroom demonstration(s)” (NCDPI, 2009, p. 4). The NCTEP indicates that teachers are evaluated on six standards at the end of the year, which include:
• Standard I: Teachers demonstrate leadership
• Standard II: Teachers establish a respectful environment for a diverse population
• Standard III: Teachers know the content they teach
• Standard IV: Teachers facilitate learning for their students
• Standard V: Teachers reflect on their practice
• Standard VI: Teachers contribute to the academic success of students.

Observations are conducted using the first four NCTEP standards. The yearly summative evaluation completed by school administrators is based on five of the six standards. The sixth standard, issued by the state, is based solely on state testing results (NCDPI, 2009).

Background Information

According to Anderson and Olsen (2006), “Although there is no consensus regarding what actually constitutes ‘quality,’ few would challenge the claim that a quality teaching force tops the list of crucial ingredients for an improved educational system” (p. 359). Indeed, the American public views a qualified teaching force as necessary to provide a quality education for students (Educational Testing Service, 2002). In California, for example, 87% of the state’s residents believe that well-qualified teachers are vital to increasing student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2002). The federal government wants to close the achievement gap between low-income and high-income students and believes that better educated and highly experienced teachers will enable better academic performance by students. However, critics say that the government’s guidelines are bombarded with loopholes that present states with some concerns regarding alignment with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and implementation of its policies (Josey, 2006).
Statement of the Problem

Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) requires that students receive the highest quality of instruction possible (as cited in Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 56). NCLB further mandates that teachers in Title I schools, at a minimum, hold a Bachelor’s degree and certification by the state or pass a state subject-knowledge test. Elementary school teachers must exhibit content competencies in math and reading, while teachers in secondary grades must demonstrate sufficient subject knowledge in the areas they teach (Thomas & Brady, 2005). Additionally, each state is “responsible for developing a highly qualified teaching force, and districts were required to place highly qualified teachers in every classroom by the 2005-2006 school year” (Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 56).

States, however, have reported barriers to complying with this mandate to have highly qualified teachers. Several researchers have noted that states find themselves in a major predicament trying to recruit highly qualified teachers in districts that are not performing well, and which serve large numbers of minority students (Center on Education Policy, 2003; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Watson, 2003). Rural districts also face the same dilemma. Retaining teachers in schools that NCLB deems as needing improvement is very difficult (Sunderman & Kim, 2004). “Administrators pointed out NCLB did not allow necessary time or provide the necessary resources to overcome problems in recruiting, training, and retaining highly qualified teachers by 2005-2006 deadline” (Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 59). Special education, moreover, is at a greater disadvantage. For these reasons, states have requested a revised definition of highly qualified teachers (Thomas & Brady, 2005).
NCLB was amended on March 15, 2004 to address highly qualified teachers’ credentials. Flexibility was given to states to meet NCLB requirements. According to the United States Department of Education (2004), rural teachers who are highly qualified in one subject are given three years to become competent in other subjects, and states must provide professional development and supervision to help them gain proficiency in several areas. Teachers already working in the field had until the 2006-2007 school year to obtain certifications, and new teachers were given three years from their start date. Other stipulations include giving states the latitude to permit science teachers to either demonstrate proficiency in general science or individual subject matter; and enabling states to use single evaluation assessment for teachers to demonstrate content knowledge (NCLB, 2002).

The newest version of the ESEA, called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), was signed into law by President Obama in 2015. He stated, “With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal—that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will” (Obama, 2015, n.p.). The biggest change with the new ESSA law is that teacher evaluation systems are not required to be based on students’ test scores, which differs from the requirements of NCLB. As a result, some states are already in the process of reconsidering their evaluation policies (Sawchuk, 2016). For example, states like South Carolina have reported a hurried delivery of training on their evaluation system to obtain NCLB waivers, causing both administrators and teachers in these states to implement a process in which they were not fully trained. In fact, even the state chief of North Carolina June Atkinson said that “she could envision only minor alterations to her state’s system” (as quoted in Sawchuk, 2016, p.2). This means the NCEES will still be utilized.
in the coming years, and teachers and administrators should therefore continue to familiarize themselves with the system, even though revisions may be possible.

ESSA also does away with the requirement for core academic teachers to be highly qualified. This major change has been met with mixed reactions by educational leaders. Some reported the benefit of the “highly qualified” component in helping establish content tests for elementary teachers, though some educators have concerns that economically disadvantaged and minority students will suffer due to lack of minimum teacher quality standards (Sawchuk, 2016). This affects North Carolina in particular, because a substantial portion of the state’s schools receives Title I funds.

As political pressure and budget restraints continue to plague North Carolina, the need to evaluate teachers continues to increase. Districts are being held to higher-stakes testing accountability, hence the pressure placed on teachers has increased. Teachers’ performance is being questioned, and performance pay, or merit pay, continues to be a hot topic in the media. Clotfelter, Glennie, Ladd, and Vigdor (2008) assert:

Many states face the challenge of hiring and retaining high-quality teachers. Finding such teachers is particularly difficult in the areas of math, science, and special education. The shortage of qualified teachers in these fields poses special challenges for schools serving large numbers of low income and low-performing students. Because many teachers tend to view such schools as less attractive places in which to teach than schools serving more advantaged or higher-performing students, such schools are likely to be in a far weaker position to attract and retain quality teachers in fields in which there are shortages. (p. 63)

The challenges faced by rural, low-wealth districts in attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers, furthermore, may be impacted by the new teacher evaluation instrument since teacher
evaluations have a direct effect on teacher retention. In districts already facing many hard-to-staff positions, the context in which principals tend to work may shape their views of the new evaluation instrument and how they use it. It may also shape how district-level personnel, including superintendents, view the new evaluation instrument. Although the evaluation instrument has changed to address the needs of the twenty-first century, the training on the tool has varied by district. This variation has caused some inconsistencies with implementation between districts and the professional development provided for teachers. Moreover, some subjectivity is inherently involved, since not all principals and evaluators rate the standards the same way.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

This case study evaluated the perceptions of educational leaders regarding the NCEES. It addressed whether principals in two small rural districts in eastern North Carolina perceived they were attaining and retaining effective teachers based on the ratings teachers received on the evaluation instrument. More specifically, its purpose was to describe the perceptions of 10 North Carolina leaders regarding the NCEES and their views on the quality of the teachers in the district. The overarching research question was: What are the perceptions of the educational leaders or key players in two rural counties in eastern North Carolina regarding the NCEES? The investigation sought to gain insight on whether the evaluation system was increasing the quality of teachers in these rural districts based on the perceptions of principals, directors of Human Resources, and superintendents.
**Definition of Terms and Acronyms**

*Highly qualified.* According to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2015 (ESEA), the term is used to describe any state’s public elementary school or secondary school teacher who has:

…obtained full State certification as a teacher (including certification obtained through alternate routes to certification) or passed the State teacher licensing examination, and holds a license to teach in such State, except that when the term is used with respect to any teacher teaching in a public charter school, the term means that the teacher meets the certification or licensing requirements set forth in the State’s public charter school law. (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2006a, p. A-3)

*Education leaders.* The key players in the district’s educational system, specifically, elementary, middle, and high school principals, directors of Human Resources, and superintendents.


*NCDPI.* The acronym abbreviation for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

*NCEES.* The acronym abbreviation for the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System.

*NCTEP.* The acronym abbreviation for the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process, developed by the state Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction in collaboration with McREL.

*RTTT.* The acronym abbreviation for the Race to the Top initiative.

*SBE.* The acronym abbreviation for the State Board of Education.
*Summative evaluations.* The end-of-year assessments of teachers’ alignment with Standard I through Standard V of the NCTEP, conducted by administrators and principals.

**Significance of the Study**

Information about the perceptions of the “highly qualified” component of NCLB and the NCEES is limited in the literature. This study sought to address this dearth of extant research on how the “highly qualified” factor is viewed by educational stakeholders such as principals and other educational leaders. It explored the perceptions of educational leaders in two rural county school districts in eastern North Carolina, which were selected because of proximity as well as the researcher’s personal connection and vested interest in the education of family members who still reside there. Since these professionals are the ones who ultimately oversee or directly implement the conditions of NCLB and the NCEES in our schools, this investigation sought to understand how they view NCLB’s “highly qualified” component and the NCEES.

District-specific factors including low wealth and difficulty attracting and retaining excellent teachers underscore the importance of this study, as does the current state of our nation’s economy as it relates to pay allocations for teachers. The researcher thus sought to learn if the educational leaders in these districts believe that they, with their limited resources, receive the same caliber of highly qualified teachers as other districts. The study furthermore worked to uncover how these principals feel the “highly qualified component” of the new NCEES has impacted students’ academic success, if at all. Additionally, teacher pay in the state of North Carolina points to the significance of this study, as North Carolina currently ranks 35th in the nation for average teacher pay (NEA, 2017).

These factors have considerable impact on the small rural districts examined in this study where, like many other North Carolina districts, the unemployment rate has risen, and new
teachers have been going to other states offering better starting salaries (Clark, 2015). Even more, teachers in North Carolina continue to face loss of possible merit pay, lack of tenure, contract renewal issues, and school report card system changes. Issues like these cause principals in poor rural districts to face greater challenges as they try to recruit and retain teachers. Thus, this study sought to gain insight into these issues by looking at how principals in these districts view the NCEES and the teachers they employ for their students.

**Overview of Research Approach**

A qualitative study approach is appropriate, because the researcher wants to know the perceptions of the educational leaders or key players with regards to their state’s interpretation of “highly qualified” teachers and the NCEES (Merriam, 1998, 1998) since NCLB acted as the catalyst for recent revisions to the NCEES. Participants in this study were the Superintendents and Human Resources Directors of each district, as well as two high school principals, two middle school principals, and two elementary school principals. These educational leaders had experience with both the TPAI-R and the NCEES.

Interviews were conducted by telephone and audio-recorded. They were later transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed for emerging themes. Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent to interview was secured for each participant through telephone calls, emails, and signed consent forms. Ethical issues were addressed through the guidelines of the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for protection of human subjects.

**Statement of Subjectivity**

The researcher’s 24 years of experience in education may have influenced several parts of the current study, from participant selection to interview design and data analysis. Moreover, as an assistant principal at the time of the study who worked in a different district than those
studied, and who has used both the TPAI-R and the NCEES for teacher evaluation, the researcher had to remain mindful of personal bias when conducting this study. Additionally, the researcher had relatives attending school in the districts examined in the study; this presented another area of possible bias that was considered by the researcher during both the interview and analysis portions of the study.

**Chapter Summary/Organization of the Study**

Chapter One has introduced the problem addressed in this study and its background, including an overview of the research design. Chapter Two follows with a review of the literature pertinent to NCLB’s “highly qualified” component and the NCEES as it relates to the perceptions of educational leaders. In Chapter Three, a detailed explanation of the methodology used for the study is shared, including details about site selection, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study. In Chapter Five, these findings are discussed in relation to existing research, situating the study within the extant knowledge base. Recommendations for future research and practice are offered to assist researchers and policymakers with this complex, contentious issue.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Introduction

This literature review serves as a “systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and interpreting the existing body of recorded work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners” (Fink, 1998, p. 3). The current study investigated rural educational leaders’ perceptions of the NCEES and its impact on attaining and retaining qualified teachers. The NCEES is in part aligned with and impacted by policies in the NCLB, and NCLB underwent several amendments prior to becoming policy in education, the most recent of which was its revision of NCLB into ESSA. To be thorough, then, the forthcoming chapter includes a review of literature pertinent to NCLB, ESSA, and the lens through which the component requiring highly qualified teachers is viewed by those in the education field. Key issues in the NCLB policy prior to the 2015 revision are also discussed, as are changes related to teacher appraisal and evaluation.

No Child Left Behind Act

In January of 2002, NCLB was signed into law after Congress revisited the mission and goals of the ESEA (Thomas & Brady, 2005). Its supporters claimed that NCLB represents “unprecedented bipartisan commitment to providing a quality education to all American students, regardless of racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background” (Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 55). The original purpose of the ESEA, which was to help disadvantaged children reach grade-level proficiency and strengthen basic and advanced skills, is reflected in NCLB (Thomas & Brady, 2005). NCLB’s Title I, “Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged,” mandates that all children should have “fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education” (Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 56). NCLB also requires better paraprofessionals
for Title I schools (Wirt & Kirst, 2005), which is similarly intended to provide students with high-quality services, and it has resulted in much stricter requirements in schools today, for teachers as well as students. Of all its policies, though, there is one that has had arguably the most impact: with the intention of improving education, NCLB holds teachers and districts accountable for student performance (Heck, 2004), which has a wide range of implications for teaching.

NCLB has four major objectives or guiding principles: increase states’ and local districts’ level of accountability for student achievement; utilize research-based practices; provide quality instruction; and empower parents with choice options (Thomas & Brady, 2005; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002). With a lofty goal mandating that “all students are expected to reach grade-level proficiency by the 2013-2014 school year” (Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 56), NCLB indicates that districts that fail to comply with its policies may encounter administrative expense reductions, reorganization of schools, staff replacements, and/or state takeovers. NCLB furthermore poses sanctions for low student performance, including reductions in federal funding. Schools receiving Title I funds are expected to show Adequate Yearly Progress on all state achievement measures and recommended uses of federal funds strongly encourage research-based practices and partnerships with institutes of higher learning to improve mathematics and science instruction (Thomas & Brady, 2005).

