GRADE FOUR TEACHERS’ PERCEPTION OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A thesis presented
by
Kerry J. Clery

to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
July 2015
# Table of Contents

**List of Figures and Tables** ................................................. 4  
**Abstract** ........................................................................... 5  
**Acknowledgments** ............................................................. 6  

**Chapter 1: Introduction** ...................................................... 8  
  Statement of Problem .......................................................... 8  
  Significance of the Problem .................................................. 10  
  Positionality ........................................................................ 13  
  Research Questions ................................................................ 16  
  Theoretical Framework .......................................................... 17  
  Organization of this Document ............................................. 22  

**Chapter 2: Literature Review** .............................................. 24  
  Importance of Self-Assessment ............................................ 25  
  Obstacles to Self-Assessment ............................................. 28  
  Characteristics of Successful Self-Assessment Processes .......... 32  

**Chapter 3: Methodology** ..................................................... 37  
  Research Design ................................................................. 37  
  Ethical Issues ....................................................................... 39  
  Participants .......................................................................... 39  
  Data Collection and Storage .............................................. 41  
  Data Analysis ...................................................................... 42  
  Trustworthiness .................................................................... 45  

**Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis** ....................................... 47  
  Participant Profiles .............................................................. 48  
  Overview of Emergent Themes ............................................ 52  
  Theme 1: Foundations for Self-Assessments ......................... 53  
  Theme 2: Self-Assessment and Evaluation ............................ 61  
  Theme 3: Thoughtful Practice vs. Reflective Practice ............. 67  
  Theme 4: The Self-Assessment’s Direct Impact on Teachers .... 75  
  Conclusion ........................................................................... 80  

**Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings** ......................... 81  
  Summary of the Problem and Methodology .......................... 81  
  Summary of Major Findings ................................................ 82  
  Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Frameworks ............... 88  
  Findings in Relation to the Literature Review ........................ 95  
  Study Limitations ............................................................... 98  
  Future Research ................................................................. 99  
  Conclusion and Reflection ................................................... 100  

**References** ....................................................................... 105
Appendix A: Interview Protocol ..................................................110
Appendix B: Recruitment Email ..................................................113
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form .........................................114
**List of Figures and Tables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Professional Development Through the Lens of Adult Learning Theory</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Three Key Points Identified in the Literature Review</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Steps in the Data Analysis Process</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Themes and Subthemes</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Self-assessments are used by educators to make realistic judgments about their own performance. While self-assessments can be implemented in a wide variety of ways, the process is intended to foster self-directed learners and increase motivation for continual improvement in teachers. In 2012, Massachusetts introduced a new educator evaluation tool that is required by all public school districts and is used to evaluate teachers’ performance. This study investigated teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment process, which is the first of five steps in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System. This work is intended to help readers understand teachers’ perception of the self-assessment process and the direct impact they feel it has on their teaching.

There are two questions that guided this qualitative study: (1) What are fourth grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment? (2) What are the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the self-assessments on their teaching practices? This research was conducted using an interpretative phenomenological analysis design via one face-to-face, semi-structured interview with each of the seven participants; all whom are fourth grade teachers in Massachusetts. Based on the findings in this study, there are several variables that interfere with the implementation of a quintessential self-assessment process. Despite these hindrances, the teachers report that the self-assessments have a positive influence on their teaching practices.

Keywords: Self-assessment, reflective practice, educator evaluation, professional development, interpretative phenomenological analysis.
Acknowledgments

“Self-education is, I firmly believe, the only kind of education there is.”—Isaac Asimov

As I reflect upon this academic journey, I feel incredibly blessed by the support system that I had in place to make this accomplishment possible. First and foremost, to my wonderful husband, Steve, thank you for the endless patience and support you provided me over the years. I would not have completed this program without your love and encouragement throughout the process. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You mean the world to me and I love you.

To my fabulous parents, Linda and Frank Sullivan, thank you for all you have done for me throughout my entire educational experience. Your reassurance and positive outlook gave me the motivation I needed to push through the times when I felt discouraged. I hope I have made you proud and I love you.

To my beautiful daughter, Addison, seeing your smile every day gave me the drive to persevere through this process in order to be a positive role model for you. I hope you too learn that, even when you have self-doubt and maybe some fear, you can do anything you put your mind to. Your dad and I are so lucky to have you in our lives and, even at 2 years old, you inspire me on a daily basis. Dream big and stay positive. I love you all the way to the moon and back!

I would like to send a special thanks to two very important critical friends that assisted me along the way: Dr. Thomas Campbell, a member of the Groton-Dunstable Northeastern University cohort, emerged as a leader among our group as early as our first course… with Dr. A. Tom has been a cheerleader and supporter throughout my writing process. He has been a wonderful resource and an even better friend.
Soon-to-be-Dr. Julie Kelley has been my partner and sounding board throughout this process. It feels like a short time ago that we were sitting in my kitchen wondering what each of the five chapters should contain… how quickly we had to learn! Thank you for being by my side through this journey and I can honestly say that you added a level of fun to this project.

It is important to note that I would not have been able to complete my dissertation without the support, guidance, and expertise of Dr. Karen Harbeck, my NEU advisor. Thank you for the time you dedicated to helping me through this process. Your words of wisdom gave me the insight I needed to press on, even during times when I felt doubt. Thank you for your help during every step of the way.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of Problem

In K-12 public schools, accountability systems have tightened as school and district data are being collected to assess and evaluate teacher performance. As a result, “the importance of effective teaching in the nation’s public schools is receiving unprecedented attention” (Chait, 2010, p. 1). It comes as no surprise that “teachers have a tremendous impact on student achievement and that teachers vary greatly in their effectiveness” (Chait, 2010, p. 1). The transparency of the data being collected and shared throughout the country is a step to try to provide more consistency in the quality of teaching that occurs in classrooms.

In fact, policymakers believe that states are best positioned to improve student achievement by directing policies toward the educator workforce (Data Quality Campaign, n.d.). Massachusetts has responded by introducing a new educator evaluation tool, first implemented in the 2012-2013 school year, that links teacher evaluations to students’ scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System and other measures of learning (Howard, 2011). There is no prescribed way to conduct the self-assessment, instead there is a form that is suggested to be completed that communicates the results of your self-assessment.

Self-assessments, when implemented correctly, are a vital component in improving teaching practices and raising standards and are part of Massachusetts’ tools. One research study highlighted this notion: “Teachers would only change educational practice when they begin to reflect on their own practice against standards for excellence” (Spitz, 2001). Therefore, “a disposition toward reflection—and a good sense
of when the teacher needs to step back and think deeply—should be part of all teachers’ repertoires” (Danielson, 2009). A thoughtful process that is self-driven is the essence of a meaningful self-reflection.

To ensure that the self-reflection process is a useful, regular, and informative practice for teachers, teachers must be supported. Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (as cited in Graves & Vye, 2007) stated, “Although these avenues for reflection should be available in the teacher’s workplace, this is not always a reality.” To ensure that all teachers are being reflective and reflecting against high standards, a systematic approach is necessary. An appropriate amount of support and consistency among educators because DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (2009) express, “improving teacher practice requires informed and precise conversations about effective techniques” (p. 27). When effective techniques are agreed upon, educators can juxtapose the results from the self-assessment with those delivered by their supervisor.

To improve student performance, leaders must support teachers as they assess their own performance and try to improve upon their skills. It is crucial to set the bar high for all teachers and create evaluation systems that support teachers’ reflection to continuously improve their teaching skills. As Pollard and Collins (2005) stated, “Reflective teaching should be personally fulfilling for teachers, but also lead to a steady increase in the quality education provided for children” (p. 3). Ultimately, the purpose of self-reflection is to make the necessary changes in teaching practices in order to improve student outcomes.

The research that has been collected on this topic demonstrates the positive impact teacher self-assessments can have on teaching practices. However, the tools and
processes that have been deemed successful were elaborate and offered teachers targeted professional development and support so that they were able to utilize the reflection process most effectively. This mindful use of self-assessment contrasts with a less effective habitual effort of reflection in practice. Osipova, Prichard, Boardman, Kiely, and Carroll (2011) noted that the practice of reflection as part of teacher education and professional development can become “routine and meaningless” (p. 160). In other words, there is a distinction between a self-assessment process that is being done for compliance purposes and one being done to truly enhance one’s teaching abilities.

This study explored seven fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of their self-assessment process in the evaluation cycle relative to their professional growth. In particular, this research investigated how fourth-grade teachers implemented the self-assessment process of the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System and their perception of the impact the process had on their teaching practices.

**Significance of the Problem**

Based on the research, some self-assessment practices have had a positive impact on teaching, but there is a deficiency in evidence that indicates whether or not schools in Massachusetts are practicing the processes that have been proven effective in the five-step evaluation cycle, with Step 1 being the self-assessment. The results from this study have the potential to benefit teachers and evaluators alike. The findings may prompt school leaders and staff to review self-assessment practices and their effectiveness in order to enhance them if necessary.

This study is also significant in that the recent push from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2011) “to promote student
learning, growth, and achievement by providing educators with feedback for improvement, enhanced opportunities for professional growth, and clear structures for accountability” is now a key topic for public school districts in Massachusetts and in many other states. Instead of trusting that best practices are being utilized in the classrooms, teachers are being held accountable by way of this new comprehensive evaluation process.

In the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, the self-assessment is meant to address performance standards—detailed actions that fall under the four main standards of (1) curriculum, planning, and assessment; (2) teaching all students; (3) family and community engagement; and (4) professional culture. A rubric has been developed by the state and is used to measure the level of proficiency in each of these four standards. The self-assessment process put forth by the state was to include:

1. An analysis of evidence of student learning, growth, and achievement for students under the educator’s responsibility
2. An assessment of practice against performance standards
3. Proposed goals to pursue to improve practice and student learning, growth, and achievement (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013)

The first step of Massachusetts’s five-step evaluation cycle is teacher self-assessment. The subsequent steps, goal-setting, implementation of plan, formative assessment, summative assessment, are meant to build on the information produced in the self-assessment. Teachers are being asked to reflect on and assess their own teaching practices in a more formalized manner.
Massachusetts’s regulations state,

Those whose performance is rated *unsatisfactory* will have no more than one year to move into one of the upper two categories—*exemplary* or *proficient*—or face possible dismissal. Those in the *needs improvement* category who do not move within a year to one of the upper two categories will be rated *unsatisfactory* and have no more than one more year to reach the two upper categories or face possible dismissal. (Howard, 2011)

A comprehensive evaluation instrument is conducive to teachers’ identifying how they can improve on their strengths and ameliorate areas of weakness (Melvin, 2011). Precise and critical self-assessments are intended to improve teaching practices; thus, the ability of teachers to reflect regularly and accurately is integral to a meaningful implementation of the required evaluation system.

Although the self-assessment, the first step in the evaluation process, puts the teachers in the driver’s seat, the responsibility is shared with the educational leaders. The leaders, or evaluators, are expected to provide quality professional development on self-assessment and give their faculty the focused support that will help them effectively assess their own practices. In addition with offering support, the collaboration with the evaluator in the self-assessments is useful so the educator can take into account the opinions of the leader. These conversations “can lead to experimentation with other ways of seeing, which might lead to more desirable courses of action” (Scaife, 2010, p. 3). The teamwork between the educator and evaluator is meant to support the teacher in improving areas of weakness and building on strengths, with the goal of improving student performance.
Many other states and local education agencies are implementing evaluation process regulations similar to those of Massachusetts. While the each state has the autonomy to develop their own evaluation systems, embedding self-assessments into the evaluation system is not unique to Massachusetts. Danielson and McGreal (2000) revealed, not speaking specifically about the Massachusetts system, “Some newly developed evaluation systems require that teachers conduct a self-assessment and establish professional growth goals” (p. 30). As a result, the findings from this study may benefit schools and districts beyond Massachusetts because many other districts are using self-assessment, either in a formal way or simply because it is a best practice.

Thus, this study is expected to increase understanding of the use of self-assessment, which is intended to drive teachers to reflect on their own practices in order to learn and develop further in their respective roles. Having an effective and systematic approach to self-assessments that is understood by the teacher and the evaluator is likely to result in improved practices, having a direct positive impact on student learning.

**Positionality**

Opie (2004) described positionality as “where the researcher is coming from in terms of their philosophical and their fundamental assumptions” (p. 18). Positionality is a critical component in qualitative research because it raises the researcher’s awareness of the biases that may exist so that he or she can attempt to be as neutral and objective as possible when developing the questions and analyzing the responses.

Upon reflection, my desire to collect and analyze data on the topic of self-assessment stemmed from the profound experience of learning to reflect as an educator, which was explicitly taught in my master’s degree program. This 14-month master’s
degree program from Lesley University was a cohort model that was comprehensive, intensive, and selective, allowing our cohort to develop a deeper understanding of pedagogy and develop skills through authentic practices and regular on-the-spot coaching. Threaded throughout the full-year internship/coursework experience, self-reflection was explicitly taught and practiced on a regular basis. This approach helped me develop the metacognitive skills necessary to assess my own strengths and weaknesses and continuously reflect on my practices. I have transferred the skill of self-reflection to other areas of my life, including being a wife, mother, friend, sister, and daughter. That powerful experience in my life, along with the emphasis on self-assessment in the field of education with the new Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, sparked a strong interest to pursue this topic.

My role as an assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum and instruction in a public school district in Massachusetts impacts my positionality as well. Four out of the seven participants interviewed in this study are teachers in Hillville, the district in which I work. I was concerned originally that this relationship may negatively impact the authenticity of the feedback I received from those teachers. However, the evaluation system was initiated by the State prior to my employment in Hillville, so it was my predecessor who introduced the initial training and implementation of the self-assessment process to these teachers. It appeared during the interviews that the participants were speaking freely, so the timeline of my employment may have increased the level of comfort to allow those participants to speak freely about less favorable impressions they may have had.
Prior to joining the Hillville district, I was an assistant superintendent in a nearby district, one that is not represented in this study, and I was charged with introducing and implementing the educator evaluation system, including the self-assessment requirement. I conducted this study having had the direct experience of implementing the self-assessment process synchronously with the other four steps in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System. I had an awareness of the tremendous pressure assistant superintendents in Massachusetts incurred when being tasked with preparing school districts for this unfamiliar, comprehensive and complex evaluation system in a relatively short amount of time. Consequently, throughout the interviews and data analysis, I was mindful of the potentially heightened level of bias that I may have had which stemmed from my experience on this topic. For example, I had to deliberately avoid viewing the responses with a slightly defensive lens when there were feelings expressed about a rushed and even careless implementation of the self-assessment process. It was important that I kept in mind that the goal of the study was to live the experience through the teachers’ eyes and not to allow my background knowledge to provide a rationale for some of the concerns that teachers reported.

When analyzing the data, I paid close attention to how my positionality could influence the interrogation of the qualitative interview data (Silverman, 2011, p. 136). Opie (2004) stated that we have these “inevitable agendas that [we] bring to [our] writing as a result of [our] beliefs, values and experiences” (p. 40), but I understood that my bias and opinion must be controlled.
Research Questions

In this study, I focused on two research questions. According to Maxwell’s (2005) description, both questions were based on process theory, as they were framed to explore the meaning and process of self-assessments as perceived by the participant teachers.

The first research question was, *What are fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment?* Information gathered to address this question was meant to identify the teachers’ impressions of this process. Also, through the participants’ responses, I was looking for their level of preparedness to implement self-assessments, any common variables that contributed to the self-assessments, and the conditions conducive to implementing meaningful self-assessments.

The second question was, *What are the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the self-assessment on their teaching practices?* This research question was formulated to gain an understanding of the changes that teachers may or may not make due to the results of their self-assessments. The interview questions will elicit responses that explain any improvements or adjustments the teachers may have made to their practice to address the areas identified as needs.

Each question was open ended and framed in a way that elicits in-depth responses. As a result, I gathered a significant amount of data from the participants’ answers and interrogated the data to identify common themes about the self-assessment process that was currently in place.
Theoretical Framework

To provide a context for teachers’ perceptions of reflective practice, this study was grounded in the framework of adult learning theory. In 1970, Malcolm Knowles introduced the notion that adults learn differently than what we had assumed based on the pedagogical approaches used with children for centuries. This controversial belief sparked much subsequent research, which still continues today.

The premise of adult learning theory is the belief that, to learn, adults must first identify and truly believe in areas of weakness that they possess and believe in the support that is being offered or that they are seeking out in order to strengthen these areas. In the *American Society for Training and Development Training and Development Handbook*, Knowles (1996) indicated that adults spend much of their time and energy determining the benefits of learning something new and the limitations of not learning it before taking the time to learn. His belief reinforces the importance of self-assessment for teachers because, based on this theory, in order for adults to be open to new information, they must believe that there is an area they need to strengthen and that learning the new information will be advantageous to them. In an organization, such a school, the educational leaders play a critical role in creating a climate where teachers feel a thirst to learn and believe that there is a benefit in doing so. Knowles’s andragogical model “focuses more on the educator as a facilitator who makes resources and procedures available to the adult learner” (Cooper, 2009). Ultimately, learners are in the driver’s seat and believe that the new information will be auspicious to them in their practice. It is up to the leaders to provide a structure where teachers are taking ownership of their own learning.
Adult learning theory asserts that adults must have their own motivators and rationale for learning. Knowles (1996) explained that evaluations and recommendations by a third party may not suffice, which was one of the key differences between andragogy and pedagogy that he underscored in his earlier work. “Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the [leader] is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it” (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 39). Consequently, adult learning theory aligns with the notion that teachers who can properly reflect upon and assess their teaching practices, and believe they can benefit from increasing their level of expertise in a specific area, will be more likely to invest time into learning, which is likely to improve teaching practices.

Rothwell (2008) described the difference between training and learning. Training is something that is done to others and “pushes knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are essentials to successful work performance” (p. 3). Learning, on the other hand, “pull[s] knowledge, skills, and attitudes from others so [the learner] can be successful” (p. 3). Learning is something that individuals do on their own and is much more influential because it is the individual that is seeking out information that is deemed important.

Adult learning theory highlights a common mistake that leaders make. Frequently, educational leaders offer predetermined professional development topics and activities. Diaz-Maggioli (2004) asserted, “Professional development arrangements are made by administrators and consultants rather than teachers” (p. 2) Based on adult learning theory, adults must deem the training necessary before learning can take place,
and therefore teachers are less invested in their professional growth around prescribed topics. In fact, Diaz-Maggioli (2004) explained, “By muffling the teachers’ voices and placing priority on the administrative needs, these [professional development] programs become a burden to professionals instead of a welcome solution to classroom problems” (p. 2). This can be problematic and have unfavorable results because, when this occurs, teachers may not subscribe to the new information being presented, and the credibility of the leadership may be compromised if teachers feel that the professional development is not an effective use of their time. Adults are defined psychologically by perceiving themselves as leaders of their own lives and in charge of making their own decisions. Consequently, if teachers identify the types of professional development that will be most beneficial to themselves as practitioners, they will be more invested due to the self-directed nature of the topics and their commitment to the intended outcomes.

Since “adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy” (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 39), providing opportunities for self-assessment is an appropriate starting point for an evaluation process. This step marks the shift in focus from an administrator-led to individual teacher-led identification of learning needs. The essence of the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, which has the self-assessment step, is to allow teachers to recognize their individual needs by analyzing their own practices and then become intrinsically motivated to learn and improve on areas they identified.

Adult learning theory is grounded in the belief that the most potent motivators are intrinsic and people will learn if they believe they can profit from the new knowledge in some way. “Andragogy works best in practice when it is adapted to fit the uniqueness of
Rothwell (2008) asserted, “People will generally do what they believe they will be rewarded for and avoid doing what they believe they will [not be rewarded] for doing” (p. 88). Based on this theory, once a challenge becomes evident to teachers by way of reflection and self-assessment, learning can occur.

Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin (2004, p. 95) indicated that Knowles’s belief in adults as self-directed learners is especially beneficial for three reasons:

1. Self-directed learners are better learners.
2. Adults do not need teachers in the sense that they are perfectly capable of taking charge of their own learning.
3. The deinstitutionalization of education, in the form of open and independent learning systems, creates a need for learners to develop appropriate skills.

These three benefits are believed to be natural results of intrinsically motivated adult learners.

Building on adult learning theory, Schon (1983) referred to reflection-on-action in his text *The Reflective Practitioner*. Reflection-on-action involves processing and assessing the events prior to or after they take place. Self-assessments and the valuable conversations that follow allow teachers to take control and become self-directed learners in areas tailored to their needs, thus resulting in a more valuable growth experience.

Schon (1983) shared that one of the expectations of adult learners is that they have to have a sophisticated outlook on their own lives and understand their own needs, interests, motivation, and goals. He indicated that they should strive to become better by assessing themselves maturely and objectively. The goal is for teachers to identify areas in which
they need assistance and then partner with their evaluators to create action plans to address the areas of need.

Rothwell (2008) also made significant contributions to adult learning theory. He claimed that one fundamental principal relative to adult learning that needs attention is the learning climate in an organization. He defined learning climate as “the psychological ‘feel’ about learning in the organization” (p. 88). He emphasized that, in addition to the intrinsic will to learn something new, adults must be part of an environment in which they feel psychologically “safe” to learn. “Adults are emotionally invested in how they perform in learning situations and how others perceive them when they make mistakes” (Rothwell, 2008, p. 88). As a result, learning climate is an integral part of the adult learning process in the workplace.

Rothwell (2008) offered four key questions that should be asked to determine if the learning climate is conducive to adult learning in a professional setting. He asked

Do individual workers feel that they are encouraged or discouraged from

- developing themselves professionally;
- learning in real time to solve work-related problems;
- declaring their career goals and pursuing them, even when they are not aligned with their supervisors’ expectations;
- using work time and organizational resources to enhance their knowledge, skills, and attitudes to achieve higher performance and productivity (p. 88)?

After the self-reflection process has identified areas of growth, the learning climate plays a role in the progress of the learning process and the success of the intended outcomes.
In short, positive change can occur when teachers own the learning. Growth is much more likely to take place when teachers feel the learning is necessary and that they have been active participants in identifying the specific need. Additionally, as seen in Figure 1, the success of the growth and learning process will depend on the learning climate that is established in the respective organization.

Figure 1. Professional development through the lens of adult learning theory. This figure shows the potential implications and perceptions of professional development based on the learning climate.

The learning climate can produce a learner-driven professional development, which based on adult learning theory, can result an experience that is meaningful, empowering, applicable, and motivating to the learning. Alternatively, if the learning climate fosters externally-driven professional development, the learners may be less invested as their drive is to comply with the expectations, resulting in a lack of investment and buy-in, and may lead to resistance from the learner.

Organization of this Document

This chapter has identified the problem of improving teaching practices, focusing on self-assessment as a tool to help adult learners recognize what they need to learn and
to take ownership of their own learning. It has outlined the two research questions to be addressed by this qualitative study: What are fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment process and how it relates to their teaching practices? What are the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the self-assessment on their teaching practices?

Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to this study, focusing on the importance of self-assessment, obstacles to self-assessment, and the process of self-assessment. Chapter 3 presents the methodology. It explains the study’s research design and outlines procedures for participation selection, data collection, and data analysis. It also highlights efforts to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Chapter 4 presents the study’s results, and chapter 5 discusses them in the context of the literature, offering conclusions and recommendations.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to lay a foundation for this study, this chapter summarizes the literature that has been published on the topic of self-assessment. This information has been organized into three sections. The themes that emerged when analyzing current research speak less to the specific tools that are used to conduct self-assessment, and more about self-assessment in theory and the conditions surrounding the process.