**Highly Qualified Teachers**

ESEA’s Title II, “Preparing, Training and Recruiting High Quality Teachers and Principals,” requires that students receive the “highest quality of instruction possible” (as quoted in Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 56). Under the NCLB, the United States Department of Education defines a *highly qualified teacher* as one who holds, at the least, “a Bachelor’s degree, full state
certification, as defined by the state,” and who demonstrates “competency, as defined by the state, in each core academic subject he or she teaches” by passing a state subject-knowledge test (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2006a, p. 1). Elementary teachers must exhibit content competencies in math and reading. Teachers in secondary grades must demonstrate subject knowledge in the areas they teach (Thomas & Brady, 2005). States were responsible for “developing a highly qualified teaching force,” while districts were mandated to “place highly qualified teachers in every classroom by the 2005-2006 school year” (Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 56).

States reported barriers to complying with the “highly qualified” mandate, as the time limits set forth by the government left states scrambling to quickly find ways to comply within their current systems. As Thomas and Brady (2005) noted, “Administrators pointed out NCLB did not allow necessary time or provide the necessary resources to overcome problems in recruiting, training, and retaining highly qualified teachers by 2005-2006 deadline” (p. 59). This includes the challenge faced by many states when trying to recruit highly qualified teachers to work in districts that do not perform well and serve large numbers of minority students. Retaining teachers in schools that NCLB deems as needing improvement presents a strenuous task for districts across the United States (Sunderman & Kim, 2004), and schools with large populations of minority students tend to have more teachers who are not highly qualified (Darling-Hammond, 2001). Rural districts face the same problem with even more difficulty due to their geographic location (Center on Education Policy, 2003; Hanushek et al., 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005; Watson, 2003). Notably, special education is also at disadvantage in trying to meet this mandate, due to the limited applicant pool for teachers in this field in most states and the nature of the job requirements for handling students with more challenging needs. Another issue is the variety of subjects that special education teachers can teach, which can pose
a problem for attaining the “highly qualified” status in a single subject. Faced with these obstacles and challenges, states have requested a revised definition of highly qualified teachers (Thomas & Brady, 2005).

NCLB was amended on March 15, 2004 to address highly qualified teachers’ credentials, and flexibility in meeting NCLB requirements was given to states. According to the United States Department of Education (2004), these changes include giving rural teachers who are highly qualified in one subject three years to become competent in other subjects they teach, as well as mandating that states must provide professional development opportunities. These teachers must also be provided with adequate supervision to be proficient in different disciplines. Teachers already teaching had until the 2006-2007 school year to obtain certifications, while those new to the profession were granted three years from their start date to obtain their “highly qualified teacher” status. States can use single evaluation instruments for teachers to demonstrate knowledge of content and are granted permission to have science teachers either show proficiency in general science or individual subject matter.

From a review of the literature pertaining to NCLB and the “highly qualified” provision, the researcher has found a clear history of the intent of NCLB and its requirements. However, the researcher has not found a definition that clearly defines what a highly qualified teacher looks like across different states. Though the federal government had supplied states with a definition, it appears no single definition from the federal government was being used to identify highly qualified teachers.

**Every Student Succeeds Act**

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) was signed by President Obama, a new education law that changed the provisions of the “highly qualified” requirement of NCLB. This
legislation gives states more latitude to determine licensing and evaluation criteria for themselves. It also stipulates that teachers in schools receiving Title I funds only need to meet the licensure requirements set forth by their individual state. Sawchuk (2016) addressed the concerns held by many in the education field:

The NCLB teacher-quality rules were broadly unpopular because of their bureaucratic complexity and because many advocates questioned how much they helped boost teacher quality. Various loopholes in the law exempted teachers-in-training and many veteran teachers from having to fulfill all the requirements. (p. 15)

With ESSA, there are few consequences for failure to comply, and states are not even penalized financially by the federal government for not meeting the goals. Although the “highly qualified” component is no longer mandated under ESSA, it remains an issue of foremost relevance because it is the basis for the changes seen in teacher evaluation systems across the country.

States sought compliance with ESSA’s “highly qualified” component as part of efforts to obtain waivers and Race to the Top (RTTT) federal funding for their districts. According to Laine and Behrstock-Sherratt (2012):

To improve their eligibility to access federal funding, and to simultaneously achieve their school improvement goals, since 2009, 36 states plus Washington, DC and hundreds of school districts have passed teacher evaluation reforms, and 33 states have additionally passed principal evaluation reforms. (p. 3)

In addition to reforms in how teachers and principals are evaluated, states have made changes in their evaluation instruments:

A meaningful, accurate evaluation system achieves a number of important purposes. As in any field, evaluations provide those managing the organization a clearer sense of each
employee’s strengths and weaknesses so that decisions about promotion, professional
development, assignment, and when necessary, dismissal can be made in a more thoughtful
manner. In schools, there is an additional emphasis on the role of evaluations in providing
detailed, constructive feedback to all teachers, including those that are considered generally
effective already, with data that can inform continuous improvement in practice. (Laine &
Behrstock-Sherratt, 2012, p. 3)

Teachers in Title I schools only need to meet their state’s licensure requirements under ESSA
and are not required to pass the same level of scrutiny as they did under NCLB. Also, unlike
NCLB, ESSA has no requirement to notify parents if their children are taught by teachers who
are deemed “not highly qualified.” Advocates for teacher quality worry this will send a negative
message about teachers to parents and the profession and are furthermore concerned about the
impact it may have on minority and economically disadvantaged youth (Sawchuk, 2016).

Evolution of Teacher Appraisal in North Carolina

Federal initiatives continue to have a direct impact on how the business of education is
run. America seeks better public schools, and teacher evaluation is paramount in achieving that
goal. Popham (2013) points to two federal programs aimed at comprehensive reform, the
American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the ESEA Act of 2011 Flexibility
Program. RTTT and the ESEA Flexibility Program called for putting in place measures to
evaluate teachers’ effect on student performance if they wanted to receive funding. Initiatives
like these have contributed to increased attention toward the measures and the means of teacher
evaluation as educators consider the appropriate criteria and instruments for evaluating teachers.

In the 2010-2011 school year, the NCTEP was introduced statewide, with the stated
purpose of assessing teachers against the state’s teaching standards and contributing to teachers’
professional development. The NCTEP is based on five domains, which require that teachers: 1) demonstrate leadership, 2) establish a respectful environment for a diverse population of students, 3) know the content they teach, 4) facilitate learning for their students, and 5) reflect on their practice” (NCDPI, 2009). NCTEP was mandatorily implemented by the North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) during the 2010-2011 school year, in all the public-school systems in the state. All previous evaluation instruments were no longer utilized, including the TPAI-R that had been last revised in 1997. Comparing the NCTEP to its predecessor, the TPAI-R, Breedlove (2011) remarks:

The North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process has kept some elements of the previous teacher evaluation process, but the new policy has also brought about some marked changes. The most obvious change is in the evaluation itself, which was changed to a rubric format that also allows for the use of artifacts and other data in addition to the traditional classroom observation. This new process calls for more involvement by the teacher, including conversations with the evaluator, self-assessment, and a greater emphasis on plans for individual professional growth. These changes began with the adoption of a revised set of standards for teaching and the development of rubric for measuring them. (p. 66)

**Theoretical Framework**

The research shows that the federal definition of a “highly qualified teacher” is open to interpretation, as are the ratings of the NCEES rubric for teachers. For this reason, the current study explored the “highly qualified” provision and the NCEES through the lens of problem definition. The problem, student achievement, is believed to be solvable if teachers are highly qualified. Yet, an inherent problem also exists with the “highly qualified” definition and NCEES
rubric ratings by administrators. No solution has been offered to make sure that the same criterion for the “highly qualified” classification is used consistently by states across the country, and there is no clear interpretation of the NCEES implemented across school districts in North Carolina.

To learn more about this issue and discover the perceptions of educators regarding the NCEES and the “highly qualified component,” this researcher used a multiple-case study to investigate the perceptions of the educational leaders in two districts in two rural counties in eastern North Carolina.

**Problem Definition**

**Defining Problem Definitions**

A *problem definition* is “an expression of dissatisfaction with existing circumstances” (Portz, 1996, p. 372). It should explain the origin or cause of the problem, as well as provide possible remedies to rectify the issue (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994), though these remedies may or may not solve the problem. Cleven and Gutkin (1988) conducted a study on problem definitions using female college education students and children with problem behavior, and their research supported Bergan and Tombari’s (1976) finding that successful problem identification is crucial to the remediation of problem situations. Incorrect labeling of the problem, on the other hand, can lead to incorrect solutions that may worsen the situation.

Since they relate to one’s personal views and include suggested solutions, problem definitions are subjective, not objective. Cobb and Elder (1983) state, “[They] are not simply ‘givens,’ nor are they simply matters of the ‘facts’ of the situation. They are matters of interpretation and social definition” (p. 172). Similarly, Portz (1996) writes that problem definitions relate to “the way people think about and evaluate issues; they involve human
perceptions and interpretations” (p. 372) that may not exist for every person. Dery (1984) agrees, noting that problem definitions are the “product of imposing certain frames of reference on reality” (p. 4). For instance, an individual from a single-parent home may not view the world and its opportunities in the same way as a person from a two-parent home. Likewise, the wealthy, middle class, and poor may have differing views, in large part due to their varied circumstances and life experiences.

Problem Definitions in Federal Education Policy

Due to the public’s varied interpretations of the problems in education, concerns in this area are inconsistent (Elmore, 1990; Henig, 1994). While scientific disciplines, as Toulmin (1972) argued, can be classified by the genealogy of the problems they intend to solve to differentiate between them. For nonscientific disciplines such as education, he notes the “absence of a clearly defined, generally agreed reservoir of disciplinary problems, so that conceptual innovations within them face no consistent critical tests and lack any continuing rational direction” (Toulmin, 1972, p. 380). Portz (1996) points to the competition among problem definitions apparent at all levels of the federal education system. These definitions “play a critical role in placing particular problems on the policy agenda” (Portz, 1996, p. 372), and controversial problems that may sway the political status quo are usually added to the agenda more quickly than others.

Understanding “Highly Qualified” through the Lens of Problem Definition

The “highly qualified” teacher component of NCLB can be viewed through the lens of problem definition. The National Education Association (NEA) (2003) notes the “highly qualified” designation as one problem with the NCLB legislation, writing, “The final law lets states use multiple approaches in measuring a veteran teacher’s content knowledge. The law also
allows either states or local districts to design their own ways to measure paraprofessionals’ academic competence” (p. 24). Keller (2005) concurs, stating, “Many advocates of raising teacher quality say that federal officials have failed to push the law’s teacher-quality agenda sufficiently and left states without the guidance or support they needed to do a better job” (p. S6). According to Michael Poliakoff (2002), president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, the federal government expects states to use the latitude that they have been given to make wise decisions for their individual school districts. To remediate the problem, NEA (2003) recommends that the federal government “close the loopholes and clarify the law” (p. 22).

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) (2002) discusses the findings of two reports on teacher quality that attempted to answer the question, “What is a highly qualified teacher?” Their summary looked at the United States Department of Education’s report that summarized research linking teacher excellence to high student achievement, as well as a report by the Educational Testing Service highlighting respondents who viewed pedagogical skills and social abilities as being of more importance for effective teachers than content knowledge (ASCD, 2002). However, according to Berry, Hoke, and Hirsch (2004), “the discord over how to define and develop ‘highly qualified’ teachers has less to do with research evidence than funding and politics” (p. 688), making reports like these minimally effective in spurring real change.

Gelman, Pullen, and Kauffman (2004) also cite several areas where the NCLB definition of highly qualified teachers “lacks clarity and specificity” (p. 198). There is no federal definition for full state certification. Even more, NCLB includes no federal plan to help states and schools deal with teachers already currently teaching who do not meet “highly qualified” status, a pressing issue facing school administrators. NCLB also mandates that teachers pass a “rigorous”
state test to show they are highly qualified, but how to define this is not specified by NCLB (Gelman et al., 2004). States may interpret these criteria differently, so one state’s requirements for the “highly qualified” status may not necessarily align with the requirements of another state. Alternative teacher programs also vary from state to state (Lackzko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002), causing additional inconsistency.