The first section outlines the importance of self-assessment and why it is an essential practice to improving pedagogy. This information is critical to the study because understanding the impact that self-assessment has on teaching practices provides a context for the research.

The second section discusses the findings uncovered in the research regarding two specific obstacles to self-assessments:

1. The conditioning of top-down decisions, in which teachers become more comfortable having somebody tell them what they need to know rather than constructing that information.

2. Lack of support from leaders and teachers’ lack of understanding of what they need to know.

The third section in this literature review provides a summary of information related to self-assessment processes that have been deemed successful. I analyzed various studies of self-assessments and triangulated the findings to identify some common variables that may have contributed to favorable outcomes.
Figure 2. Three key points identified in the literature review. This figure illustrates the three themes that emerged from the existing studies on self-reflection.

A self-assessment is a proactive approach in which one measures his or her performance against a set of criteria, but it cannot be done without a level of self-reflection. In this document, the terms self-reflection and self-assessment are used interchangeably.

**Importance of Self-Assessment**

The literature specifies that self-assessment is a practice that can have a positive impact on improving teaching and learning. The research supports the notion that reflection practices and self-assessment processes are an integral part of positive change. Self-assessment can pinpoint areas in which further learning can and should take place.

In the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s *District-Level Planning and Implementation Guide* (2012), produced to support the implementation of the new evaluation system, the self-assessment step of the cycle is justified as “a formal process for reflection and self-assessment [which] creates the foundation of a new opportunity for educators to chart their own course for professional
growth and development” (p. 3). Knowles (2011) reminded us that “experience is the richest resource for adults’ learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience” (p. 39). In his research, Humphreys (1992) stated that a self-assessment secures “only average market force credibility but . . . has high value in terms of informing the teaching process” (p. 117). The self-assessment process provides a window for teachers to view their experience leading to ownership of the identified areas of need.

Lotter et al. (as cited in Osipova et al., 2011) asserted that “teachers’ beliefs about their instructional practices become apparent when teachers engage in self-reflection” (p. 158). Self-reflection can lead teachers to frame their beliefs and make judgments on their own instructional practices, which may become an internal incentive to self-initiate ways to improve. Grounded in the premise of adult learning theory, self-assessments provide opportunities for teachers to take ownership of areas in need of further development. When self-assessment is done correctly, teachers are theoretically more open to learning and eager to seek new information if they feel that certain content is necessary and applicable to their needs. The professional development to improve one’s practice can be strategically planned due to the outcome of a self-assessment. When the learning can address an identified need, it is likely to be absorbed and utilized more effectively. Although the traditional professional development practices that are determined for teachers “have at their core the noble intention of improving [learning]” (Diaz-Maggioli, pg. 2), it is typical to have external factors driving the topic, not individual needs. Self-assessments, however, are intended to frame the professional development needs in order to address specific needs of teachers. Lotter et al. (as cited in
Osipova et al., 2011) stated, “Research on the power of self-reflection in education demonstrates that reflective teachers are better able to recognize problems in their practice, which empowers them to reframe the problems in order to seek solutions” (p. 158). A comprehensive self-assessment process “bridges experience and learning, pushes one to critique unexamined assumptions and beliefs, and involves a deep, structural shift in thoughts, feelings, and behavior” (Osipova et al., 2011, p. 159). Loughran (as cited in Osipova et al., 2011) commented in his journal article titled Effective Reflective Practices, “Teachers who reflect on their practices are more likely to change their practice to better meet the needs of their students. Reflection on practice has been seen as a way for teachers to better understand what it is they know, and how they need to develop their knowledge” (pp. 159-160). Self-assessments provide teachers with insight into their teaching, allowing them to hone in on particular areas that need focus. “Self-assessment contributes to expectations that guide goal setting and effort” (Ross & Bruce, 2007, p. 148). Once goals have been established and teachers believe these goals are applicable to their needs, feasible, and rigorous, the effort to achieve them comes more naturally. “Individuals are more likely to persist if they adopt goals that have unambiguous outcomes, that are achievable in the near future, and that are moderately difficult to achieve” (Ross & Bruce, 2007, p. 148). Targeting concrete, desirable, and attainable outcomes will gain better traction, which increases the likelihood for success. Similarly, in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, educators are expected to develop goals that are directly connected to the results of their self-assessment.

Diaz-Maggioli (2004) plainly stated, “Professional development, as we have known it for years now, has yielded little or no positive effects on student learning”
Looking through the lens of adult learning theory, “Adults have a deep need to be self-directed” (Knowles, 2011, p. 38), and professional development often does not result in change in practices unless the topic is driven by teachers’ needs, or their perceptions of their needs. “Given that [teachers’] voices are not generally heeded during professional development, teachers rightly question their investment in programs that were built behind their backs yet are aimed at changing the way they do things” (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004, p. 2). Based on the literature, a strong self-assessment process will help drive professional development and make it meaningful and worthwhile for teachers.

### Obstacles Found in the Self-Assessment Processes

Throughout the review of existing research, two key obstacles that interfere with self-assessments emerged from the literature. Neither directly relate to the specific tools and processes used to conduct self-assessments, but instead they are variables embedded in the conditions that impact the success of the self-assessment processes. These two obstacles were: conditioning of top-down decisions and lack of support and understanding.

**Obstacle 1: Conditioning of top-down decisions.** The first obstacle is that teachers are conditioned to be told what to do and learn, instead of having ownership of their own learning. Humphreys (1992) conducted a study that highlighted the notion that the perspective of teachers controlling their own learning is unfamiliar to them. Humphreys (1992) noticed an initial feeling of confusion because the teachers “had expected to be told by others what it was they needed to know” (p. 119). He found that the educators who participated in the study, who were all experienced teachers, were puzzled by the self-assessment process because it was significant shift in mindset for
them; “as a consequence they felt uncertain and lacked conviction that they had correctly identified their own areas of development” (Humphreys, 1992, p. 118). It was found that the teacher participants were comfortable with making decisions and evaluating the needs of their students, but were much less assured about making judgments and decisions about their own practices. He shared, “Systems chosen for teacher [self-] appraisal frequently reflect the interest of the end users other than the teachers themselves” (p. 115). The participants were conditioned to expect top-down decisions to be made relative to their own practices and were not comfortable being in command of these decisions. He found that only a limited number of approaches “encourage individual teachers to take responsibility for their own needs analysis” (p. 116). Based on the fundamentals of adult learning theory, if the teachers do not have confidence in the decisions that are made about their learning and areas in need of improvement, they will implement their practice changes with less fidelity, if at all.

When teachers were left to make their own decisions during their self-assessments and seek opportunities to improve on their areas of weakness, Humphreys (1992) found that they were more likely to “attend courses that were either of interest to them or that they were asked to participate in through their school” (p. 118). One teacher in the study admitted, “I feel more comfortable when I am given more guidance, probably because that was the way I was treated when I was a student” (p. 119). In his research, he acknowledged the trend toward legislated change, where areas needing improvement were dictated, rather than negotiated change, where the educator and the leader collaboratively agreed upon the areas needing improvement. He argued that “any school could supplement a top down management led system with methods that also encourage
greater respect for teacher derived judgments” (p. 116). Giving teachers more independence and autonomy to identify areas needing further development may have improved some of the outcomes in the study.

**Obstacle 2: Lack of support and understanding.** A second obstacle is the teachers’ lack of understanding of the knowledge that they should possess and the lack of support given to help them with these understandings. Despite the literature that supports the importance of self-assessments, as described earlier in this chapter, findings show self-assessments have been done without proper support, which results in a lack of growth and development for those teachers. Teachers simply lacked the confidence and comfort to determine their own fate for continual improvement in their work.

During the analysis of his data, Humphreys (1992) realized there was “confusion arising from having too little knowledge concerning the knowledge to be learnt” (p. 120), which resulted in a loss of self-esteem. One teacher described her feeling after trying to identify areas of focus she should address through the self-assessment process as, “one of apprehension in going into the unknown, into areas of learning that are hard to grasp as concepts…” (Humphreys, 1992, p. 120). Although teachers were encouraged to collect qualitative evidence from their teaching and analyze it, they found it difficult to relate to their own personal needs as an educator. Additionally, “criteria in many cases have been decided by persons other than those selected by the teachers themselves” (Humphreys, 1992, p. 122). When teachers have been asked to establish their own priorities for growth and professional development, they found it difficult to identify their audience—that is, the head teacher, the principal, or themselves (p. 122). Ball and Goodson (as cited in Humphreys, 1992) asserted that the “lack of confidence is based on the traditional teacher.
culture where it is regarded as a professional weakness to admit to colleagues that you cannot cope” (p. 119). It was found that when teachers were left to identify their own needs, “the apparently supportive self-assessment approach turned out to be laudable rhetoric as the teachers felt isolated by lack of informed advice from others” (Humphreys, 1992, p. 119).

In their study, Sharil and Majid’s (2010) found a superficial quality of reflection, “as the trainee teachers were only describing their actions and their lessons without much attempt to synthesize relevant literature and evaluate them” (p. 261). If teachers do not fully understand the self-assessment process, the quality of their reflections may be compromised. In this study, “the participants failed to reflect on the ‘whys’ and the ‘hows’ of their pedagogical planning” (Sharil & Majid, 2010, p. 266). Instead, teachers just shared the ‘what’ part of their planning process, leaving out the reasoning part of their reflection and explanations for their decision making.

Support throughout the self-assessment is critical. In the absence of support, even those teachers who accurately assess their performance and identify a need for change are unlikely to be able to carry out the changes in their practices. Other teachers will “generate inflated self-appraisals that reduce motivation to change” (Ross & Bruce, 2007, p. 155). Additionally, Ross and Bruce (as cited in Osipova et al., 2011) found in their study that “teachers’ initial self-reflections can be an over-estimation of their instructional practice” (p. 168). The results of Osipova et al.’s (2011) study confirmed these findings, as the teachers consistently gave themselves high ratings in most categories. This indicates that teachers can be overconfident, focusing on their good
intentions instead of objectively reflecting on their practices, which may lead to inaccurate judgments on their performance.

Still others will “under-rate their performance or . . . accurately appraise themselves as low performers,” and they “are also unlikely to change due to the depressing effect of negative self-assessment on teacher efficacy. Teachers with low self-efficacy are less likely to implement new teaching ideas” (Ross & Bruce, 2007, p. 155). Teachers who feel confident and understand how to coalesce their pedagogical practices to make meaning of their teaching performance are more inclined to embrace change.

**Characteristics of Successful Self-Assessment Processes**

The research outlined above indicates that self-assessment is an important part of teachers’ growth and development. However, there are obstacles that, if not addressed, minimize or diminish the benefits that could be achieved from a comprehensive approach. Despite the research that supports the benefits of self-assessments, “surprisingly little attention has been paid to teacher self-concepts—teachers’ self-perception of their own teaching effectiveness” (Roche & Marsh, 2000, p. 439). This section will highlight some of the variables in the existing literature that have contributed to successful self-assessments. The success of certain self-assessments in the existing literature was not necessarily due to the assessment tools that were used, but instead to certain conditions that were established.

The research that demonstrates the positive impact of self-assessments provides extensive and comprehensive methodologies for guiding teachers through self-assessments. One essential component in the process is to build teachers’ efficacy and
empowerment. While it may be assumed that in some studies the tools or methods of the self-assessment may be the success factors, it became evident when looking at multiple resources that the preparation and support are more important than the actual means used to collect the data.