There are other problems with NCLB’s clarity and consistency. Under NCLB, states define the grades for elementary and middle school, and they may also determine what level of competency is appropriate for an individual teacher. Rural teachers who usually teach multiple subjects due to hiring shortages, as well as science teachers who instruct in more than one scientific field, were not addressed in the revised language of NCLB. Some states therefore have different guidelines for these teachers. Further revisions to the policy were needed to address these oversights and allow additional time for rural and science teachers to become highly qualified in multiple subjects. High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE), is a state’s means of documenting content expertise for individual teachers who are not new to the profession. According to HOUSSE, years of experience, expertise, and professional growth are required for a teacher to be considered highly qualified. States can create their own HOUSSE procedures (Reese, 2004), and North Carolina’s Revised State Plan for Highly Qualified Teachers includes the use of HOUSSE evaluations for establishing that a current teacher is “highly qualified” as required by NCLB (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2006b). For areas where it is difficult or impossible to align with NCLB, especially considering the vagueness of some of its criteria, the United States Department of Education (2016) grants NCLB waivers to states that:

…request flexibility regarding specific requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001
(NCLB) in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive State-developed plans designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction. (n.p.)

With the passing of ESSA, many states are now revisiting their evaluation systems to determine whether they need to make revisions or keep current methods in place.

Another problem with the highly qualified teacher is cited by Darling-Hammond (2004), who notes a direct correlation between the problem of a school’s underqualified teachers and the socioeconomic status and achievement of its students. In other words, the more students in poverty a school has, the greater the number of emergency credentialed teachers needed there. Supporting this correlation, Sanders and Horn (1998) reference the longitudinal data from the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, which show the cumulative effects of teachers on student achievement. These data point to decreased achievement in students who are instructed by less qualified teachers, providing substantial evidence suggesting that future effective teachers will be able to undo the harm wrought by ineffective teachers. Thus, it seems improbable that all teachers in the United States will be “highly qualified” by equivalent standards, as NCLB is not specific enough in its expectations and definitions surrounding this component (McNergney & Imig, 2003).

**Chapter Summary**

The ESSA’s mandate of highly qualified teachers was the federal government’s solution to the nation’s student achievement problem. While more qualified teachers may be part of the solution to improve student performance, its definition of “highly qualified” is unclear and leaves much up to states to determine, thus failing to ensure that students across the country have equally highly qualified teachers. The definition of “highly qualified,” or lack thereof, has hence
created more problems than it solved, especially in rural school districts and in the field of special education. According to Sawchuk (2016), “With the signing of the ESSA into law, an era of significant federal involvement in teacher licensing and evaluation has come to an end” (p. 1). Regional teacher shortages continue to be a concern across the country, causing educational groups to not only be concerned about student academic performance, but also who will teach the students and help them achieve.

Chapter Three follows with a detailed review of the methodology utilized for the study, including details about site selection and sample, data collection, and data analysis.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Introduction

The review of the literature in Chapter Two revealed that states are free to interpret the definition of “highly qualified” teachers in the way that works best for their state. Individual states have the additional liberty to create teacher evaluation systems and can set the criteria for the teacher evaluation process. States define full-state certification and demonstrated competency based on components they select (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2006a). This results in marked differences between states’ teacher evaluation processes, even those located near one another. Such differences put considerable strain on teacher recruitment efforts for low-performing schools with high numbers of minority students, particularly in rural districts (Center on Education Policy, 2003; Hanushek et al., 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005; Watson, 2003). The intention of the current research was to learn the perceptions of those who have critical roles in fulfilling federal mandates as well as maintaining the teacher evaluation process. Information gleaned from these educational leaders provided the researcher with insight on how the ESSA is perceived, knowledge of how it impacts the NCTEP for recruiting and retaining teachers, and insight into the way administrators in rural districts perceive the NCEES.

Qualitative Case Study

Case study research studies an issue through one or more cases. The case or “object” might be an event, a process, a program, or several people (Stake, 1995). In the current study, the researcher used qualitative case study methodology to discover how educational leaders in rural eastern North Carolina perceived the NCEES. Interviews, document reviews, physical artifacts, and observations allowed the researcher to develop a rich, thick description of the cases (Bogdan
& Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2007). This approach was appropriate for the current study in the field of education for several reasons.

Historically, different disciplines have employed case study research, including the fields of psychology, medicine, and political science, but it is especially popular among social scientists. The origin of the case study can be traced back to the 1920s through anthropology and sociology (Hamel, DuFour, & Fortin, 1993). Stake (1995) established a set of procedures for case study research still used today. Merriam (1998) suggests that the field of education should apply a qualitative case study approach in research, but after examining descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory qualitative case studies, Yin (2003) contends that both qualitative and quantitative approaches to case study research have benefits.

There are two major types of case designs: single-case and multiple-case (Yin, 2003). The first is “analogous to a single experiment, and many of the same conditions that justify a single experiment also justify a single-case study” (Yin, 2003, p. 39). In a multiple case study, the case(s) are examined over time through detailed, in-depth data collection from various sources of information, and data are reported in a case description and via organized under case-based themes. These data collection tools can include observations, interviews, audiovisual materials, documents, and reports (Creswell, 2007). Interestingly, as he considers these research designs to be variations of the same methodological framework, Yin (2003) makes no broad distinction between the so-called classic case study (also known as the single-case study) and multiple-case studies.

Stake (2005) views case study research as a choice of what to study in an investigation rather than a methodology of how to study a phenomenon. Other researchers, however, including Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Merriam (1998), and Yin (2003), contend that case studies involve
an approach to strategic inquiry, a structured methodology, and a comprehensive research strategy. Because it began with a wide focus that narrowed as the researcher identified the subjects, materials, topics, questions, and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), a funnel is the best visual representation for a case study like the current investigation.

Choosing between a single and a multiple-case study was part of this research design, as both frameworks are included under the case study method (Yin, 2003). The cases or objects investigated by the current study were the state’s educational leaders and the NCTEP facilitated by the NCEES. To aid this research, Stake (2006) provides a step-by-step approach and rich descriptions for conducting multiple case studies that occur within a bounded system in which the boundaries of the setting and context, such as time and place, are maintained (Creswell, 2007). In performing this process, the researcher examined the cases at hand closely, and recorded the data collected in detail (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) before analyzing it for emergent themes.

**Appropriateness of the Research Approach**

This study was best suited for a qualitative case study approach, as the researcher sought to understand “in considerable detail, how people such as teachers, principals, and students think, and how they came to develop the perspectives they hold” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 3). In this study, the researcher explored educational leaders’ perceptions of the NCLB’s previous mandate of highly qualified teachers, the ESSA, and the NCTEP that includes the NCEES.

Qualitative research includes detailed data collected from the participants, which is supplemented with additional data sources, such as documents and memos. Discovering people’s true perceptions requires that an ample amount of time is spent with participants, usually through face-to-face opportunities like focus groups or via telephone, simulcast, email, or other avenues.
In line with this, the current qualitative study included telephone interviews with participants to collect their detailed views, as well as district and state data reviews.

Qualitative research is also open-ended in nature, as it allows participants to provide their viewpoint by responding to questions using their own frame of reference. In other words, participants in qualitative research can express themselves freely without being limited to certain responses or answer choices. Likewise, the researcher wanted this qualitative study’s participants to speak freely and honestly. Small sample sizes are utilized in qualitative studies to allow the researcher to obtain a large amount of detail from each participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), and collecting this from larger samples would require a lot of time. Direct quotes and pictures are used to illustrate the findings and describe results in as much detail as possible, making the written word “very important in the qualitative approach, both in recording data and disseminating the findings” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 5).

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), there are five major features of qualitative research: it is naturalistic, descriptive, concerned with process, inductive, and interested with meaning. Qualitative researchers are more concerned with the process than the outcome, as they seek to know how meaning is defined for their participants (Creswell, 1994; Merriam, 1988). Since the qualitative researcher is working to allow a theory to naturally emerge from the data rather than trying to prove or disprove a preestablished belief; data are analyzed inductively. Qualitative researchers also seek to find the meaning behind people’s perceptions, wanting to understand what their subjects think about a specific topic or event. They “set up strategies and procedures to enable them to consider experiences from the informants’ perspectives” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 7). Thus, the more research a qualitative investigator does, the more they learn.
Creswell (2007) suggests some other features of qualitative research. In addition to those already mentioned, he maintains that the qualitative researcher is the key instrument of his/her study, and names characteristics including the use of multiple data sources, a theoretical lens, interpretive inquiry, and holistic account. That is, the researcher interprets what they see, hear, and understand from the participants, and does not rely on one single method of data collection. Results are then viewed through a theoretical lens that helps the researcher organize the study and its findings into themes. To achieve a holistic account, the researcher creates a complex picture of the findings using multiple perspectives and the thematic factors that emerge.

**Research Question**

Following is the overarching research question that guided the investigation in the current study was:

1. What are the perceptions of the educational leaders or key players in two rural counties in eastern North Carolina regarding the NCEES?

This question was answered through conducting telephone interviews intended to assess the views of principals, human resource representatives, and superintendents of the NCEES; the training they received on it; and any feedback or suggestions they may have to improve it. Appendix A includes the specific questions asked to participants as part of this study’s structured interview protocol.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study relied on a single-case study as the major component of its theoretical framework (Yin, 2003). The research focused on problem definitions of highly qualified teachers and the NCEES from the perspectives of 10 educational leaders from two rural school districts in eastern North Carolina. Moreover, the current research was an instrumental collective-case
study, because it focused on a specific issue, the perceptions of the NCEES by educational leaders, rather than addressing a case. This was also a multi-site case study because it took place in two districts in a similar geographic location in eastern North Carolina (Creswell, 2007). Replication logic makes the case more robust and worthy of continued investigation or interpretation (Yin, 2003). The researcher sought to follow this logic to add to our understanding of the NCEES.

**Site Selection and Sample**

Two districts in rural, eastern North Carolina were chosen as sites for the current study because the state issued a plan to the federal government addressing the “highly qualified component.” However, North Carolina’s plan failed in certain areas. This piqued the researcher’s interest because North Carolina has generally complied with federal mandates. The two school districts selected were also useful to the researcher since they have more limited resources than districts in high-wealth areas, and findings may illuminate how the “highly qualified component” is affected by a school’s socioeconomic status. Additionally, major changes in state legislation have occurred that may impact the districts selected for the current investigation, making them ideal for closer study.

In conducting a qualitative study, a general guideline is “not only to study a few sites or individuals but also to collect extensive details about each site or individual studied” (Creswell, 2007, p. 126). North Carolina has 115 districts and 2,397 public and charter schools, with a total enrollment of 1,405,455 students (Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). Thus, the researcher used purposeful sampling to select 10 participants who met the definition of educational leaders established in Chapter One, including superintendents, human resource administrators, and principals at various levels of school organization. These individuals were chosen for their ability
to purposely inform an enhanced understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2007). The researcher retained symmetry between participants from each district where possible, choosing superintendents, human resource directors, one high school principal, one middle school principal, and one elementary principal from each district to participate as subjects of current study. The selected participants were eager to share their perceptions of the NCEES and the resulting challenges they face in hiring and retention because of the “highly qualified” teacher component mandated by federal legislation.

**Data Collection**

The data collection instruments used in this study included interviews, document analysis, and archival data. Documents were accessed and reviewed via public record, such as websites. These public documents included the districts’ report cards, school district website data, and teacher demographic data. The documents were easily collected and reviewed by the researcher to aid in district selection.

Having gathered names of some selected districts from the documentation review, the researcher needed to then identify and access individuals from these districts for participation in the study. To gain access to individuals to participate in a study, the researcher had to use the gatekeepers (Creswell, 2007). The researcher therefore gathered names of viable participant candidates by contacting the Human Resources department for each district. Additionally, the districts’ Human Resources departments provided the researcher with specific direction on the necessary steps to gain district approval for the study.

Through telephone calls and emails, the researcher solicited the participants and obtained explicit permission to interview them. The IRB was discussed during these conversations prior to participant agreement or non-agreement, as was the anonymity of the participants that would be
maintained throughout the study; emphasizing the protection of the participants’ identities was a critical component. Due to the participants’ varied and busy schedules, face-to-face interviews in their natural settings were not possible. Thus, the researcher interviewed each of the 10 participants via telephone, which was also a good option due to distance. The telephone interviews allowed subjects to share openly with the researcher, because they were in a comfortable environment of their choosing while they shared their views.

Most of the participants have political ties because of their roles in the districts, so the researcher presented via telephone in such a way that was not threatening to them. Interviews lasted between 15 to 45 minutes, and were audio recorded using an Apple application and audiocassettes. Appendix A includes the interview protocol and specific questions asked of participants.

Data Analysis

Due to the number of participants in the study, the researcher had a large amount of data to store and analyze. Interview transcriptions were the primary data sources. These interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher hired an assistant as the job was too massive for the researcher to finish alone. The secondary data sources were the documents, and archival data from websites. This triangulated the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The researcher conducted a holistic analysis of the case in its entirety, which allowed for a detailed description of the case. The researcher analyzed the data, stored in a database created by the researcher, for common themes (Creswell, 2007). Yin (2003) suggests looking at each case individually and then analyzing for common themes found in both cases. This analysis is rich in setting (Merriam, 1988). The themes continued to be analyzed until saturation was reached. The results are provided in Chapter Four.
Research Validity and Reliability

Yin (2003) discusses the four tests of quality, the tactics to address them, and where each should take place in the research. The four types are construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. This study utilized three of the tests; construct validity, external validity, and reliability to establish credibility and dependability (Creswell, 2007). Construct validity requires that the researcher have correct operational procedures in place for the study. Multiple data sources satisfied this tactic during the data collection phase. External validity refers to the generalizability of the findings to other cases. The replication logic addressed in the research design of this case study satisfied this test. The reliability test to make sure subsequent researchers could follow the procedures set forth in this study and acquire the same results would be met through the use of a case-study protocol and a case study database developed by the researcher during the data collection phase.

Safeguards against Researcher Bias

Grbich (2007) discusses how researchers’ own lives and experiences influences their research questions, choice of design, and data interpretation. Having worked as an educator for 24 years, including teaching special education for Grades K-12, acting as an instructional resource teacher, and working formerly as an elementary school assistant principal during the study, the researcher acknowledges the potential for bias and subjectivity. This subjectivity was kept in mind throughout the research process, and actions taken to protect against any effect on the study or its results.

As a former assistant principal, the researcher has personally encountered issues with the NCEES. To safeguard against this circumtextual frame of interpreting the immediate situation (Grbich, 2007), a research journal was kept. The researcher furthermore took note of the frames
that dominate her views and used member checks to ensure the perceptions gathered in the study were solely those of the educational leaders.

The researcher listened closely to the individual subjects and their experiences and avoided interjecting examples from her own experiences so as not to influence the subjects’ responses. To this end, the researcher completed professional development to enhance her listening capabilities with techniques including pausing, paraphrasing, and posing questions. These skills aided the researcher in understanding the subjects’ perceptions of the NCEES, while also safeguarding the study to make sure researcher bias did not sway the results.

**Ethical Issues**

As Bogdan and Biklen (2003) maintain, “Nothing is more indicting to a professional than to be charged with unethical practices” (p. 42). These unethical practices include the way the study participants are treated. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) name two specific guidelines to which a researcher must adhere when working with human subjects, ensuring that the study participants have:

1. Voluntary participation with knowledge of nature, dangers, and obligations to the study.
2. Limited exposure to risks as opposed to gains.

The researcher aligned with these guidelines by securing informed consent from participants and putting in place protections to protect them from harm (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2007). Evaluation of a research proposal by Institutional Review Boards (IRB) further works to ensure appropriate informed consent and participant safety measures, so this researcher also gained IRB approval prior to conducting the study.
In addition to participants’ informed consent and safety, performing an ethical study requires consideration of other factors. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) offer seven guidelines a researcher should follow to safeguard against the potential for unethical behavior:

1. Avoid research sites where informants may feel coerced to participate.
2. Honor participants’ privacy.
3. Note that there is a difference in participants’ time commitment when a researcher observes them in public places where they would normally spend time versus when they conduct an interview with the researcher.
4. Unless otherwise agreed to, protect subjects’ identities so that the information collected does not embarrass or harm them.
5. Treat subjects with respect and seek their cooperation in the research.
6. In negotiating permission to do a study, clarify the terms of the agreement and abide by that contract.
7. Tell the truth when writing up and reporting findings.

To ensure the current study was performed ethically and that participants were protected from exposure or harm, the researcher adhered closely to these guidelines.

Limitations of the Study

There were some possible limitations in how the current study was conducted, such as the availability of participants who worked in rural schools to interview. Chance (1993) addressed this, writing, “The burden of compliance and the costs have been and will continue to be felt by the rural/small schools because of their size, isolation, and limited finances to implement required mandates” (p. 26). Similarly, Eady and Zepeda (2007) note the limited availability of rural school administrators, stating, “Because of size, rural and small schools often employ fewer
administrators than their urban and suburban counterparts. Much of the time, a single administrator must adequately supervise staff, evaluate staff, and provide staff development” (p. 6). With less staff support, the rural school administrators in the current study had limited time to participate in the interview, and the researcher had to adjust the interview protocol and length accordingly.

Another possible limitation was the researcher’s personal and professional experiences with and views of the teacher evaluation process, developed while previously working as a teacher in both rural districts being studied, and as an assistant principal at the time of the study. Having worked in rural small districts, the researcher also understands first-hand the challenges faced by these schools’ principals. As such, the researcher was mindful not to lead the participants during the interviews or allow personal beliefs or preconceived notions to influence the data analysis process or findings.

An additional limitation of this research related to the study’s small sample size. The researcher sought to understand administrators’ perceptions, but the sample size was less than 2% of the superintendents and human resource directors in the state of North Carolina, and less than 1% of the state’s principals. Thus, the participants in the current study may not have accurately represented the perceptions held by the state’s educational leaders. Subtle regional differences, moreover, may not have been apparent to the researcher.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter Three has outlined the current empirical study’s research design and methodology. It discusses which research respondents were selected and why and provides the premise for choosing the qualitative case study approach for this research. Descriptions of the data collection and analysis processes are also given. Additionally, issues relating to the validity
and reliability of this research and its findings are highlighted, including safeguards against researcher bias, ethical issues, and possible limitations of the study.

Next, Chapter Four documents the findings of the current study’s investigation of educational leaders’ perceptions of NCEES and the “highly qualified component” of NCLB, followed by Chapter Five’s discussion of the study’s findings and themes that emerged after analyzing and coding the data.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter includes the findings from telephone interviews conducted with 10 educational leaders from two Title I school districts in rural, eastern North Carolina to determine their perspectives on the NCEES. Table 1 below includes an overview of the demographics of the two districts.

Table 1: District Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Alpha County</th>
<th>Omega County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Schools</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Principals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Teachers</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>1,542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Male Teachers</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Female Teachers</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>1,213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Gender Not Reported</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of White Teachers</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>1,245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Black Teachers</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Other Teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td>3,183</td>
<td>23,432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary/Pre-K Schools</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Schools (K-5)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-8 Schools</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Schools (6-8)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Schools (9-12)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early College High School (9-12)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the educational leaders in the current study were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. Six participants were male, and four were female. Two of the participants had less than 10 years of experience in education, four participants had 15-19 years of experience, and four participants had 25-30 years. Table 2 below provides the demographics of the participants.
Table 2: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Thomas</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Elementary School Principal</td>
<td>17 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Johnson</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Elementary School Principal</td>
<td>19 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Locke</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle School Principal</td>
<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Carr</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle School Principal</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Lamont</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High School Principal</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Trenton</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High School Principal</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Wallace</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources</td>
<td>19 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Francis</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Human Resources Director</td>
<td>30 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Vincent</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>28 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Payne</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>27 years</td>
</tr>
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Educational Leaders’ Views on the NCEES

Elementary School Principals

The two elementary school principals who participated in this study were Ms. Thomas and Ms. Johnson, who had 17 and 19 years of experience, respectively. The first question in the interview protocol asked participants about their general views on the NCEES rubric. These elementary school principals, Ms. Thomas and Ms. Johnson, found the rubric easier to use, but also acknowledged that it was time-consuming. In addition, both elementary school principals agreed that the NCEES rubric is more detailed; Ms. Johnson noted that it addressed global aspects that the TPAI-R did not, while Ms. Thomas maintained that it showed teachers the progression they need to follow on the rubric. It should be noted here that, while both elementary
principals had previous experience with the TPAI-R as teachers, neither had experience with it in their capacity as administrators, which may have affected their perceptions.

Both elementary principals reported that they initially received professional development training on the NCEES at the district level, but neither had been provided any additional training. Ms. Thomas stated, “When it first came out electronically, we had school/county-wide staff development for administrators, but we have not had anything since then. You do it and kind of figure it out.” Thus, Ms. Thomas believed experienced teachers understand the tool and rubric, but she did not think beginning teachers had the same advantage. Ms. Johnson, conversely, expressed doubt that any teachers really understand it:

I think that they don’t really understand what it means to be developing versus proficient versus accomplished versus distinguished. I think that instead of really looking at the rubric categories and what are the requirements to meet that category, they tend to look at well, “I’ve been doing this for 15 years and I should be accomplished.”

Training for the teachers on the NCEES rubric is provided at the beginning of the school year, at curriculum meetings for Ms. Thomas and staff meetings for Ms. Johnson. During the training, Ms. Johnson reported that she provided her teachers with a document outlining her expectations related to the different standards of the rubric.

I think this goes back to me, that snapshot piece. If you’re not observing an entire lesson, so if it’s a teacher that’s on a snapshot year, you only have to observe 25 minutes. You sometimes don’t get, you know, you miss those. Well, what was the introduction? What was the essential question, or you come in for that. You miss the well, you know, how did they close the lesson? How did they review? Where was the formative assessment? Where was the summative assessment? Even though the rubric itself looks for those things, I
think…the guidelines behind how we use that tool are not always the most effective. The tool itself is not an issue. I think it’s more the guidelines behind what does it mean to be a teacher that is probationary versus a career teacher versus a teacher that is on the nonrenewal year and they have tenure.

Ms. Johnson, then, suggested the issue was less related to the rubric or the NCEES tool than it was to understand how to use the tool. Principal Thomas also addressed the importance of knowing how to apply the instructional strategies assessed by the rubric to create an effective teaching lesson:

Well, when you look at three and four, three is talking about the planning and preparing for the lesson. Four…it doesn’t…they never specifically address the teaching itself. It talks about, you know, what the common core standard…what research-based instruction strategies were used. Were there advanced organizers? It talks about those kinds of things, and were those things present, but it doesn’t necessarily ask you how they were used. That’s something you have to put in the comments section.

Thus, both elementary school principals in the study recognized a gap in the NCEES rubric that required them to offer additional input to make it more complete.

When asked to describe what they viewed as the strengths of the NCEES instrument, Ms. Thomas noted the instrument being electronic, and felt it was good that teachers received the same evaluation instrument. She stated:

For me, I think that the strengths are that it really…it forces teachers to…if they want to be an accomplished or distinguished teacher, it forces them to truly differentiate instruction in the classroom, both whole group and small group. I think it also…it forces them to, you know, tie their lessons and their instruction to real-world events. Those for me are kind of
big things. That we are making sure we’re differentiating instruction, and that we are looking at the global piece and how to prepare our kids for the next level.

Ms. Thomas, then, felt the instrument should be more user-friendly, and did not like the steps and components for completion. Ms. Johnson maintained that the guidelines for how the rubric is used should be changed:

It asks for things like for participation in PLCs and those things. Those are not things you observe in a lesson. They’re important things, but they’re not part of a lesson. So, I think they should kind of be pulled out of the rubric itself and maybe be a separate component. Maybe a standard seven. Where you look at participation in PLCs and planning and professional development and those things, because you don’t see that during a lesson. And that’s what you’re supposed to be observing, is what you see in the lesson. Those things can’t be seen within a lesson. So, I would make them kind of a separate component.

Clearly, these elementary school principals felt some changes were needed to make the NCEES rubric more effective.

Both elementary principals agreed they would keep some of the same components of the current NCEES if they were to design their ideal teacher evaluation system. Ms. Thomas wanted to make the rubric more “teacher-friendly” and address what she felt was its highly subjective nature:

I think it would have a lot of the same components that NCEES has, except again I keep saying, “It’ll be a little more teacher-friendly, a little easier to read and understand…What does developing look like under Standard IA? What does it look like? What does developing or proficient look like under Standard IA?” I mean…just it being more defined, because as it stands, it’s very subjective. And trying to find something to take some of that
subjectivity out of it…So there aren’t, I guess, as many people who don’t understand why they were marked the way they were marked, which is why I said I have specific things. And I have my own rubric when doing an observation, and why I go in and put certain things under each standard—so they know exactly where they are.

Like Ms. Thomas, Ms. Johnson had some ideas for things she would change, such as a stronger focus on teaching, learning, and differentiating, but overall, she felt the current model was working:

I would probably model it a lot like the current NCEES model. I think it’s important to have a section that specifically looks at teaching and learning. What is the teacher doing? What is the student doing? Are we differentiating? I also think it does need to have the component that looks at what do teachers do outside the classroom, but again, I think that needs to be a separate section. That’s maybe not done during the quote “observation,” but it’s done as an administrator as you participate in PLCs or professional development. It definitely needs to have the global piece in there. We need to continue to look at how are we using technology in the classroom. Not just “I have it in my room,” but, “Are we using it to effectively engage students in learning?” So, mine would probably look a lot like the current model.

Thus, both elementary school principals claimed their own evaluation system would look very similar to the NCEES model.

The elementary school principals were also asked to describe the evaluation practices they use. Ms. Thomas replied that she uses a personal rubric and commented she had found in her experience that teachers did not want to share artifacts. She did not, however, feel this had impacted the caliber of teachers she hired or affected teacher retention in her district:
I personally have a rubric that I go by when filling out the evaluation rubric. So up underneath each standard, there’s certain things that I always address. And so I don’t think it’s changed one way or the other, whether it’s changed one way or the other, whether it’s a BT or somebody who’s been here as long. Aside from the fact that people who have been here longer, have the tendency to want to not necessarily provide artifacts, but talk their way to a higher rating, if that makes sense. They don’t want to…They want to talk about how they think they should be accomplished or distinguished, yeah, that’s the only difference. They are better able to articulate, you know, why they feel like they need to be accomplished or distinguished versus developing or proficient.