A common type of self-assessment is the use of video. Osipova et al. (2011) addressed teachers’ ability to teach word study and fluency instruction and concluded that “the use of video self-reflection served as a valuable tool to enhance teacher practice” (p. 169). The professional development provided to teachers consisted of a 2½-day institute that focused on best practices in these areas, with six collaborative cohort meetings throughout the year when teachers could build on the knowledge they received in the institute. Osipova et al. (2011) acknowledged that numerous research studies involving preservice teacher education programs have reported successful findings using video as a self-assessment tool.

In contrast, Wright, Ellis, and Baxter (2012) analyzed the frequency of general and specific praise statements, using videotaping as a source of self-reflection, and found “no significant differences in how the teachers rated their teaching effectiveness before and after viewing the tapes” (p. 194). The professional development relative to teacher observation training consisted of a 1-day session, and the participants were trained to “define and discriminate among types of praise behavior, record frequency data, evaluate performance against the standards, and write a goal statement” (p. 191). The teachers had direct training on watching and assessing their practices.

These two studies used the same means for collecting data, yet had a major difference in the outcome. The first study provided professional development around
pedagogy and best practices, while the latter study trained teachers on the procedures of watching their videos. This triangulation of data indicates that the change came not from having teachers watch their performance via videotape, but from providing a solid context for teachers to use in their self-evaluations. The scenario where the support and professional development focused on best teaching practices instead of emphasizing how to watch the videos had a much more favorable outcome.

Based on adult learning theory, the professional development involved in the first study was more likely to foster change because when comparing their performance to the best practices learned, teachers were more likely to see the benefit of making changes that were identified. Wright et al.’s (2012) study gave the teachers their focus, which was frequency of praise, and told them how to document the data. Through the lens of adult learning theory, the teachers would be less likely to embrace change because the focus of their observations was given to them with much less of a context about good teaching. In Knowles’s (1996) theory of adult learning, the teachers must understand why a change is needed and believe they have to learn something new in order to put forth the energy to make changes.

In short, teachers were more empowered with contextual knowledge in the first study, which may have contributed to the positive results of the self-observations. Kelly et al. (as cited in Sharil & Majid, 2010) shared that “reflective practitioners look inward, examine their beliefs and values about behaviors, and appraise their actions” (p. 262). The first study embraced that process with the focus of the professional development being best practices, rather than reporting on what was seen on a particular day, which was the premise for the second study’s professional development.
The studies that have been conducted showing positive results of teacher self-assessment all emphasize empowering the teacher. As Wright et al. (2012) stated, “When teachers are empowered to become self-regulators through self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation, then we may expect to see real sustained change and professional growth among them” (p. 196). The studies deemed successful due to empowering teachers and encouraging teachers to take responsibility of their own learning is directly connected to adult learning theory and the research substantiates this theory. When the teachers are intrinsically motivated the pleasure of learning and improving on an area comes from inside and is not driven by external motivators. Humphreys (1992) looked at various self-assessment processes that have been utilized and articulated that positive results are gained through “the use of appraisal methods that will empower teachers to reflect upon their own professional needs and interests” (p. 115). He indicated that the empowerment of teachers must be embedded in the self-appraisal system in order to “respect the individuality of teachers’ contributions to the quality of education” (p. 115). McEntyre (as cited in Humphreys, 2002) concurred when they emphasized that teachers should “define their own needs according to their own frame of reference” (p. 122). It is clear from the research that involving the teachers in the process of identifying areas of need, and giving the support to do so, leads to more favorable results. Based on the research and adult learning theory, empowering teachers in the self-assessment process will increase their motivation and their desire to develop their own teaching practices.

It is evident from the research that teachers are most likely to use the self-reflection process with integrity to improve their teaching practices when they have been
empowered to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. This is done through direct professional development about a proper self-assessment and through a comprehensive self-assessment process.

The current study is intended to add to the literature on self-assessment, providing further insight on teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment process that is currently in place in Massachusetts. The next chapter describes the methodology used in this research study.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gather and analyze data regarding fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the implementation and effectiveness of the self-assessment process mandated by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in the new Educator Evaluation System. The data in this qualitative study were used to answer two research questions:

1. What are fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment?
2. What are the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the self-assessment on their teaching practices?

A qualitative, interview-based study design was chosen to address these research questions. That design is discussed in the next section, followed by a description of participant selection, data collection and analysis procedures, and the study’s trustworthiness.

Research Design

Maxwell (2005) stated that “the strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers” (p. 22). Teachers’ perceptions about the self-assessment process were sought through semi-structured interviews, as this method provided an opportunity for more detailed and descriptive thoughts to be shared. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) explained that interviews are a preferred means for collecting this type of data because “one-to-one interviews are easily managed, allowing a rapport to be developed and giving participants the space to think, speak and be heard” (p. 57).
Seidman (2013) summarized, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Interviews provide insight into the nuances that help develop meaning behind participants’ responses.

The research tradition used was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). “Phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). The interview questions were developed to support the research questions and were phrased in a format that was conducive to elaboration. As Smith et al. (2009) described, “We aim to set up the interview as an event which facilitates the discussion of relevant topics, and which will allow the research questions to be answered subsequently, via analysis” (p. 57). The rich conversation that took place during the interview sessions provided the data necessary to construct conclusions about the research questions.

Although IPA via interviews is a fluid approach, Butin (2010) reminded researchers that “interviewing is a complex undertaking that requires practice, thoroughness, and strict adherence to scholarly protocols” (p. 97). An interview protocol for this study was carefully developed, providing a set of topics or questions that were discussed and answered in a logical order to optimize the use of the conversation. This gave me plenty of data that were combed through and used to develop a full analysis and draw conclusions. This protocol ensured that the interview questions supported the research questions, were framed in an open form, and could assist with anticipating potential sensitive topics (Smith et al., 2009).
As Smith et al. (2009) indicated, IPA is designed to promote thoughtful engagement with the participants and their experiences. The end result of the IPA analysis is a summary of the meaning that I interpret from participants’ perceptions. By the final analysis, the data had gone through two levels of interpretation, first by the participants and then by me.

**Ethical Issues**

Before data collection began, approval of the study was obtained from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board. The board reviewed the application and additional documentation, including a letter to solicit participants (Appendix A), the interview protocol (Appendix B), and the participant consent form (Appendix C). I complied with all requirements of the institutional review board.

In addition, written permission in both school districts was obtained. Both district leaders were in full support of the study and gave permission for the study to be conducted in their respective district.

It was stressed to potential participants that participation was voluntary and they could choose not to participate or could end their participation in the study at any time, with no repercussions. It was also explained that I would make every effort to keep their information confidential. No participant, district, or school names are used in this thesis; rather, pseudonyms are used.

**Participants**

This study involved a total of seven teachers from two different districts in the Merrimack Valley area of Massachusetts. In the first district—here called by the
pseudonym “Hillville”—four fourth-grade teachers volunteered to participate. In the second district, about 13 miles from Hillville and with a similar size and suburban environment—here called “Crystal Falls”—three teachers volunteered to participate. In both districts, the curriculum leaders distributed a written memo from this me that gave an overview of the study and requested participants. Per the directions in the written memo, the seven interested teachers contacted me, and all were included in the study. The goal was to get at least six participants and seven responded. All of those who responded were selected to participate. Coincidentally, all seven participants are female.

This sampling strategy represents, as Maxwell (2005) coined it, *purposeful selection* (p. 88). He described this strategy as one “in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88). The determination of seven interviews was made based on the research completed by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006). They concluded that when seeking high-level, overarching themes, at least six interviews are “sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations” (p. 78). The information that I was seeking was successfully gathered with seven interviews.

There are some limitations to the approach of this selection process. The teachers who were willing to volunteer their time to assist with this study may fit a certain type of profile, such as somebody who is more willing to assist and participate in extracurricular activities or someone with a special interest in self-assessment. As such, the pool of participants may not have been indicative of the general population of fourth grade teachers. In addition, since the seven teachers were from one of two districts in the Merrimack Valley, they may represent a homogenous group due to their geographic
location. These participant limitations have an impact on external validity and must be taken into consideration when reviewing this study.

**Data Collection and Storage**

A series of seven interviews were conducted to elicit information about these fourth-grade teachers’ perception of the self-assessment process. As Seidman (2013) stated, “The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the ‘others’ who make up the organization or carry out the process” (p. 9). Seidman (2013) illustrated the root of the interview process as “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). The conversational approach was anticipated to provide me with a more authentic understanding of the participants’ perceptions on the self-assessment process.

The interviews were held face to face in order to benefit from data gathered from the nuances that accompany the verbal responses. Wengraf (2001) reminded us that “interviews are not merely speech events, they are NVC [nonverbal communication] and whole-body/whole-context events” (p. 48). The observed nuances that became evident to me were documented and considered in the coding process.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted at the participants’ schools, per their request. King and Horrocks (2010) emphasized the importance of being in a setting that is comfortable for the interviewee, not only physically but psychologically as well. They shared, “If participants feel tense and unsettled [in their setting], it may be reflected in stilted and underdeveloped answers to
your questions” (p. 42). It appeared to me that each participant was comfortable and there was no indication that any individual was tense or unsettled.

During the interviews, the dialogue was audio recorded using a voice-recording device and then was transcribed in its entirety since IPA research “requires a verbatim record of the data collection event” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 73). All interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim by rev.com, a company recommended by a colleague that has confidentiality protocols. These transcripts were saved on a thumb drive and were used solely for the purpose of this research. The thumb drive was stored in a safe at my home. Following the advice of Gillham (2005) and the requirements of the institutional review board, the files will be deleted 3 years after the dissertation is completed. Pseudonyms were created and used for all individual participants as well as their two school districts. Any information presented in the study that could have identified a person or place was altered to protect anonymity. These pseudonyms were used in all notes and recording labels to maintain full confidentiality for the people and districts participating in the study.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis process in IPA is much like that in traditional phenomenology, in that interviews are conducted and transcribed verbatim, and then the data are coded using traditional coding techniques. Following coding of the data from each individual interview, a cross-comparison was completed to identify common themes and key findings.

Although there is no prescribed method of data collection in IPA research, Smith et al. (2009) suggested a six-step protocol in order to “minimize the potential for novice analysts’ anxiety and confusion and reduce the risk of feeling overwhelmed by the
process of analysis” (p. 81). These suggestions allow for plenty of room to maneuver so the process can be modified to fit the analyst’s style. I followed Smith et al.’s (2009) general framework with slight alterations, but committed to designing a process to “encourage a reflective engagement with the participant’s account” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 87). The goal was to set up a process that allowed me to fluidly move between the parts and the whole with an open mind while engaging with the data.

Below is a brief description of Smith et al.’s (2009) six steps for IPA interview data analysis, along with the corresponding actions I took during each step.

**Step 1. Reading and rereading.** Following the advice of Smith et al. (2009), I listened to each interview while reading the transcripts, then listened to the interviews without the transcripts numerous times, and finally read the transcripts several times to gather initial thoughts.

**Step 2. Initial noting.** Smith et al. (2009) encouraged researchers to take notes and document anything that appealed to them in the transcripts or recordings and then divide the notes up into meaningful units, adding a comment to each unit. I used the MAXQDA coding software to mark and code all areas of interest using an open coding approach. Notes were developed next to the markings to document descriptors or other details.

**Step 3. Developing emergent themes.** Smith et al. (2009) recommended that once the analyst has immersed himself or herself in the transcripts and recordings and documented items of interest, he or she should leave the full transcripts and recordings and shift to the notes. At that point, the analyst’s notes begin to transform into themes.
After sorting each full transcript by codes, I clustered the related codes within each interview transcript together into broader categories.

**Step 4. Searching for connections across emergent themes.** With this step, the intent is to look for patterns and connections across all cases to develop emergent themes. I analyzed the code clusters in each individual transcript and searched for themes that emerged throughout each case.

**Step 5. Moving to the next case.** I followed the advice to repeat Steps 1 to 4 for each case in order to fully analyze each of the interviews independently.