Ms. Johnson claimed that, as she understood the tool better, she had changed her process to use the tool more while ensuring that she and her assistant principal were in agreement:

I think for me, just kind of looking at from where I was when I began my administrative career to now, I think I have a much better understanding of the tool itself and what types of evidences that I’m looking for within each standard. I have my assistant principal and I last year (which I’ll have a new one again this year, so I’ll do the same thing), before we did our first round of observations, we actually went in together to complete the rubric. What would we give that teacher? Because I think it helps with the inter-rater reliability. And so that’s something, that is a practice I’ll continue with…Getting a new AP is sitting down and going in together to make sure that we are on the same page and to make sure we are reading the standards the same way.

She also believed the NCEES had an impact on the way she hires new teachers, specifically in that she had tailored the questions asked in interviews based on the rubric components. Ms. Johnson explained:
Our questions in our interview are geared towards things like, “How would you incorporate small group instruction? How do you differentiate instruction? How do you bring in global awareness?” So, just the instrument itself, I think, it gears us in our interviewing questions and then ultimately who we hire, because I look at “Can they answer those questions? Do they understand what that means?”

Regarding hiring practices, Ms. Johnson admitted that the issue of teacher retention in her district affected the scores she gave to teachers:

I think, and again I don’t know if this is necessarily a NCEES issue, it’s more of a state requirement issue, that you know now any teacher that’s rated as “developing” if you are a low-performing school, which we are, in a low-performing district, it requires that they be placed on an action plan. That doesn’t help with teacher retention in our district…You have to rate teachers fairly, and you have to look for the best teachers to teach your children. And that’s sometimes a struggle with that teacher shortage, because you know the type of teacher you want for your children, but if they’re not there? I think sometimes we hold on to teachers that we know maybe are not what’s best for our children, but we know we don’t have anybody to replace them. So sometimes—again I’m very fortunate, I have a fabulous staff—but I know that sometimes we say, “I know if I give them a developing I’m going to lose ‘em. So, do I just give them that proficient because I know at least I have a teacher that I can work with?” They might not be the best, but I think that does happen sometimes, especially in rural counties.

Fear of losing teachers, then, according to Ms. Johnson, had influenced principals’ scoring practices at times, but she seemed to trust in her general instinct for choosing the right candidate.
The elementary school principals had many of the same views on the NCEES rubric, which could in part be attributed to their similar years of experience. Both Ms. Thomas and Ms. Johnson agreed they would keep some of the same components of the current NCEES if they were to design their ideal teacher evaluation system, but each pointed out specific things they would change to make it more “complete” and relevant to what actually happens in the classroom.

Middle School Principals

The middle school principals interviewed in this study were Mr. Locke, with 25 years of experience, and Mr. Carr, who had only eight years in the education field. Just as their years of experience varied widely, these two male principals had markedly different viewpoints about the NCEES.

Both middle school principals received district professional development related to the NCEES tool, yet they held differing perspectives on its value. Mr. Carr shared having participated in workshops to learn more about the artifacts teachers could share to support higher ratings, thus demonstrating his interest in leveraging the tool to its fullest advantage and an appreciation for the learning opportunity. Less eager about his professional development experience, Mr. Locke reported that, after the professional development he received on the tool, it was not even clear to him what the tool was assessing. This left him feeling uncomfortable using it to assess a teacher, for he did not believe the questions aptly captured what a teacher was or was not doing in the classroom. He said there was a need to look deeply into the language of the tool, which he noted observers do not have time to do on-the-fly during an observation.

Regarding the quality of the NCEES instrument, Mr. Locke thought that the NCEES system was “too abstract” compared to the previous evaluation instrument, and argued that reading a completed evaluation provided no insight into what took place during the lesson:
I think actually, in pretty much most of the cases, what we are asked to observe and look for has nothing to do with what is actually going on in the classroom. I don’t think…I think that the questions are too abstract.

Mr. Locke strongly believed that the TPAI-R was a tool that did ask the right questions to identify what happens during the lesson, and voiced his preference for the TPAI-R several times during the interview.

While Mr. Locke felt strongly that the questions on the NCEES rubric failed to adequately assess teaching and learning, Mr. Carr viewed the NCEES as a better tool than the previous TPAI-R instrument, particularly in it being more student-focused than teacher-focused:

Personally, you know, I think it’s a step up from what we currently had. This here actually does have some key standards and indicators asking, “What are the students doing?” and “How are the students learning?” So, it has a lot more of a student focus compared to the previous one that we were using. That was really all teacher focus.

Interestingly, Mr. Carr’s statement here that the NCEES rubric included questions about student activities in class and methods of learning used by the teacher during the observation seems to directly contradict Mr. Locke’s claim that the rubric’s questions have “nothing to do with what is actually going on in the classroom.” Mr. Carr also liked that the NCEES included components related to student learning instead of being focused on the teacher’s actions in the classroom:

I would say definitely it’s better. One of the favorites is Standard 5, element “aim.” You know, that reflection piece. This one here talks more about the teacher facilitating the learning for the students using the data how to recognize or to guide the instruction. The previous one [TPAI-R], it was teacher this, I mean, it was pretty much, “What is the teacher doing?” So, a teacher can go in and put on a show and based off of that they would get high
ratings, but it didn’t necessarily reflect on the…if the kids were actually learning. This one here [NCEES] does have some student learning components in it as compared to the previous one.

However, Mr. Locke did not agree. He asserted that the TPAI-R was better than the NCEES. As evidence, he noted that the NCEES did not take the curriculum into account to help an evaluator determine whether the teacher was meeting the learning objective. Speaking of the NCEES, Mr. Locke stated:

Five elements, and they got wonderful headings, but I fail to see where it allows a Principal and an evaluator to tell what the objective is based on the curriculum and where a teacher is supposed to be headed—or where they’re going, or where they are—and put down the bolts and the nails to this whole lesson to let that person know that’s reading the evaluation, “This man or this lady did a wonderful job.”

Additionally, Mr. Locke felt frustrated by the steps needed to complete the NCEES rubric, and disliked that it failed to account for things teachers do for the students beyond the rubric. He stated, “You never know a teacher’s value to a campus based on an evaluation.” Mr. Locke also noted that use of the NCEES instrument required too many meetings, in his view. He went on to claim that, in certain cases, he felt he needed to observe teachers too often, and lamented that the current process took his attention away from other areas of need for students and staff.

It should be noted here that, while these male principals did not concur entirely, both did seem to place a value on an evaluation tool that truly assesses the teacher’s instructional methods. Mr. Carr did not want a weak evaluation tool that gave teachers the chance to merely “put on a show” without demonstrating that their methods helped students succeed, and,
similarly, Mr. Locke wanted a stronger rubric that not only assessed the teacher’s management of the curriculum, but also what they did for students above-and-beyond the classroom lesson.

Although Mr. Carr was a fan of the NCEES while Mr. Locke was not, both middle school principals agreed that some aspects of the lesson are not always able to be seen during an observation, such as strong student-teacher relationships. In fact, Mr. Locke stated more than once during the interview that the components of a good lesson were missing from the current NCEES rubric. Similarly, Mr. Carr reported that what he saw during the lesson observation and the information the teacher shared with him during the post-observation conference were often conflicting, and had considered whether this should affect the ratings teachers receive.

Regarding whether teachers understand the NCEES, Mr. Carr and Mr. Locke had different views. Mr. Carr believed his teachers understood it, but still recognized that there was room for improvement. He explained that, at the beginning of the school year, his teachers received training to understand the expectations of the observation and procedures. New teachers were given more in-depth training to further prepare them after the initial all-staff training. Mr. Locke, however, did not think teachers understood the NCEES, as he explained:

No, I don’t think they really understand it…The teacher has the objective that they are trying to put forth and drive home. Nowhere in the tool does it ask if that there. Do you have these things? Is it present? Does he/she state exactly what the objectives are for this day? These things you will know when we finish this lesson. Or you will be able to…those things are not present. So it’s a stretch, and we seek to grade teachers for something that is nebulous to me.

Both Mr. Locke and Mr. Carr were able to point out some strengths of the NCEES instrument. Mr. Locke liked that the entire system was electronic, especially its ability to upload
documents and videos to support lessons, and he even mentioned wishing that the TPAI-R was electronic. He also appreciated that any interested parties, such as Human Resources, could access the NCEES system as needed to gather information related to applicants. Notably, in line with his other responses, Mr. Locke did not actually name any specific content or features of the NCEES instrument itself that he liked, and his response was focused mainly on its electronic, easily accessible format. Mr. Carr, however, named several things he especially liked about the NCEES, including the progression of its ratings, its data components, and the additional resources for administrators provided.

Addressing what their evaluation process looked like, Mr. Locke complained that his process had become more about just going through the steps to get through it. He saw the process as time-consuming and ineffective in many cases, maintaining that even the best teachers may not show evidence of each element of the rubric during an observation. The NCEES instrument, in Mr. Locke’s view, failed to ask valuable questions regarding teacher proximity and student engagement, which he noted the TPAI-R did address. Additionally, Mr. Locke expressed his dislike of attaching teacher merit pay to the evaluation system.

Presenting a more approving perspective on the NCEES, Mr. Carr shared that his evaluation process was about looking for best teaching practices. In his view, there should be a positive correlation between the ratings teachers receive and the effectiveness they attain using EVAAS (Educator Value Added Assessment System). He described how he focused his discussions with teachers on effective teaching practices and the benefits of intentional collaboration. Mr. Carr said that he looked for teachers who have demonstrated strengths in applying best teaching practices, as well as teachers who are coachable:
I’m a big believer, I think educators they are doing the best they can with what they know…Maya Angelou said, “When you know better, you do better.” So, if you got that mindset, and you are willing to do something new and to improve, that makes us willing to work with you.

Neither Mr. Locke nor Mr. Carr believed the NCEES had affected teacher retention in their schools. Instead, they both pointed to negative societal and political issues impacting teacher retention, such as requirements set by legislation and the North Carolina State Board of Education.

When asked about changes that they would make to the NCEES, Mr. Locke suggested changes be made to the evaluation instrument to determine overall ratings based on how teachers perform during individual observations. Due to his view that the observation process was time-consuming, he also suggested that a designated administrator was needed to perform teacher evaluations:

You need a principal or an administrator that their only job is to evaluate teachers…that’s all they do…they don’t do discipline …they don’t do schedules…they don’t go to any functions unless they feel like it…Your job is to manage the NCEES, the evaluation tool. To make sure every teacher has all the artifacts and documents uploaded, downloaded, sideloaded, and all the little buttons are clicked. You can keep a running tally so…when it’s time for your summative, you can click a button and there it is.

Mr. Carr and Mr. Locke agreed the NCEES instrument had some vague components which are left to the observer’s interpretation. To this, Mr. Carr suggested the NCEES be revised to increase its clarity:
I would say maybe a little more straightforwardness. For example, “knowledge that diverse cultures impact the world,” and “displays knowledge of diverse cultures, their histories.” I mean that you could be a little bit of anything. So, I mean, trying to get a little more specific on stuff like that.

Concurring with Mr. Carr on the vagueness of some of the NCEES rubric’s questions, Mr. Locke shared:

[They need to] find a way to emulsify, to create, whatever they are asking for. I mean, twenty-first century-level learning pieces. If there are some specific things that they want to see, say what they are and ask if you see them, “Where and in what do you see them?”

Mr. Locke and Mr. Carr both said they would include more snapshots in their ideal teacher evaluation system, though Mr. Locke felt it was needed less frequently. Mr. Locke would like everyone to have at least three or four snapshots a year, but Mr. Carr suggested four unannounced snapshots per semester. Both middle school principals wanted these snapshots to occur regardless of where teachers are in the cycle.

There were other changes suggested by the middle school principals as well. Mr. Carr brought up the benefit of a conversation with a student or students about what they learned in the lesson observed or in prior lessons as an additional component of the evaluation. Mr. Locke suggested adding questions to the evaluation rubric about interdisciplinary components and teacher collaboration. He also wanted the evaluation instrument to address special education and Section 504 students, specifically how far these students need to be moved and if the teacher can help them succeed.

On many questions asked in the interviews, middle school principals Mr. Carr and Mr. Locke disagreed. Perhaps this can be partially correlated with their vastly different amount of
experience in education. Mr. Carr liked the NCEES overall and preferred it to the previous TPAI-R instrument, while Mr. Locke felt the NCEES was lacking in many regards and repeatedly praised the TPAI-R as a better tool. Yet both agreed that the ideal evaluation instrument should focus on what is happening in the classroom, particularly what instructional methods the teacher is using and how the students are responding. Still, both Mr. Carr and Mr. Locke had several suggestions for improving the NCEES, particularly its clarity and effectiveness in providing an apt portrait of a teacher’s performance.

**High School Principals**

The two high school principals interviewed in this study, Mr. Lamont and Mr. Trenton, had 7 years and 15 years of experience, respectively, and had different opinions about the NCEES and the evaluation rubric. Mr. Lamont and Mr. Trenton both received professional development training from the state as well as in-house district training. Mr. Lamont’s district training allowed him to visit different schools to observe and discuss the standards with colleagues. Mr. Trenton shared that principals and assistant principals reviewed classroom clips and determined ratings based on what they saw.