**Step 6. Looking for patterns across all cases.** Without being too cautious or descriptive at first—which Smith et al. (2009) indicated was a common error with novice analysts—researchers should analyze the emergent patterns (i.e., themes) that are common across multiple cases. Interpretation of these findings then begins through what Smith et al. (2009) called “contextualization” and “numeration,” both of which are described in the next chapter. I developed a total of 17 themes that spanned all seven interviews. These 17 themes were then clustered into four broader themes, as explained in detail in chapter 4.
Figure 3. Steps in the data analysis process. This figure illustrates the steps in data analysis, derived from Smith et. al.’s (2009) framework, that were used to analyze and interpret the data.

Trustworthiness

To ensure that a study is valid and reliable, the data should be rich and detailed so that the conclusions are credible. Although Maxwell (2005) indicated that “validity does not imply the existence of any objective truth” (p. 106), the topic of validity must be explicitly addressed in the research. The use of multiple sources of data (i.e., conducting seven interviews) in this study provided a more comprehensive collection of information so that I was not relying on a single data source. Baumgarten (2010) defined reliability as “the consistency of measures of a concept, using an identical measurement procedure” (p. 4). Using a standard protocol for these semi-structured interviews allowed me to obtain a variety of data using the same measurement procedures.

Data were triangulated to develop common themes that led to the findings and conclusions of this study, which increases the validity of the data. Because the seven interviewees represented two different school districts, the data represented teachers’ perceptions rooted in different experiences, including a variety of practices and procedures to implement the self-assessment process with teachers. Analyzing the information, extrapolating common themes, and triangulating that data increased the level of validity in this study.

I took measures to minimize the level of response effect bias, which was described by Butin (2010) as a common response in interviews when the participants “tell the interviewers what they want to hear” (p. 96). Among the variables listed that impact
response effect bias—which include the interviewer’s gender, race, tone, and body language—I addressed those that could be altered. My tone and body language remained neutral throughout the interview. My positioning relative to the participant was strategic. In most cases, I sat on the side of the table that was perpendicular to the participant, with the chair turned to face the interviewee. I did not react with words or facial expressions when in agreement or disagreement. Remaining indifferent lessened the effect bias during the interviews.

Lastly, the setup of the interviews helped increase the study’s validity. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and the interview questions were open-ended so that the participants could provide a narrative to answer the questions and describe their perceptions. These strategies provided the opportunity for in-depth information to be elicited. With permission from the participants, the full interview was recorded, and the data were analyzed using the verbatim information, rather than depending solely on my notes and memory.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discusses the use of an interpretative phenomenological analysis used to understand the perceptions of the experiences fourth grade teachers’ have regarding the self-assessment process. Ethical issues, participants, and data collection and storage were reviewed. The chapter concluded with a description of the data analysis process and the trustworthiness. Chapter four provides a discussion of the findings that were gathered from the methods outlined above.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

This interpretative phenomenological study was conducted to understand the perceptions of fourth-grade teachers relative to the self-assessment process used in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System. I conducted this study through the lens of adult learning theory. Seven participants were interviewed, and each shared her approach to and viewpoints on the self-assessment process conducted at the beginning of each evaluation cycle, per the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Educator Evaluation System requirements. These teachers were public school fourth-grade teachers in Massachusetts with at least 3 years of teaching experience. Two different public school districts were represented in this study: three participants from one district and four from another. Pseudonyms are used for both the school districts and the participants. This chapter provides responses to the two research questions:

1. *What are fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment?* Information to address this question was collected to understand teachers’ impressions of this process. The data collected provided information that helped make sense of the following:

   — Conditions related to teachers’ level of preparedness to implement self-assessment
   
   — The influence that the evaluation has on the self-assessment process
   
   — The level of reflection that takes place during the self-assessments

2. *What are the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the self-assessment on their teaching practices?* This research question was developed to gain an
understanding of changes made to teaching practices based on the individuals’ results of the self-assessment.

The first part of this chapter presents a view of the seven participants. The second part provides an analysis of the interviews using Smith et al.’s (2009) recommended interview analysis process, called “contextualization.” Contextualization is “a useful way of looking at the connections between emergent themes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 98). I implemented contextualization by using the transcripts to shape the themes that stemmed from the participants’ narratives. Using this information to “highlight the constellations of emergent themes” (Smith et al., 2009, pg. 98) derived from particular narratives provided clarity on some of the commonalities that led to my findings.

Additionally, I used the method of “numeration,” which Smith et al. (2009) defined as “the frequency with which a theme is supported” (p. 99). Although one should take caution not to overemphasize this method, it was useful in helping me identify themes that were important and relevant to this study.

**Participant Profiles**

This section briefly describes the teaching experience of each participant, along with her self-reported general level of reflectiveness in her work. As stated in the criteria for this study, all seven teachers were currently teaching fourth grade. Also, although all teachers worked in one of two districts, Crystal Falls or Hillville, the participants represented six different elementary schools. The first two interview questions that gathered the information for the descriptions were as follows:

1. Tell me about your teaching experience. How long have you taught fourth grade?
   
   Have you been in this school throughout your entire career?
2. In general, how would you describe your level of reflectiveness in your work?

   **Katherine.** Katherine is in her ninth year as a fourth-grade teacher in the Crystal Falls school district. She has been at the same school for all 9 years. Prior to that, she taught 1 year at a private school the year after she graduated.

   Katherine felt that she was generally reflective in her practice and felt that all good teachers should be thinking back on their teaching experiences and thinking about what changes could be made to improve student experiences in the future.

   **Barbara.** Barbara has been an educator for 19 years in the Crystal Falls district at her current school. She began as a first-grade teacher at her current school and then moved to part-time kindergarten and part-time reading teacher for 2 years. She spent 5 years as a third-grade teacher and had been in her fourth-grade position for the past 11 years.

   When asked about her general level of reflectiveness as a teacher, she responded, “I think I’m getting there.” She explained that her past practice was to write little notes each week in her plan book to document what went well that week and what did not. However, now that she felt she was forced to reflect due to the new evaluation system, Barbara wrote in a journal on Fridays to reflect on the week. Barbara shared that she now reflected more often due to the new Educator Evaluation System.

   **Jacqueline.** Jacqueline has worked in the Crystal Falls district since she started teaching 5 years ago. In her first year teaching, she was a long-term substitute, covering two half-year maternity leaves, first in second grade and then in fourth grade. After her first year, she was hired as a permanent teacher in fourth grade and then switched to fifth grade for 2 years. She returned to teach fourth grade in the 2014-2015 school year.
When asked about her level of reflectiveness, Jacqueline shared that she self-reflected in some aspects of her job, particularly in areas such as math where she felt most comfortable. She admitted that she tended to be less reflective in areas, such as writing, where she felt less confident.

Cynthia. Cynthia has worked in the Hillville district since she began her teaching career in 2001. As a career-changer, Cynthia was an accountant for 10 years prior to switching to education 14 years ago, when she began as a part-time math tutor in Hillville while going to school to obtain her master’s degree. After graduating, Cynthia was hired as an interim special education teacher for 6 years. She then wanted a classroom of her own, so in the same school held a fifth-grade position for 2 years and then switched to fourth grade, where she has been for the past 3 years.

Cynthia considered herself a reflective teacher but shared that, due to her accounting background, she tended to focus too heavily on the numbers when doing her self-assessments. She hoped to expand her practice and include more qualitative data as well. She enjoyed the self-assessment part of the evaluation process because she felt she gleaned good quantitative information from the exercise.

Judy. Judy has been in Hillville since 1999, when she began her work as a teacher. She was a career-changer and worked as a labor and delivery nurse for 10 years prior to entering the world of teaching. After realizing she was meant to be a teacher, she worked in another district as a teaching assistant and a one-on-one aide for a child with a hearing disability. Judy obtained her master’s degree and began her teaching career in Hillville. She has gone back and forth between fourth and fifth grades over the past 16 years.
Judy described herself as “pretty reflective.” Since her first year of teaching, she has written a commentary to herself in her lesson book at the end of the week as a reminder of what went well and what did not. She liked tweaking lessons each year based on her feedback from the previous year.

**Natalie.** In 2009, Natalie began her teaching career in Hillville when she graduated with her master’s degree. She has taught fourth grade each year, with the exception of last year when she taught fifth grade for 1 year. She is now back to fourth grade.

When asked about her level of reflectiveness, Natalie shared that it depended on what she was doing. If she “tanks a lesson,” then she tended to be more reflective to identify what went wrong and plan accordingly to improve it the next time. Natalie shared that she did not tend to do written reflections because she did not have time for that. She said she did often think about what worked and what didn’t when teaching lessons.

**Sarah.** Sarah has been a teacher in Hillville since she started her career 7 years ago. She began as a fourth-grade teacher at her current school. After 3 years, she was transferred to a different school in the district due to enrollment, where she taught fifth grade. After 2 years at the other school, Sarah returned to her first school and has been there teaching fourth grade for the past 2 years.

Sarah reported that she was very reflective. She explained that it took her a couple of years to learn the practice, because she ultimately wanted everything to be perfect all the time. She found it difficult at first to identify what areas of her teaching needed to be changed but then realized, “You’re not going to learn if you’re not reflecting
on what worked and what didn’t.” Now Sarah felt that reflection was part of her regular practice.

Overview of Emergent Themes

This study was developed using interpretative phenomenological analysis so that I could get an in-depth understanding of the experience, feelings, and thoughts of the participants relative to the self-assessment process in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System. The information was collected through seven semi-structured interviews with fourth-grade teachers who worked in one of the two school districts involved in the research. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed, case by case, using a systematic approach.

In this evaluation cycle, the step subsequent to the self-assessment is the development of professional goals. In the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, it is recommended that teachers use the information from the self-assessment to formulate their goals. In all cases in this study, the participants referred to their goals in the context of being a concrete and written outcome of their self-assessments.

Specified self-assessment steps or procedures are not focused on in this study. In most cases, the teachers reported that during self-assessments they simply looked at student data and identified areas where the data, in most cases student assessment data, showed a lower achievement score. As a result, this study does not emphasize the specific procedures employed. Instead it details the information that teachers use to inform their self-assessments.

The interview data were interrogated through a double hermeneutic analysis, a characteristic of interpretative phenomenological analyses, and four themes emerged
based on the responses of teachers gathered during the interviews. These themes represent findings about the self-assessment step of the evaluation cycle based on an analysis of teachers’ perceptions through the use of contextualization and numeration. Within each theme, there were subthemes that, when combined into clusters, composed the broader themes. Table 1 lists the emergent themes and their respective subthemes.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Foundations for self-assessments</td>
<td>1a. Fundamental beliefs of the teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1b. Self-assessment professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1c. Checking it off the list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Self-assessment and evaluation</td>
<td>2a. The audience for the self-assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2b. External influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Thoughtful practice vs. reflective practice</td>
<td>3a. Looking at student data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3b. Team goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The self-assessment’s direct impact on teachers</td>
<td>4a. Self-directed professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4b. The influence of self-assessments on classroom instruction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sections that follow present each theme and subtheme through narrative accounts. The information includes related excerpts or quotations that support the claims.

**Theme 1: Foundations for Self-Assessments**

This theme related to three prongs that may impact the foundation for successful implementation of the self-assessment process: a fundamental belief of staff, professional
development received on the topic, and having an intrinsic desire to complete self-assessments. Each of these three prongs are discussed in this section.

While the first two subthemes were developed mainly from related interview questions that were associated with those two topics, the third subtheme was developed by examining the information gathered from a variety of interview responses. In this case, the subtheme began to emerge from data collected throughout the interviews, not from a specific related question.

**Subtheme 1a. Fundamental beliefs of teachers.** Based on adult learning theory, the teachers must first believe that self-assessments are beneficial to them and can be a useful tool to help them enhance their teaching practices. Based on the perceptions that the participants shared, the idea that self-assessment is a beneficial practice was supported, and the teachers considered it to be a valuable process.