Mr. Lamont thought the current NCEES evaluation rubric was good in addressing the whole teacher as well as leadership in and outside of the building. He maintained that it was better than the previous TPAI-R tool. Mr. Lamont elaborated:

I think it’s better…I think it allows teachers more opportunities to excel. You know, everybody has different strengths and weaknesses, and you have some teachers that you know they are really good at knowing content and providing instruction, but they struggle a bit on relationships, so on that rubric there is a place for everybody.
He also believed that the self-assessment component was useful in allowing teachers to truly rate themselves without it being held against them.

With the opposite view, Mr. Trenton felt the NCEES was too general and broad, and believed it was difficult to give teachers valuable feedback using the tool. With the TPAI-R, he maintained, observers could record and share more information with teachers, while the NCEES simply provided elements to check off without entering evidence. Mr. Trenton shared, “I think that any of the instruments are only going to be as good as the person who is utilizing the information that comes from each one of those instruments.”

Both high school principals did not think teachers understood the NCEES. According to Mr. Lamont, new teachers have a better grasp than older teachers who were used to the TPAI-R. He recalled having to explain to a teacher that the levels on the NCEES were not equated to letter grades, because she saw proficient as meaning a “C” grade, when she wanted to be an “A” teacher. He continued:

Now again, when you haven’t seen but one system and that’s all you know, they understand a little better. But when you compare it to an old system, it’s apples and oranges in my opinion. So, I think a lot of them don’t have a good grasp on what is a high mark and what is not a high mark.

Mr. Lamont shared that when he trains teachers at the beginning of the year and during individual post-observation conferences, he would make sure they understand the ratings are not equated to grades. Mr. Trenton agreed with Mr. Lamont, concurring that teachers have not been trained on the NCEES well enough to understand fully what the elements mean. Mr. Trenton shared:
A lot of that had to do with the administrators not having the proper training to begin with, and it was very hard for the administrators to do professional development on a tool that they are not as knowledgeable as they should be. As we have gone through and as we learned more about those tools, we then have been able to more appropriately give professional development to the teachers, so that they are more aware of what some of these leadership roles look like and what it means to actually be proficient or accomplished or distinguished in different levels.

Mr. Trenton thinks new teachers do better with understanding the NCEES as compared to teachers who came in under another system. He provided teachers with the required training at the beginning of the year and offered deeper training during planning periods to help them understand the standards and the elements. Also, this helped to enable teachers and administrators to have the same understanding of what it means to be proficient.

The high school principals named strengths of the instrument including that it looks across several areas for teachers, acknowledges if rigor and differentiation are being applied, and gives the teacher the opportunity to explain and show how they have met goals. Teachers can also include documents/artifacts to support their work with students and their ratings. Mr. Lamont talked about how the evaluation instrument addressed the components of an effective lesson by using data to differentiate and meet the needs of students. However, in his view, teachers were addressing content but not rigor, and therefore Mr. Lamont did not believe teachers were instructing to the needs of all students:

I think teachers are missing the boat on that. You know, they are teaching to one audience, and they are not differentiating. I think this tool really the way it’s written out it ask that question. You know, first of all, how are you recognizing the differences, and then how are
you driving the instruction? Because you can dig all the data you want, all day long, but if you are not letting it drive how you are going to prepare and extend those kids in your instructional practices, you are doing it for nothing. So, I think it’s better in that regard, basing it on those two principles right there.

Mr. Trenton similarly addressed whether the teacher was meeting student needs as he pointed out the difficulty in determining which element on the NCEES was being met during an observation:

It really doesn’t go into an individual lesson plan, how the teacher plans, but you have to read into the questions as far as the reflection part. And the Standard 5, you know, is the teacher going back and modifying the lesson plan to meet the needs of the students that are in the classroom? When you look at a lot of the elements that are within the document itself, you really need to go back and consider every individual aspect of the class as it’s taking place, you know, the classroom management piece. And I think the most difficult part is trying to determine which one of those elements something may fit under.

Using the NCEES tool, then, was not easy in Mr. Trenton’s view, and he felt too much was left to the perception of the person using the tool.

Both principals noted the instrument was redundant in some of the things it asked in different standards and criticized that it allowed for too much personal subjectivity on the part of the observer. When asked about what their ideal teacher evaluation system would include, Mr. Lamont replied he would keep some of the aspects related to instruction in the current rubric, but added that he wanted it to address relationships more as they pertain to students’ performance, stating, “When kids know you are doing right by them, they are going to be more apt to learn and willing to listen and behave in your class.” Mr. Lamont viewed the current observation and evaluation cycle as effective and stated he would keep it as it is.
For his ideal evaluation system, Mr. Trenton would include a component that gave students, parents, and communities the opportunity to offer input and be a part of the system:

I think that would be a key factor in rural community schools that have student populations that are in poverty, because you get very little help from the outside as it is. But I think a lot of it has to do with the individual teacher themselves putting themselves out there and really trying to work to get the community and get the parents involved.

Mr. Trenton added, “I think that there needs to be a piece of evaluation making sure teachers are actively soliciting information from parents in the community and the students themselves.” Like Mr. Lamont, Mr. Trenton would not change the evaluation cycle, but did point out that completing the tasks required in the current cycle is time-consuming, and increasingly so as more and more teachers retire from the field and new teachers replace them, since new teachers require additional observations.

Both high school principals shared that their evaluation practices have changed since the NCEES. Mr. Lamont’s teachers are observed by multiple people instead of just the same administrator, and he encourages administrators to look at the teacher holistically and to consider data as part of the evaluation. Mr. Lamont also includes elements of the rubric as part of his interview process for new teachers. Comparably, Mr. Trenton’s administrative team has focused on empowering teacher leaders and building professional learning communities.

Mr. Lamont and Mr. Trenton held similar views on the effect of the NCEES on teacher retention in their respective districts. Mr. Lamont thinks the use of the system across the state is a good thing, because teachers are aware that administrators will be looking for the same standards and elements. For this reason, he does not believe it has affected retention rates. Likewise, Mr.
Trenton feels there has been no impact on teacher retention in his district caused by the NCEES, and instead noted that other factors impact it much more.

While they did agree on a few factors, the two high school principals in this study held some disparate views on the NCEES. One preferred the previous tool, the TPAI-R, while the other seemed satisfied with the current NCEES evaluation system. Both felt teachers did not truly understand the NCEES system, and neither found the NCEES to be easy to use for the observer. To improve the evaluation system, each had suggestions for changes, including a shared view that it should be more focused on whether teachers are meeting student needs.

**Assistant Superintendent and Director, Human Resources**

Ms. Wallace, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources with 19 years of experience, and Ms. Francis, Human Resources Director with 30 years of experience, differ in their thoughts about the NCEES. Both women received professional development on the NCEES through the state department and their respective districts. Additionally, Ms. Francis had someone from the state department come to assist in training her staff.

Ms. Wallace viewed the NCEES evaluation rubric as being more effective compared to the previous TPAI-R, instrument specifically because more artifacts can be produced to show alignment with the ratings. Although Ms. Francis did not have any experience with the TPAI-R, she still saw the NCEES as a difficult instrument for administrators to use effectively and noted that many administrators have complained about knowing where information fits in the rubric.

Ms. Wallace and Ms. Francis agreed that some teachers understand certain aspects of the NCEES, though others do not. Ms. Wallace maintained that the veteran teachers understand it better than the newer teachers; this is because they can make a comparison with the previous instrument, but newer teachers do not yet understand how it is aligned to their work. Ms. Francis
shared that teachers do not understand the value of the information the instrument provides for them.

Both Human Resources professionals think the NCEES instrument addresses some of the components of an effective lesson. Ms. Wallace, however, maintained that while it may address parts of a lesson, it does not account for the rigor of the lesson:

I think it doesn’t address it, because it just doesn’t tell you exactly what that looks like. So, if you are an administrator that’s not trained on what relevant and rigorous lessons look like, then of course the instrument isn’t going to just plainly tell you “this is what you need to be looking for.” However, it does tell you that you need to be looking for it.

Looking for a way to make it work, Ms. Francis suggested picking out pieces from the evaluation rubric to address the lesson. In her opinion, the NCEES instrument views everything globally, and she stated, “This instrument is looking at everything globally, and you are trying to fit the observation pieces – the parts of the lesson – into that instrument, and it is not a good fit.”

Speaking to the strengths of the NCEES instrument, Ms. Wallace lauded that it pushes veteran teachers to change their behaviors to deliver more relevant, rigorous, and diverse lessons to address Common Core curriculum. Ms. Francis noted that the NCEES provides a more complete portrayal of the teacher, because it addresses diversity, technology, differentiation, and data.

Both Human Resources leaders offered ideas for changes to be made to the instrument. Ms. Francis stressed the need for a way to ensure fidelity, which continues to be an issue in her district even though the same district professional development was provided:

Well, one of the things that we have a lot of difficulty with in our system is fidelity, and we provided everyone the same training. But we see the instrument being used very
differently by different administrators, and we’ve done some fidelity training with the administrators, and we really haven’t seen that change how they are conducting observations and evaluations with the new system. So, fidelity is a problem.

Adding to this, Ms. Wallace brought up the problem of subjectivity, and the fact that some things the NCEES looks for occur during a lesson and others tend to be found in the school environment. She said, “So that piece, I don’t think there will ever be a tool that is not subjective, but right now it still is heavily subjective just like the TPAI-R was.”

When asked to describe their ideal teacher evaluation system, Ms. Francis said she would redesign the current instrument to make it more administrator-friendly but retain its focus on content. In her view, administrators must be willing to provide more observations for teachers who are struggling in the classroom. Additionally, she shared a desire to help principals be more honest in their evaluations:

One of the things that principals are very confused about is when they go into a classroom, they are using the instrument to do observations of what they see in the classroom. They don’t know how to incorporate things that are going on outside the classroom into that observation.

Ms. Wallace felt she would keep all the current components of the NCEES, but would put more emphasis on teacher relationships, especially with students:

I would add some more elements to that part and require the teacher to provide more artifacts and evidences as to how have they built that relationship, which also ties into not only just student growth and performance, but also behavior.
Ms. Wallace also claimed she would increase the number of observations for veteran teachers to three to four full observations instead of snapshots. This, she felt, would address burnout and help administrators ensure teachers are keeping up with the changes.

Ms. Wallace reported that she used the NCEES rubric to ask interview questions when she goes to job fairs for the district, stating, “As a Principal and an Assistant Superintendent of [Human Resources], when I’m interviewing, those are the questions that I’m asking. So, I think it has changed my way of asking questions and hiring tremendously.” However, Ms. Francis had only administrative experience with the NCEES since beginning her current position. Her school district had revisited how they train their staff to increase fidelity with the instrument. Ms. Francis noted, though, that teachers who do well on the NCEES are those who bring copies of their evaluations with them to interviews.

Neither Ms. Wallace nor Ms. Francis felt the NCEES had impacted teacher retention in their respective districts. What has been a deterrent to recruitment in her rural district, according to Ms. Wallace, is funding and low pay. Ms. Francis pointed out discrepancies with the summative evaluation data and teacher performance in her district, as the evaluation results did not always align with the teacher’s performance by other measures such as testing.

**District Superintendents**

Superintendents Mr. Vincent and Mr. Payne had nearly the same amount of experience, 28 years and 27 years, respectively. Both superintendents had been trained by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), whereby districts train the school principals and then principals are responsible to train their staff. Neither superintendent had received a lot of professional development since the initial rollout of NCEES, nor had they been trained on how to evaluate principals.
Both superintendents agreed that the NCEES addresses processes and behaviors aligned with good teaching and leadership. Mr. Vincent, though, noted that some of the components are difficult to address in a rural district because of lack of opportunities. However, he maintained that teachers should not be penalized for this in their ratings. Mr. Payne said that the NCEES tool was cumbersome and inflexible.

Mr. Vincent maintained that the NCEES evaluation rubric was better than the previous TPAI-R because it was more reflective and addresses facilitative teaching styles with much rigor. Moreover, the expectation that teachers work in collaboration with others and seek leadership opportunities is part of the NCEES instrument, and collaboration is included in the rubric. Mr. Payne’s answer was less certain, as he claimed the NCEES was at once both better and worse than the TPAI-R. The TPAI-R, in his opinion, was easier to implement and less cumbersome than the NCEES, which requires the principal to interact more with teachers.

Mr. Vincent noted that the instrument addresses components of an effective lesson by having teachers be more reflective and create data-driven lesson plans. About Standard 6 of the NCEES, Mr. Vincent remarked:

Standard 6, I thought, was an important component, because it was a check. There is always a check and a balance. You have teachers who do very good lesson planning, but what they do goes right over the head of their kids and you saw that throughout EVAAS. You saw teachers were able to teach to a certain segment of their class.