This theme emerged primarily from the data gathered from the responses to the questions, *Based on your experience with your self-assessments, would you want to see it maintained or omitted as a step in the evaluation process? What argument would you give to support your position?* While there were mixed reviews on the actual process in place with the Massachusetts Educator Evaluator System, all seven participants shared that self-assessments, in theory, were beneficial to teachers, particularly in the development of their own professional goals, which was step 2 of the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System.

Several of the teachers articulated that self-assessment was a necessary step in order to develop relevant professional goals, which in this process was the concrete outcome of the self-assessment. Jacqueline shared that teachers should “take a look at
their own strengths and weaknesses. How are you going to pick [goals] without knowing [your students’] strengths and weakness, or your own, for that matter?” Cynthia concurred that the self-assessments were beneficial in the development of her goals, as her goals were “driven on what I perceive as my weaknesses, not [my students’] weaknesses.” Natalie shared that she “used what I didn’t do well at, what I thought my weaknesses were, to create my goals for that cycle. I think it forces me to at least try to implement something new, find a way to improve upon what my weaknesses are, whether or not it is always super successful.” Barbara agreed that “in order to have goals, you have to self-assess.” Katherine asserted, “I think [self-assessments] are good because they make you think about what you’re doing and why you’re doing it.” In several cases, the teachers mentioned that good teachers should self-assess, regardless of whether it is required by the evaluation system.

Judy and Sarah also agreed that the self-assessment process was beneficial and they would argue that it should be part of the evaluation cycle. Judy shared, “As an educator, not only do we need to keep up on our own learning, but I think you have to reflect on it. Otherwise, I think you become sort of robotic.”

In two cases, not only did the teachers feel self-assessments were important, but they would like to have more direct conversations with their supervisors about the results of their self-assessments. Both Judy and Sarah talked about the strong desire to have in-depth conversations with their evaluators about their individual self-assessments. Judy explained that after she did her “soul-searching,” she’d like to sit down with her evaluator and have the evaluator share his or her input. She said, “It would be nice to have that step. I don’t feel like our supervisors know us that well to do that.” Sarah had a similar
thought, “I really would like to sit down with [my evaluator] and talk to them about . . . the reflective piece.” Having their evaluators interact with them about their self-assessments was a strong desire of both Judy and Sara.

In summary, it was evident in the interviews that all participants felt that self-assessments were a meaningful exercise that should be part of their regular practice. They believed self-assessments provided insight that may not be identified otherwise and helped teachers develop an area of focus moving forward.

**Subtheme 1b. Self-assessment professional development.** Since previous research has shown that true self-assessments do not always come naturally and can be uncomfortable for teachers, training and professional development help develop a solid foundation for successful implementation of self-assessments. One interview question specifically elicited information used to develop this subtheme. I asked participants: *Describe the emphasis that your school or district has placed on self-assessments (training, discussions, etc.).* While the participants understood the importance of the self-assessment, as identified in Subtheme 1a, it appeared from the responses that minimal professional development was provided to specifically address the self-assessment part of the evaluation cycle.

In several cases, it seems that training may have been geared toward the entire five-step Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System. This training provided an overview of each step, but did not go into detail about *how* to complete each step effectively. For example, Natalie’s initial response was that she felt the staff in Hillville was trained; however, she then explained that the training had been accomplished through the direction for staff to review the PowerPoints that the state released. She
admitted that after watching the online sessions, she and her colleagues “were like: *I have no idea what they’re talking about.*” She mentioned that those PowerPoints were the only training provided, but she felt experiencing the process was more helpful than the PowerPoints. Natalie explained, “Going through it for the 2-year process made it so much easier.”

Judy had a similar experience that she shared when she stated, “I remember going to some training over at the high school. . . . I don’t even remember what it was.” Barbara indicated a similar scenario. She shared that “there was overall trainings when we did it.” However, she had difficulty recalling the specifics. She did say that the administrators were always very open if people wanted to go see them for help, but Barbara explained, “I think a lot of us who have been around a while, we figure we can figure it out.” She alluded to the fact that people did not take advantage of the opportunity to meet with administrators to ask questions or seek clarification.

Others did not recall receiving any training. Jacqueline said, “Trainings, we didn’t get any trainings. It was just kind of handed to us.” Katherine, who was from the same district, also indicated that there was no training, and “no one really knew what they were doing, so at the end you were kind of scrambling to figure it out.” There was a sense of frustration in the tone of both individuals when discussing this point.

Interestingly, there were mixed reports about the level of training that occurred, and there was more than one description of the preparation process from different members of the same district. Although variation existed in the recollection of training when this evaluation tool was implemented statewide in 2012, it was consistently communicated that there was minimal to no explicit instruction and support on the self-
assessment part of the evaluation process. It seems that the training that was completed addressed the entire five-step evaluation process, and each step was presented with an overview. Among all participants, there were no reports of comprehensive trainings around self-assessments that gave the participants a solid understanding of the process. The interviews uncovered that the teachers did not feel they received adequate professional development in preparation for implementing self-assessments.

**Subtheme 1c. Checking it off the list.** Another condition that is necessary for success is an intrinsic motivation to complete the self-assessment. This is a fundamental component of adult learning theory. One main purpose of self-assessment is to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses and then to use the information to make a concerted effort to develop those areas that are lacking. As a result, teachers should feel that the self-assessment is a process that is for their own benefit and will be useful for them as they continue to grow as a professional.

While all of the participants expressed favorable feelings about self-assessments, as indicated in Subtheme 1a above, several participants indicated that they were using the self-assessment to comply with the mandate, rather than as a tool to better their pedagogical practices. This information was collected from various statements that were spoken throughout the interviews and was not elicited from one specific question.

Barbara, for example, said on six different occasions that teachers were “forced” to complete a self-assessment. She described how she appreciated the information that she gleaned from her previous and informal way of self-assessing, which consisted of jotting notes in her planning book each week. However, now, “because we’re forced to do it,” her process took much longer and was more of a nuisance.
Jacqueline shared a story about a colleague who met her goal rather quickly in her cycle and did not develop a new goal because she did not think it was permissible. Jacqueline said, “She stuck with her goal, because I don’t think you can really switch in the middle anyway.” Jacqueline did not seem aware that she was indicating that, in this case, the essence of the self-assessment and goal setting was compromised because of a rule that she was not confident even existed. I knew that there was no such rule and the goals could be altered to meet the needs of the individuals, as these needs evolved at varying times. The point was not whether or not this rule was being enforced. Instead, it gave insight into the feeling that the compliance factor prevailed over the spirit of the process of continuous reflection and improvement.

Cynthia shared a story that occurred a week prior to the interview. The Hillville district had an early release day and, during that time, they learned about an online professional development resource that housed hundreds of webinars, sorted by topics that ranged across all grade levels, content areas, and pedagogical practices. She explained that many of her colleagues were asking one another, “Did you find something for a goal for next year?” This suggested that people were “shopping” for goal topics and “checking it off the to-do list” prior to completing the self-assessment process, which was intended to drive the goal development. Rather than relying on the self-assessment, the teachers were looking for topics that would lend themselves to a good goal for next year.

As stated in a previous subtheme, Judy expressed her desire to have conversations with people about her findings from the self-assessment process. However, she explained that based on the culture, “This [self-assessment] is part of the requirement; this is what needs to be done.” She felt that many people had not embraced the process because it
was not rolled out thoroughly, and she wondered about the quality of self-assessments throughout the district. In short, although the teachers expressed that self-assessments can be a valuable in theory, the data indicated that many participants felt that the process they used was done primarily to satisfy a requirement.

**Summary of Theme 1.** When adults believe that information is beneficial to them, they are more likely to embrace it and become invested in the learning. It is evident that the participants felt that a self-assessment process was an element of good teaching. Their fundamental beliefs were in support of the self-assessment, which is likely to enhance the desire to implement the process with fidelity.

The overall perception of the participants was that there was minimal professional development in the area. Although generally teachers who were interviewed felt that their administrators were supportive, they did not feel that there was sufficient explicit teaching and preparation around the self-assessment process. As a result, there seemed to be a feeling of slight discomfort when sharing their understanding of self-assessment practices.

Lastly, in this theme, possibly due to the nature of the state mandate and its implementation, the teachers showed signs of completing the self-assessment process to comply with the mandate, rather than using it as a valuable tool to improve their practice. Some felt that the process had benefits, but in most cases, there was an indication that steps were taken in the self-assessment process because it was a requirement rather than a desire.
Theme 2: Self-Assessment and Evaluation

This theme was developed based on two subthemes that emerged relative to the self-assessments and their use as a step in the evaluation cycle. The data collected from the interviews revealed that having self-assessments included in the evaluation process could interfere with teachers’ ability or willingness to experience honest and thoughtful self-reflections.

Both subthemes that emerged in the interviews under this main theme were gleaned from a holistic view of the interviews and not from a specific question. Feelings and thoughts that were shared throughout the interviews were contextualized, and the relationship between the self-assessment and the evaluation process generated this theme.

Subtheme 2a. The audience for the self-assessment. “Reflective practice is the process of thinking analytically about what we are doing, thinking and/or feeling” (Scaife, 2010, p. 4). The self-assessor is his or her own audience, as the essence of the process “involves an attitude of open-minded curiosity oriented towards ongoing learning based on any of our experiences that are capable of informing professional practice” (Scaife, 2010, p. 4). Throughout the interviews, it became evident that the self-assessments that were being conducted tended to be more geared to meeting the expectations of the administrators, instead of the individual teachers being the own audience during the process.

As stated earlier, many teachers referred to their development of goals when discussing their self-assessment because, in the evaluation process, individual goals are to be developed based on the results of each person’s self-assessment. Therefore, the goals were the tangible outcomes of the self-assessments.
During the discussion with teachers, it was evident that in most cases, the goals that were developed were created for the purposes of getting the approval of administration as opposed to being based on the needs of the individuals. When describing her goals, Jacqueline admitted, “I would love to take on a math goal, because I feel like I’m strong there.” She shared that her “discomfort always, for me, is actually jumping right in and saying we should do a goal that I know will be harder for me to reach, based on my teaching abilities.” She wanted to be sure that her goals were based on her more comfortable areas, whereas the process was meant to identify areas that needed further develop in order to continuously improve teaching practices. After Jacqueline went through the self-assessment process, she claimed that she and her colleagues felt that “we really didn’t know if what we were doing was what they were looking for.” This was another instance where the focus was on meeting the expectations of the administrators instead of using the tool as a self-fulfilling practice.

When conveying her experiences in the interview, Judy shared that during the self-assessment window, “I have an after-school time in my class where people could just come and say, Hey, this is what I’m doing . . . and share ideas because there is so much frenzy about ‘Are we doing this right?’” In this instance, there was more emphasis on ensuring that the process met the expectations of the administration and less on teachers using the tool as a way to look at their practices from a bird’s eye view and develop goals based on their true individualized needs. Judy disclosed that “people still feel like somebody is checking their report card and wonder if they identify the faults that they should have.”
Sarah described her process of looking at student data for her self-assessment. She expressed uncertainty about whether the scores she was using to reflect on aligned with the expectations of administration. She said, “How do I know how much percentage I should expect my kids to jump? I think this is a piece that I don’t feel so confident in.” She appeared more concerned about her principal agreeing with her judgment than with the end product of her own analysis of her practices.

Barbara shared that she was always concerned that her administrator might not feel that her goals were good because “you don’t want to do something wrong.” Despite the fact that she believed “the worst that can happen is [the goals] would come back to you and [the administrator] would say, ‘Hey, please take a look at these again,’ we don’t want that to happen, because then you take it like I’m wrong.” As a result of having her principal as her main audience-member for the self-assessment, Barbara admitted that she developed goals that may be less rigorous so that she had a better chance of meeting them by the summative evaluation.

When expressing her feelings about the self-assessment process, Katherine said that when she’s conducted self-assessments, “it kind of feels like they think we’re not doing our job and we have to prove that we’re doing our job right and that . . . is not motivating. I feel like it’s the opposite of what was probably intended.” Because of her concern with having the administrators as the audience, she too confessed that “honestly, we usually choose goals that we know that we’re going to reach because you don’t want to do something that you’re not going to pass doing.”

Based on the information shared, it was evident to me that there were external influences that were persuading the teachers to be more concerned about their appearance
to their evaluator in the self-assessment and goal-setting processes than with utilizing the practice to deepen their understanding of teaching and learning and further develop their pedagogical skills.

**Subtheme 2b. External influences.** Self-assessments are intended to be a window into one’s own performance in order to, as objectively as possible, analyze the practices and identify areas of strength and weakness. In the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, the intention is to use the information from the self-assessment to develop goals that are used as targeted approaches to improve areas that need to be further developed.

During the interviews, a subtheme emerged exposing a significant amount of outside influences that impacted the implementation of teachers’ self-assessments. No specific question asked about outside influences; this subtheme emerged from the participants’ responses.

Sarah indicated that, “self-reflection isn’t really pushed for and isn’t really talked about.” Instead, she shared that there was a strong level of influence from the administrators because there were specified areas on which they wanted the teachers to work. She described that it was a common feeling among teachers to address the initiatives that are being highlighted in the schools.

Although Sarah did not specify which goals her administrators expressed as priorities, other teachers spoke specifically about new initiatives that were put in place within their schools or district, and those tended to be the areas on which teachers chose to focus. Barbara, for example, commented on the fact that she had identified writing as an area that needed focus because the school purchased a new writing program. At
another time, Barbara claimed she learned through the self-assessment that she needed to work on her use and implementation of technology in her classroom. When I inquired about what information she used to determine that was an area of need for her, she stated, “I felt I needed to be better at technology because we got Promethean boards and we hadn’t had them before.” Barbara said, “I made sure that was my goal,” because other new technology, such as Chrome Books and iPads, were purchased for the school as well.

Katherine shared a similar, but more explicit, example of this notion. During her last evaluation cycle, her principal had such a heavy focus on guided reading that he asked that every staff member use that as their area of focus. As a result, Katherine did not complete a true assessment of her own practices during the self-assessment process because the goal was pre-determined for her. Instead, she looked at her incoming students’ reading data and planned her goal and instruction accordingly.

Jacqueline shared that her entire grade-level team chose to develop a math goal because a new math program had been implemented in the district. She explained, “We all had to learn the same thing so we all sat down to look at different aspects of [the program] and created goals based on that.” During this time, the need to focus on the new math program overtook the desire to focus on an area that would have been identified through a personal self-assessment.

Osipova et al. (2011) concluded that although teachers “may accept the ideas of PD [professional development] and be willing to learn, they may remain unaware of their professional shortcomings” (p. 159). None of these teachers expressed a resistance to change initiated by their administrator; however, it appeared that teachers may have omitted a key component of the self-assessment because they had understandings of what
needed to be learned based on new initiatives. Shortcomings, or areas that need refinement, may not be identified when teachers already have areas from the school or district that they must learn and incorporate into their practice. Based on the data, teachers preferred to focus on the area that had been identified for them through a school or district initiative. It was evident that these initiatives would be a more preferred area of focus for the administrators, and they trumped any information that may have been discovered through a thoughtful self-reflection process.

**Summary of Theme 2.** In prior research on successful self-assessment practices, the processes that took place were independent of the teachers’ formal evaluations. The data collected in this study support the notion that the essence of the self-assessment process was compromised due to its direct connection to the teachers’ evaluations. Teachers entered the self-assessment process with a feeling of, *What do my administrators want to hear?* and *Do they think I’m doing this correctly?* With the administrators being the audience of the self-assessments instead of the teachers, the self-assessments were not being used to reflect on individual pedagogical practices in order to identify personalized areas of strengths and weaknesses.

Additionally, with the amount of curriculum changes taking place in the two districts that were represented, there was little room for teachers to take on new learning that was separate from these school- and district-based initiatives. Instead of identifying something new to learn that was discovered through a self-assessment, the teachers tended to latch on to the areas that were determined by administrators’ initiatives. These initiatives consumed much of their interest and capacity to learn and acquire new information, leaving little desire to identify an additional area of focus.
In short, the teachers tended to spend time on the priorities that were meaningful to the evaluators, as the goals addressed the initiatives brought forth by administration. This made sense due to the fact that the self-assessment was a component of the teachers’ performance evaluations.

**Theme 3: Thoughtful Practice vs. Reflective Practice**

The third theme relating to the self-assessment process addressed the information that the teachers used for the self-assessments. During the self-assessment process, there seemed to be a consistent use of thoughtful practice, yet a lower amount of reflective practice, quite possibly as a result of the connectedness to the teachers’ evaluation, as described in Theme 2.

Scaife (2010) illustrated the difference between thoughtful practice and reflective practice in a scenario of crossing a street in a place where cars drive on the opposite sides of the road. She described a walker crossing a street who looked left to see that no cars were coming and took his step into the road, whereupon he experienced a near miss when a car was in fact coming from the right. The walker had to rethink his habitual routine of looking left first. He decided to be more cautious when crossing the next time and was sure to look both ways several times before crossing the road. Scaife (2010) named this response a *thoughtful practice*.

A *reflective practice* in the same scenario, however, would involve the walker not only thinking about the incident, but analyzing it as well. He may think that “because the traffic drives on the other side of the road it is necessary to reverse the sequence of [his] normal looking before crossing the road” (p. 2). A hypothesis or possible explanation for the experience was created due to this reflection. As a result, moving forward, the walker
“may decide to train himself to recite the reverse sequence when next faced with crossing the road” (p. 2). At this point, the walker had a conversation with himself to review his normal behavior, analyzed why it did not work, and then made a conscious change in what to do in the next occasion. This scenario depicts the difference between thoughtful practice and reflective practice. The data collected from the interviews indicates that the teachers tend to use thoughtful practice more so than reflective practice in their self-assessments. The two subthemes that are discussed in this section depict the thoughtful practices that are used by the participants when conducting their self-assessments.

**Subtheme 3a. Looking at student data.** In addition to the influence district and school initiatives have on self-assessment, there was also a strong emphasis on the use of student data during the process. In most cases, the topic was driven by the school initiative and then the specific foci within those areas were determined by student data relative to that topic. In some cases, however, the student data used was independent of school-driven initiatives. Analyzing student data and using it to tailor instruction has been a major focus for many school districts throughout the country. “Schools must find ways to use data to drive instruction by delivering content and assessing student learning in more systematic ways” (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012, p. 76). There is significant value to looking at student data and adjusting courses of action based on the information. When speaking about educational reform, Zeichner and Litson (2014) highlighted the emphasis on student learning and outcomes and said that there is “renewed vigor given to student academic outcomes as assessed by state exams and enhanced by ‘value-added’ quality teaching” (p. 82). As a result, it was not surprising that reviewing student data was a common practice among the teachers who were interviewed. While using student
data is a component of self-reflection, it is only a starting point, and the remaining part of the process should ultimately lead to the critical analysis and identification of personal pedagogical strengths and weaknesses. “Many critics of the federal legislation maintain that its policy efforts are too focused on student test outcomes and inadequately concerned with the actual process of student learning” (Zeichner & Litson, 2014, p. 83). In the teachers’ use of student data, they shared no examples of internalizing the data to enhance the understanding of their inner-selves as teachers.

It became evident in the research that the participants tended to look at student data and use it to adjust their lessons accordingly, but there was no evidence that the student data analysis led to deeper self-assessment that contributed toward focusing on, and eventually improving, each individual’s pedagogical art and science of teaching. Examples of this will be discussed in the theme 4 of this chapter. Although much of this data came from the interview question, Describe the specific self-assessment process that you use at the beginning of your evaluation cycle, information pertaining to this theme manifested throughout the interviews.

Jacqueline, Katherine, Cynthia referred to using the data from their incoming students for the self-assessment process—students that they had not yet taught. That set of data was then used to determine their own teaching foci for the year, and they then developed their goals in that area. When Jacqueline shared her approach to the self-assessment, she explained that she looked at Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) results from the students entering her class, along with their fall reading scores using a district-wide common reading assessment. She explained that, in her most recent self-assessment and goal-setting process, she used that student data and then
developed a reading goal to get “at least 85% [of students] to be at grade level at the end of the year.” She chose that goal because, based on the information she gathered through her “self-assessment,” only 40% of those students ended the year at grade level in the previous year. From there, Jacqueline developed her small reading groups and began planning her instruction accordingly.

Cynthia explained that during her self-assessment, she looked at the class list of incoming students and identified those students who were on individualized education plans or 504 accommodation plans. She also looked at those students’ cumulative files to review any qualitative information. “Then we start administering any kind of standardized common benchmark [assessment]. I look at the numbers from that point of view. Then of course, when MCAS scores come in, that’s the next component that we look at.” This was the information that Cynthia said she used as her self-assessment so that she could plan her future instruction to address the needs that the data exposed.

Similarly, when asked about the self-assessment process, Katherine shared that, in her most recent self-assessment, she “used the [common reading assessment] scores as data to see where the kids were . . . and used that to drive our goals.” This data represented the skills that her “new” students came into the year with from their spring and/or fall assessments.

Although information about incoming students provides valuable insight into their level of skills and reviewing it is seen as a strong practice, the teachers were looking at data and information that had no relationship to their own teaching. Instead, they were assessing students based on how they performed in other teachers’ classes.
Natalie, Judy, and Sarah tended to look at student data as well for the self-assessment. However, they focused more heavily on their own previous class’s data and searched for strengths and deficits in order to improve that area of instruction moving forward.

Natalie indicated that she gathered student data from her previous year’s students during the self-assessment process. She shared that using the data from the previous year could be difficult because “your data doesn’t always match . . . depending on the dynamic of kids.” She explained an instance where she had a unique class with very high levels of need, behaviorally and academically. As a result, she found that looking at that class’s scores was not always helpful for a new, more evenly distributed group of students.

Judy shared that she reviewed her students’ performance from the previous years—MCAS scores being one source—and asked herself, “Did I have any surprises? There is always at least one kid that surprises you.” She used these moments to reflect on her teaching and make necessary adjustments to lessons, units, or projects.

Sarah shared that she used a variety of data from her last year’s students, such as state MCAS scores, their Developmental Reading Assessment levels, and their end-of-the-year math assessment scores. “I use that to think about where I want my teaching to go and the progress I want my kids to make.” Lessons or units could be adjusted based on the information gleaned from the student data.

Barbara was the only participant who did not mention the use of student data. Most of her attention on self-assessment was relative to Theme 2 above and focused more heavily on the areas that were school-based initiatives, mainly technology.
Subtheme 3b. Team goals. Another common practice when implementing the self-assessment process was using a collaborative effort to identify areas of focus. Similar to the data-driven practice outlined in Subtheme 3a, this too was a solid educational practice. However, a group setting may be prohibitive to a true critical analysis of one’s own teaching because the needs of one educator may not match the needs of another. As a result, the analysis that the groups conducted was based on student data, as described above, or initiatives brought forward from the school or district.

Six of the seven participants described working in groups for the self-assessment process. Natalie was the only interviewee who did not reference working with a group to complete this process.

Jacqueline indicated, “We sit down as a group and go through [student data] and see where there are weaknesses with our incoming class. We decide what we should target with them.” When asked what part of the self-assessment process Jacqueline was most comfortable with, she felt it was “sitting down with my teammates and figuring out the strengths and the weaknesses within the grade population.” She felt a level of safety when working with grade-level team members to determine the areas of focus for the upcoming year.