He also spoke about the importance of student learning, which the NCEES does not truly measure:

There is no teaching without the learning part and, so, unfortunately for most of us, you don’t know that until the end of the year when they take EOGs or EOCS. And that’s of
course, I know that’s not the only measure of how effective a lesson is, but in high-stakes accountability (which is unfortunately what we have), that’s where it happens.

Conversely, Mr. Payne asserted that the NCEES is more focused on students than it is the teacher’s lesson:

I think NCEES has a lot to do with the instruction and what is going on with the students, not necessarily look at what is involved in a lesson, not necessarily the lesson components. I think it measures more about student engagement and things like that, which is obviously valuable, but not necessarily about the different components of a lesson.

Mr. Vincent and Mr. Payne agree a strength of the NCEES is that it is more reflective for both teachers and administrators. Because of the NCEES, more conversations occur about instructional practices and expectations.

Mr. Vincent did not feel the tool differentiates for the types of teachers in a school, and thus said that changes such as altering the tool to address different disciplines or types of teachers would improve the NCEES tool. He added the value of having different versions of the instrument based on years of experience, since a new teacher and a veteran teacher may not be focused on improving in the same areas. Similarly, Mr. Payne attested that more flexibility is needed in the NCEES to enable the tool to assist struggling teachers or principals and help employees grow.

Mr. Vincent and Mr. Payne both shared ideas for an ideal teacher evaluation system. Mr. Vincent wanted the ability to evaluate teachers on levels and not the items checked off on the NCEES. He also suggested a component that equates lesson planning with effectiveness based on student performance and would differentiate the tool based on the teacher’s experience or type of instruction. He would not change the observation cycle. Also focused on teachers, Mr.
Payne’s ideal evaluation system would rate teachers based on goal accomplishment and would assess mastery of the goal as part of the instrument. He would not change the current evaluation cycle.

Mr. Vincent did believe the NCEES had changed the way interviews were conducted by using the rubric for questioning. Due to the NCEES and what is in the rubric, he felt principals were addressing concerns better, and are more able to tell a teacher where he or she needs to grow:

On the front end, when you are hiring teachers and when you are having those conversations with teachers who are not performing where you need them to perform, I think that the way it’s written helps principals have those conversations.

Likewise, Mr. Payne maintained that he and his principals had done a better job assessing and giving feedback as their understanding of the tool has increased, which, in turn, helps teachers improve more quickly:

I’ve been able to work with my principals requiring specific data that they can use on their evaluations. I’ve learned enough to say, “I want you to look at these or this part of the rubric and give me that information back.”

Whether they loved the tool or not, it seems that both superintendents had found ways to use it for the improvement of their teachers and districts.

Neither Mr. Vincent nor Mr. Payne thought the NCEES had impacted teacher retention in their districts. Mr. Vincent shared that the NCEES had never been mentioned during the exit interview as the reason a teacher left his district. Mr. Payne did not think that the NCEES had helped the current teacher retention situation any and added that the NCEES is a harder tool to use for dismissal documentation.
Summary of Findings

The educational leaders in this study provided a range of views and feelings about the effectiveness and application of the NCEES evaluation instrument. Participants had experience ranging from 7 years to 30 years, yet their responses to the interview questions were remarkably similar. To begin, while all the participants received some sort of training on the NCEES tool, none of them seemed to feel it was sufficient to provide the understanding they needed. Several participants found the NCEES rubric to be highly subjective, very time-consuming, and in need of administrator input to make it complete. There were no participants, in fact, who praised the NCEES entirely, and all 10 of them offered as many suggestions for improvements as they noted its strengths.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter Five, common themes that arose through the interviews of the 10 educational leaders in this study will be discussed. Additionally, the study’s findings are examined against previous research, and implications for educational practice, state policy, and further research are provided.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Chapter Introduction

This study focused on the perceptions of the NCEES by 10 educational leaders from two rural eastern North Carolina school districts. In this chapter, discussion of themes that emerged from the findings, implications for practice, implications for research, and the study’s conclusion are presented.

Emergent Themes

The 10 educational leaders shared similar responses to the structured interview protocol which emerged into common themes. The emergent themes are discussed in this section. These include the NCEES versus the TPAI-R comparisons, evaluation instrument strengths, evaluation instrument changes, ideal teacher evaluation system, and the effect of the NCEES on teacher retention.

NCEES Compared to TPAI-R

Most of the educational leaders felt the NCEES was better overall than the TPAI-R, as it was deemed more detailed. Addition of the self-assessment was believed to be a good component of the new system. Principal and teacher interactions have increased because of the NCEES, as perceived by the educational leaders. More discussions are held, and teachers can expound on their artifacts to support their ratings. Principals are also able to pinpoint and share with teachers any areas needing additional support to support teachers’ growth.

Strengths of the Evaluation Instrument

All the educational leaders noted strengths of the NCEES evaluation instrument, including that it was electronic and has uploading capabilities of documents. The ratings progression, and use of data as part of the rubric, were also discussed as strengths. The fact that
other administrators can view previous evaluations in the system was also noted as a strength, as were its acknowledgement of rigor and differentiation. Leaders shared that the NCEES shows the larger picture of what the teacher does and pushes veteran teachers to make changes to their practices to address curriculum needs. Another strength noted about the evaluation instrument was that it caused teachers and administrators to be more reflective about instructional practices and expectations.

**Suggestions for Changes to NCEES**

The educational leaders agreed that changes needed to be made to the NCEES instrument. Suggestions included making the instrument more user-friendly, as well as adding the ability to determine overall ratings, eliminate redundancy and personal subjectivity, and ensure fidelity. Altering the tool to address different disciplines and types of teachers was also suggested. Additionally, the participants believed the NCEES instrument needed more flexibility to help principals use it to support the growth of struggling teachers.

**Ideal Teacher Evaluation System**

Most of the educational leaders shared they would keep some of the components of the current evaluation system in their ideal teacher evaluation system, such as the content focus and the evaluation cycle. They would like to have more snapshots and/or full observations for veterans, interdisciplinary components, student relationship component, and acquire input from students, parents, and the community. Leaders would like to have correlations noted in the system to address lesson plan effectiveness and student performance. They also would like to see differentiated tools based on experience and type of instruction. One other addition to the ideal evaluation system would be adding process of rating goal accomplishment and mastery within the tool so administrators would not have to determine if goals have been mastered.
Effect of NCEES on Teacher Retention

The educational leaders did not perceive the NCEES affected teacher retention rates in their rural districts, and instead pointed to negative societal and political issues such as the state requirement that teachers rated “developing” be placed on action plans in low-performing schools. Lack of respect for the teaching profession by society was named as a deterrent, as were current class size changes, loss of arts and specials, grading of schools, and limited resources in rural districts. Insufficient funding to support salary supplements offered by urban districts also negatively affects retention rates in rural districts. Discrepancies with summary evaluations and teacher performance were noted, but overall, the education leaders in this study did not perceive the NCEES as having any significant impact on teacher retention in their respective districts.

Discussion of Results

Breedlove (2011) cited some of the changes to the NCEES suggested by the educational leaders in this study, such as use of artifacts, inclusion of other data as part of the evaluation process and increasing the number of conversations between teachers and evaluators when comparing the TPAI-R to the new system. This study’s findings support previous research that NCEES ratings are subjective, such as Portz’s (1996) defining of problem definition in perceptions of NCEES ratings. Since the ratings are open to interpretation, administrators continued to seek ways to ensure fidelity and eliminate subjectivity. Findings also supported how rural districts are at a disadvantage when trying to acquire teachers who will positively impact student achievement based on the applicant pool, because the evaluation system caused administrators to retain teachers they would replace if they had an ample applicant pool.

Furthermore, this study’s findings indicate that rural districts find it difficult to fill vacancies (Center on Education Policy, 2003; Hanushek et al., 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et
al., 2005; Watson, 2003). Educational leaders in rural districts have difficulty soliciting teachers, which means they must maintain the teachers they have on staff. This includes a responsibility to provide them with the training needed to be successful when they are not meeting their expectations. As shared previously, per the United States Department of Education (2004c), rural teachers who are only deemed highly qualified in one subject are allowed three years to become competent in other subjects taught. States are required to provide these teachers with the necessary professional development opportunities to assist them in becoming proficient in other subjects. Having teachers who understand the state’s evaluation process was also important to the participants in this study. These educational leaders in rural districts strive to provide in-house professional development opportunities to expand their teachers’ skills and knowledge of the evaluation instrument. Some have created their own tools in conjunction with the ones provided by the state, such as rubric artifact examples, to help teachers understand the ratings and the evaluation process.

The ESSA changed the “highly qualified” component previously established by NCLB, giving states more leeway with evaluation and licensing criteria. The ESSA does not require districts to document highly qualified teacher status. However, while the “highly qualified component” is no longer mandated, it was still the catalyst for changes in teacher evaluation systems across the nation, along with the need for funding:

To improve their eligibility to access federal funding, and to simultaneously achieve their school improvement goals, since 2009, 36 states plus Washington, DC, and hundreds of school districts have passed teacher evaluation reforms, and 33 states have additionally passed principal evaluation reforms. (Laine & Behrstock-Sherratt, 2012, p. 3)
Like many other states, North Carolina revised its evaluation system at this time to improve its schools and gain access to federal funding. The educational leaders interviewed in this study thought the evaluation instrument affected their interviewing practices and the questions they asked, but not the caliber or effectiveness of the teachers hired.

The goal of evaluations should be teacher improvement to ultimately increase student learning and performance, but the findings of this study suggest that the current NCEES and evaluation rubric may not provide this. “In schools, there is an additional emphasis on the role of evaluations in providing detailed, constructive feedback to all teachers, including those that are considered generally effective already, with data that can inform continuous improvement in practice” (Laine & Behrstock-Sherratt, 2012, p. 3). However, only 50% of the educational leaders interviewed in the current study felt the NCEES evaluation instrument aptly addressed the components of an effective lesson, while the other half maintained it did not. Participants claimed that assessing the effectiveness of the teacher’s instruction during the observed lesson is determined by the interpretation of the observer or evaluator.

Comparably, the educational leaders in this study noted the previous evaluation system, TPAI-R, had components that addressed some of the parts of effective lessons and required teachers to be reflective on their instruction and outcomes toward the goal of student improvement. One educational leader shared his appreciation for Standard VI of the NCEES and the fact that data could be used to measure teacher effectiveness in student achievement based on the individual results of teachers and their students. Though lessons may be planned well, if students do not grasp the concept being taught, the instruction was not effective. When this occurs, the teacher must be able to reflect upon what happened during the lesson to determine whether mid-course corrections would have helped students better understand the content. Thus,
a teacher needs to be a reflective practitioner to have a positive impact on student achievement, and the state’s evaluation instrument should encourage such reflection.

Sawchuk (2016) suggested, “With the signing of the Every Student Succeeds Act into law, an era of significant federal involvement in teacher licensing and evaluation has come to an end” (p. 1). That is, although states now have more latitude thanks to the ESSA, they still must find ways to ensure their evaluation practices are implemented as intended. Subjectivity also remains an issue that affects the evaluation process. Problem definitions are the “product of imposing certain frames of reference on reality” (Dery, 1984, p. 4), and since the assessment of an effective teacher will inevitably vary based on the experiences of the observer or evaluator, this certainly applies to the evaluation of teachers. No two evaluators will rate a teacher the same unless they have a similar understanding of the evaluation process and seek to ensure fidelity within their established assessment practices to address inter-rater reliability.

Teacher shortages continue to be a concern across regions of North Carolina, but it is a particularly pressing issue in rural districts that must compete with districts which are able to offer teachers more in monetary payments, curriculum materials, and professional development opportunities. Speaking directly to the difficulty of staffing teachers to work in rural districts, one educational leader described the vacancies in his district’s elementary schools and high schools which they had not been able to fill for months. Unquestionably, this has a direct impact on student performance. As one educational leader put it, “We don’t have any room to get rid of anyone,” stressing that every teacher in his district is needed or there will be even more vacancies. Such a desperation at times places the school administrator at odds with the best interests of their students and school when selecting candidates for hiring, finding themselves forced to make a tough decision that could have a lasting, often deleterious effect on both.
Implications of the Study

Implications for Practice

This body of research offered some building-level solutions for ways to address common issues with the NCEES. Specifically, the educational leaders shared practices they used in their respective buildings to decrease subjectivity when observing and evaluating teachers. For example, administrators and staff used agreed-upon examples for the standards and elements as a guide to aid them in determining where aspects of observed lessons should fall within the rubric, building consensus about expectations regarding the rubric. Another takeaway practice from the current research is having the principal and assistant principal observe lessons together to increase fidelity with ratings, as it allows administrators to see from one another’s perspective and have discussions toward reaching an agreement on expectations. The use of the NCEES for interviews of prospective teachers is another implication from this study, as this would enable administrators to learn about the instructional practices, differentiation, collaboration, and data that teacher candidates may use in developing lessons and meeting the needs of their students—before hiring them. Prospective teacher candidates could also be required to perform a teaching lesson as part of the interview process to demonstrate their instructional best practices.

The district-level implications from this study relate to professional development for principals and assistant principals. Districts could offer more strategic professional development opportunities to principals and assistant principals, such as having them visit and observe other schools’ lessons and instructional best practices. Additional professional development opportunities could be provided to assist administrators with conducting mid-year and end-of-year observations and professional development plan reviews; this would, in turn, help them with summative evaluations by providing accurate pictures of each teacher’s performance throughout
the year. Moreover, teachers would gain a greater understanding of the ratings they receive during the year and clarity on the areas they need to focus on for their individual growth, thus aiding them in improving their performance.

Implications for the NCDPI include offering professional development for district superintendents, as well as revamping the evaluation instrument based on the recommendations provided by the interviewees in this study. These include creating overall ratings for the summative evaluation, determining a teacher’s mastery of goals, eliminating the subjectivity in ratings, modifying ratings to meet the needs of teachers in different disciplines, and adding flexibility supports to assist struggling teachers and principals. To this end, a collaborative engagement between NCDPI and a panel of selected administrators could provide valuable input on how to revise the NCEES instrument to make it a better tool for verifying teacher performance—and, most importantly, to ensure that it is serving its ultimate purpose of providing students with the quality education they need. Additionally, based on the educational leaders in this study indicating they had not received training on the NCEES since it was first introduced, professional development for principals and assistant principals could be vital in helping them more effectively use the evaluation tool and the rubric.

There is also a need to address inter-rater reliability across districts and schools. Professional development specifically addressing inter-rater reliability would assist the state in creating a body of teachers and administrators who demonstrate consistency and understanding of the ratings as well as the practices required to earn high ratings. Opportunities for administrators in the same school and district to observe lessons and reflect on ratings together would further aid in addressing inter-rater reliability. These professional development opportunities could be provided throughout the year or during the summer to accommodate
various school calendars, such as traditional and year-round. Giving administrators the opportunity to see other districts in their region or state would enable these educational leaders to gain a wider view of their individual practices compared to their colleagues while also encouraging collaboration. Most importantly, this would improve the effectiveness of the teacher evaluation system by allowing for more consistency in ratings across the districts and state.

Implications for Research

At the time of this study, there was a dearth of extant research regarding the NCEES. This research continues to be evolving as the need to eliminate subjectivity in ratings will continue to be a problem across the districts in North Carolina. While the current study provided some valuable insight on the NCEES tool from the perspectives of educational leaders like principals, assistant principals, and administrative directors, further research could offer even more knowledge to help improve the state’s evaluation system. Gaining veteran and novice teachers’ perspectives on the NCEES, for example, could add more to the body of research about their views on the tool, including its strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for change, as well as help inform processes on state and local levels. In addition, conducting a longitudinal, qualitative study following a new principal or superintendent as s/he maneuvers through the NCEES could provide districts and the state with information on the supports needed to assist them in using the tool effectively.

Furthermore, comparative quantitative studies could be done to determine if there is any positive or negative correlation between teacher performance on the NCEES and the academic performance of his or her students. Henry and Guthrie (2015) evaluated the NCEES and the student achievement standard from the 2010-2011 through 2013-2014 school years, and they found no direct correlation between teacher ratings and EVAAS data results. EVAAS ratings
identified 80% of teachers as needing improvement, while NCEES ratings resulted in significantly higher principal ratings than the teachers’ EVAAS results (Henry & Guthrie, 2015). This study could possibly be replicated to assess whether results would be similar or different.

Chapter Summary

This study involved 10 educational leaders’ perceptions of the NCEES. Overall, the participants who were interviewed perceived the NCEES to be better than its predecessor, the TPAI-R, despite it not being entirely user-friendly. They also noted challenges with the NCEES tool’s technology, subjectivity, need for additional information, and the sequence of its steps. At the time of the current study, the educational leaders who participated were all currently implementing the NCEES and continuing to seek ways to help teachers understand the ratings and the system. They spoke of efforts to add more clarifiers every year, and worked to provide as much information to staff as possible during conferences. While the participants did confirm some of the strengths of the NCEES, the educational leaders also suggested several changes to assist with improving the system. They furthermore shared what design elements they would include in their ideal teacher evaluation system.

Administrators, as the instructional leaders, are tasked with observing teachers. The cycle and timing of the observations depends on the teacher’s number of years in the district, state, and profession. The timing of due dates for components of the NCEES set by districts can be challenging for educational leaders due to the daily operations of their buildings. Although the state has one deadline for the NCEES (June 30th of every year), districts have the flexibility to set their own deadlines for meeting the state deadline. This can vary per district and can be more of a stressor for principals than it is for district personnel. Educational leaders can find themselves rushing to meet deadlines, which may result in them not being as thorough when conducting
observations and providing ratings of teachers. Since the steps in the process to complete the NCEES for each teacher take up significant amounts of time, educational leaders are pulled away from other daily tasks because they are conferencing with teachers. Observations are necessary for school leaders to know what instructional practices are happening in their building, but the volume of time required to complete the NCEES process can be daunting at certain times of the year, particularly for a new principal.

As previously mentioned and revealed through this study, the NCEES has strengths and weaknesses. If high ratings continue to be given that do not reflect the actual skill of the teacher, the system will be ineffective. It is therefore critically important to give educational leaders opportunities to address and hone their understanding of the ratings. Once administrators have fidelity among their schools and districts, then the NCEES will have a greater impact on the teaching profession. Teachers, moreover, would value the consistency in its ability to inform them of their practices and performance. Feedback allows teachers to improve, which will, in turn help students achieve, but inconsistent feedback cannot assist teachers in growing as professionals. When a teacher receives high ratings from one leader and lower ratings from another, it leaves them confused and without a true picture of their abilities. Fidelity in ratings is crucial for teachers, students, and districts, if the NCEES is going to be effective in assessing teachers correctly.

As an educational leader for the past 11 years, I have had the opportunity to use both the TPAI-R and the NCEES. Regarding this study’s findings. I agree with my colleagues in noting both strengths and weaknesses in the NCEES, and concur with the recommendations they have given to improve the system. I have encountered the rating disparities that lead to crucial conversations with teachers, and believe there remains a need for examples for the ratings to be
revised and shared across the state to address the current curriculum standards. This would help the teachers and educational leaders identify what ratings would be appropriate, realizing there is no one universal set of examples per standard. It would additionally provide a starting point for discussions between the teacher and the educational leader, regardless of where they are in the state. The NCDPI should make this a part of their professional development and add revised examples each year to assist with increasing fidelity and understanding of the ratings for all users. Educational leaders and teachers would likely welcome this type of support and its usefulness, and it would furthermore help the districts provide yearly required professional development since every district would be able to use the same information. The NCDPI could even update the required professional development tools to make sure the message is the same for all districts across the state.

The findings from this study inform the extant body of education research by pinpointing areas of strengths and needs within the tool from the perspectives of the educational leaders who use it. Thus, future revisions to the state’s evaluation system should consider some of the suggested changes pointed out by the educational leaders in this study. By addressing these factors, districts and the state can work to offer educators a more effective tool for assessing teachers’ instruction and classroom practices.

However, this study is just the beginning of the more comprehensive review needed to determine if the current system is the most effective. As mentioned in the previous section, additional studies of qualitative and quantitative measures can add to this body of research and help states like North Carolina refine their teacher evaluation systems to make sure stakeholders gain the most benefits from its use. Thus, those who are involved in the redesign of the state’s teacher evaluation system should solicit information from the implementers across the state,
especially those in rural districts that may not have as many resources as other areas, to inform
the instrument’s revisions. As a result, a stronger evaluation system will help teachers improve
their delivery of instructional best practices, which will serve students’ needs by providing them
with higher-quality education. Every voice must be heard to create an effective teacher
evaluation system designed to meet the needs of our teachers and students.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Structured Interview Protocol

This study’s overarching research question was: What are the perceptions of the educational elites or key players in two rural counties in eastern North Carolina regarding the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES)? Following are the interview questions used:

1. What do you think of the NCEES and the evaluation rubric?
2. What professional development did you receive on the tool to in order to implement it successfully?
3. Do you think teachers understand the NCEES? Why or why not?
4. Is the NCEES evaluation rubric better or worse than the TPAI-R? Why, and in what ways?
5. How does the instrument address or not address the components of an effective lesson?
6. What are the strengths of the evaluation instrument?
7. What needs to be changed in the evaluation instrument?
8. How has your evaluation practices changed in your building based on the NCEES and the caliber of teachers you have hired?
9. In this era of teacher shortages, and given that you work in a rural school district, how has the NCEES positively or negatively affected teacher retention rates in your district?
10. If you were to design your ideal teacher evaluation system, what would it look like? What components would it include, and why?
Appendix B: Request for Participation in Study (Email)

Dear ________________,

My name is Tracy Purvis, and I am an assistant principal in the Wake County Public School System. I am a student at North Carolina State University pursuing my Degree of Doctor of Education and I would appreciate your support in this milestone academic endeavor.

The purpose of my study is to summarize or describe the perceptions of ten educational elites in rural eastern North Carolina of the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES). Two school district superintendents, two human resource directors, two elementary school principals, two middle school principals, and two high school principals will be interviewed face to face in their natural settings or via telephone using the interview protocol created by the researcher to gather information about their perceptions of the educator evaluation system. I would like to invite you to participate in this study. You are one of the educational elites who are doing the work and can directly inform my research. Your input is not only vital to me, but you will be helping to inform the greater body of educational research regarding the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate; then I will make no further requests to you. If you decide to participate, you will be given the option to not answer any questions you are not comfortable answering.

I am available to answer any questions you have about the study. Please contact me at xxx@ncsu.edu or 919-XXX-XXXX if you have any questions or concerns related to my study. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in research, you may contact the Office of Sponsored Programs and Regulatory Compliance Services at North Carolina State University.

Please send me a reply email within a week of receipt of this email if you would like to participate or not participate in this study. Once I hear back from you regarding your intent, we can schedule a mutually convenient time to discuss the next steps in the process.

Thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of my request for your assistance as I truly understand the value of your time.

Sincerely,

Tracy T. Purvis, Ed.S.
Appendix C: Participant Informed Consent

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title: A Qualitative Study of Educational Elites' Perceptions of the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System
Principal Investigator: Tracy T. Purvis

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of the study is to summarize or describe the perceptions of ten educational elites in rural eastern North Carolina of the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES). Two school district superintendents, two human resource directors, two elementary school principals, two middle school principals, and two high school principals will be interviewed face-to-face in natural setting or via telephone using the interview protocol created by the researcher to gather information about their perceptions of the educator evaluation system.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 30-minute interview via face-to-face or telephone to discuss your knowledge and beliefs of the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System. See detailed steps below.

1) Potential participants will receive a telephone call and email to request their participation in the study. The telephone call and email will contain an overview of the study to encourage your participation in the study. The telephone call and email will contain an overview of the study to encourage your participation in the study.

2) Consent forms will be emailed to interested participants which you will email back to the researcher within the week.

3) Consenting participants will be contacted for an interview date and time mutually agreed upon by the researcher and participant. These interviews will be face to face or via telephone and audio recorded using a digital device or tape recorder. Prior to conducting the interview, the participants will be reminded of their consent and given the opportunity to not participate. You will also have the opportunity to choose a pseudonym prior to the audio recording of the interview.

4) Interviews (face to face or via telephone) will be audio recorded and last for approximately 30 minutes. Interviews will be conducted in the offices of the participants or a location of their choice. Interviews will follow the structured protocol included in the IRB request.

5) Audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed by the researcher or hired transcriber who agrees to maintain confidentiality and will delete recorded interviews sent via a secure sharing method.

Risks and Benefits
There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits of this research will be gleaned by researchers and practitioners in the field of education who want to know the perceptions of educational elites who are directly involved in the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System.
Carolina Educator Evaluation System. This body of research will assist in awareness of educational elites in rural eastern North Carolina of how the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System is perceived, thus offering areas of improvement or strengthening continuing practices.

Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on a personal computer. Audio recordings may be recorded on an electronic device and/or tape recorder. Audio recordings will be saved on cassette tapes, external storage (flash drive), or cloud-based storage. Recordings will be kept secure via passwords and locked storage. The principal researcher and hired transcriber will be the only ones with access to the recordings. Recordings will be transcribed, and common themes will be identified. Specific quotes may be used to support researcher's themes identified. No images will be utilized as recordings will be audio only. Recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and a hired transcriber who agrees to confidentiality of participants. The hired transcriber will not have access to any identifying information of the participants. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

Compensation
No compensation will be offered or provided for any participants if they participate partially or fully in this study.

What if you are an NCSU student?
Participation in this study is not a course requirement, and your participation or lack thereof will not affect your class standing or grades at NC State.

What if you are an NCSU employee?
Participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment at NCSU, and your participation or lack thereof will not affect your job.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Tracy T. Purvis, at xxx@ncsu.edu or 919-XXX-XXXX.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator at xxx@ncsu.edu or by phone at 1-919-XXX-XXXX.

Consent to Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's Signature_______________________________________  Date _________________

Investigator's Signature_______________________________________  Date _________________

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