Cynthia explained how productive the group self-assessment process could be. She admitted that at the start of the process she felt “I’ve got all the great ideas. But then when I hear [my teammates’] ideas, it’s like, Wow, those are great!” She expressed, “Getting together as a group, all these ideas started going toward this one goal, and we
ended up with this great product.” She found the group self-assessment process to be very beneficial, as it broadened her thinking to expand on new ideas.

Barbara and Katherine shared similar sentiments about doing a self-assessment in a group. Barbara expressed her level of comfort when working as a group and identifying needs based on the new initiatives in the school. Katherine shared that her entire fourth-grade group worked as a team; “that way, it’s not just one person trying to figure it out.”

Judy and Sarah both participated in a group when conducting a self-assessment, but they had a different perception of the process from the others. Judy acknowledged that there may be two people on a team that need to focus on math, for example. However, “if I’ve been here 19 years and my neighbor has been here 2, . . . I’m sure [a group assessment] does not get to what my individual needs are, or her individual needs.” Sarah had similar concerns and indicated that “next year I am going to really look at the data [for the self-assessment] before making and before I decide if I should fit in with the team or not.” Both individuals felt that the team self-assessment approach may not address their own individual needs that they identify.

**Summary of Theme 3.** The term *thoughtful practice*, as referenced in the introduction to Theme 3, was used by Scaife (2010), who described it as a thoughtful replay of something that has occurred. However, this is different from *reflective practice*, which is more of a “critical reflection that shapes [the] future” (Scaife, 2010, p. 2). The practices used during these participants’ self-assessments, and outlined above in this theme, aligned more with *thoughtful practice* than *reflective practice*. Practices that the participants were using, such as analyzing student data and developing team goals, were
valuable and are typically embraced and encouraged in all school systems. However, using these practices as the main measures to determine individual improvement was based on *thoughtful practice* as opposed to *reflective practice*. Reflective practice is a critical analysis of one’s own work to, as Schon (1983) described, “allow for continual interpretation, investigation and reflective conversation with oneself about [a] problem while employing the information gained from past experiences to inform and guide new actions” (as cited in Sellars, 2014, p. 5). The depth involved in true self-reflection was not evident in the participants’ description of their self-assessments and the practices they described fell into the classification of thoughtful practice.

In the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, the self-assessment is meant to address the four performance standards, curriculum, planning, and assessment; teaching all students; family and community engagement; and professional culture. The rubric developed by the state that is used by evaluators to rate educators provides a definition of the level of proficiency in each of the four standards. The steps for the self-assessment that are recommended by the state is to (1) analyze evidence of student learning, growth, and achievement, (2) assess teaching practices against performance standards, and (3) propose goals to pursue to lead to improvement of practice and student learning.

Based on the data collected from the participants describing their self-assessment processes, it seems that the first and third practices were used. It appears that the second step, which is the most conducive to self-assessments based on prior research studies conducted in this area, was not mentioned by any participant throughout the interviews.
Theme 4: The Self-Assessment’s Direct Impact on Teachers

The second research question asked, *What are the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the self-assessment on their teaching practices?* It was clear that, despite the variety of variables that influenced the outcome of the self-assessment, teachers *were* changing their practices based on the results of the self-assessments. Two interview questions explicitly explored the influences that the self-assessments had on participants’ teaching. The question, *How have the results of your self-assessment impacted any professional development you may have received*, elicited data about the continuous learning that took place relative to the findings in the self-assessment. A second question that provided data contributing to the development of this theme was, *Describe the impact, if any, the self-assessment step has had on your teaching performance.* This question led the participants to share the actions and teaching practices that had changed in their classrooms due to the self-assessment process.

**Subtheme 4a. Self-directed professional development.** In all but two cases, the participants actively sought opportunities to participate in professional development workshops and conferences that related to the findings in their self-assessments. They believed the self-assessment provided them with a focus to take advantage of professional development opportunities that were relevant to them. Jacqueline expressed, “I feel like there’s [professional development] opportunities out there. Once I sit down and realize every year what it is that I’ll actually be working on, I find at least one or two [conferences] per year that I can go to that’s going to help in some aspect to strengthen that weakness of my own.”
Cynthia shared her appreciation for an online collection of webinars that addressed an abundance of educational topics. She expressed excitement that she would have these webinars as an opportunity to personalize her professional development. Cynthia also said, “I’m going to take some online courses for math problem solving this summer, and I probably would not have done that [without the self-assessment].” She indicated that the convenience of online webinars made it easier for her to address the individualized needs she had identified for herself.

Judy, Sarah, and Barbara all affirmed that they registered for off-site professional development to target the areas they identified in the self-assessment process. Judy stated, “I signed up specifically for professional development to reach the goal I developed from my self-assessment.” Sarah had similar intentions, where “with the self-assessment, I obviously try to do classes or do professional development that relate to the goal I’m working on.” Barbara shared an example of a technology class she took to address the area of need from her recent self-assessment as well. “I found a 12-week Promethean class, so I made sure I took that.” Throughout the interviews, participants shared several specific examples of professional development related to the self-assessment findings.

Both Katherine and Natalie were the two that did not indicate that the self-assessment drove them to seek external professional development opportunities. Katherine shared that her school had in-house guided reading training last year, which aligned with her goal. That opportunity, however, stemmed from the principal’s direction rather than from the self-assessment. Similarly, when asked about professional development relevant to the self-assessment outcomes, Natalie shared that she did not
feel the self-assessment had any effect on professional development. She said, “No one really knows [the topic] except for myself and my evaluator.” Both participants indicated that sometimes opportunities presented themselves in-district that related to their needs identified from the self-assessment, but that was only by chance.

**Subtheme 4b. The influence of self-assessments on classroom instruction.**

Despite the variation in approaches to the self-assessments and the external influence that could cloud their ability to critically evaluate and diagnose their performance, the participants unanimously perceived that they improved their practices as a result of the self-assessment process. Each participant was able to speak to adjustments she made in her teaching practices that stemmed from information identified in the self-assessment.

Jacqueline and Natalie both spoke about improvements that they made in the area of differentiated instruction. Jacqueline called upon the time when she focused on guided reading during the year as a result of her self-assessment. She indicated that, prior to establishing this as a focus, her students remained in the same reading group all year long. Now, “they’re in and out, depending on who’s all of a sudden flourishing or who’s falling behind.” This adjustment in teaching was a more accurate representation of the reader’s workshop model, which is a research-based approach to teaching literacy. Meanwhile, Natalie had a similar experience with math. When she learned during the self-assessment process that her students scored poorly on the MCAS test, she adjusted her approach and designed her instruction to incorporate “smaller clusters of kids, putting them based on their ability or their need for support.” Like the small group reading model that Jacqueline referenced, Natalie’s small group math approach lent itself to
differentiation, which in theory supported teachers’ ability to meet the needs of all learners.

Cynthia gave a synopsis of her growth in the area of reading, which was an area that she determined needed attention based on the self-assessment process. She shared, “I feel like my students are much stronger readers. I’m having them read more; I now understand how important mini-lessons are. I’m giving [students] the gift of time so they can have more time to read.” She felt that reading was an appropriate focus for her at the time and, as a result, it benefited her students.

When Judy identified math as an area of focus during the self-assessment process, she instituted interactive math journals in her class. After teaching a concept, “[students] have to give me a sample of what it all means to them. They need to reword my lesson in kid-friendly language and give me some examples.” Judy expressed great appreciation for the self-assessment process because this was one example of a change in practice that came from the new information she learned about this area of teaching.

Sarah and Katherine shared that the self-assessment process directly impacted their student data analysis, which allowed them to more accurately evaluate students’ areas of strengths and weaknesses. Sarah indicated that prior to determining from her self-assessment that writing conferences would be an area of focus, “I felt like, as a teacher, I had in the back of my mind where kids were and where the areas of concern were.” However, after she conducted the self-assessment and named a writing conference as her goal, “I was better able to pinpoint the needs. I noticed when assessing [a student’s] work, she really struggled with a particular area and I was able to address it.” The self-assessment process gave her a direction, and from the attention she placed
on that area, she felt she could service her students in a more accurate and individualized way. Similarly, Katherine admitted that she had always given her students benchmark assessments three times per year but did not use the data. After having determining that guided reading would be her goal based on her self-assessment process, “I do stuff with the data, like make charts to make me more aware, and visually see how much [the students] really did grow. I never would have done that before.” Both of these participants found great benefit in using data more effectively as a result of the self-assessment process.

Barbara felt that her most recent self-assessment process, which resulted in a goal with a heavy focus on technology, improved her level of skill in that area. “I really saw that I was doing minimal with [technology].” She began utilizing technology in the classroom and found that it made her students much more engaged in her lessons.

**Summary of Theme 4.** As stated in Themes 1 to 3, there was variability in the understandings, feelings, and practices regarding self-assessments. With that said, however, the participants felt that their own self-assessment process had a positive impact on their teaching practices. In all but two cases, teachers sought out professional development opportunities that they might not have previously because they identified an area needing attention during their self-assessment process. Several teachers implied that this learning might not have taken place if the self-assessment process had been removed from the evaluation cycle.

All seven participants were able to share specific changes in teaching behavior and improvement in their practice as a result of the self-assessment process. Examples were offered that depicted teaching practices that were altered as a direct result of their
self-assessment exercises. In all cases explored in this study, it was perceived that the self-assessment process had a direct and positive impact on teaching.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided four key themes that emerged from the data regarding the self-assessment process, as implemented by seven teacher participants. The themes were outlined to answer two research questions:

1. What are fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment?
2. What are the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the self-assessment on their teaching practices?

Interviews with seven fourth-grade public school teachers from one of two districts included in this study provided data that led to the analysis of their experience of the self-assessment process, which generated four main themes: foundations for self-assessments, self-assessment and evaluation, thoughtful practice vs. reflective practice, and the self-assessment’s direct impact on teaching.

The next chapter ties together the research findings and how they relate to the research questions. The chapter articulates how the problem of practice, theoretical framework, literature review, and research design have merged in order to inform the interpretation of the research findings.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

This chapter first reviews the problem of practice and methodology for this study, along with the major findings of the research. These findings are then presented in the context of the theoretical framework and the literature review. Following this information are the potential limitations of this study, suggestions for future research, and, lastly, conclusions and reflections.

Summary of the Problem and Methodology

This study explored teachers’ perceptions of their self-assessment process in the evaluation cycle. More specifically, the research investigated how seven fourth-grade teachers implemented the self-assessment process, which was the first step of the five-step Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, and their perception of the impact the self-assessment had on their teaching practices.

The existing research confirms that, when implemented carefully and successfully, self-assessments play a critical role in improving teaching practices and raising standards. Several research studies have proven the powerful impact a self-assessment can have on teaching practices when implemented thoughtfully and thoroughly. The research that already exists indicates that the quality of the self-assessment process is the determinant of the quality of the outcome. Thus, there is a distinction in the literature between the self-assessment processes that are being done effectively and those being implemented without the participants’ interest and internal motivation to enhance teaching performance.
Existing research has shown that some self-assessment practices have had a positive impact on teaching, but no prior studies examined the impact that Massachusetts’ required self-assessment process has had on teachers since it was implemented in 2012 as the first of five steps for teacher evaluation. The four subsequent steps in Massachusetts’ program are intended to build on the information produced in the self-assessment. Teachers are being asked to reflect on and assess their own teaching practices in a more formalized manner, and eventually the student results that are collected should support the teachers’ findings. Thus, this study was intended to increase understanding of teachers’ experiences and perceptions of the self-assessment required by the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, which was designed to propel teachers to reflect on their own practices in order to promote continuous growth. Improvement in practices should result in an improvement in student performance.

To address the research questions established for this study, a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis was conducted with seven fourth-grade teachers from two school districts in Massachusetts. The data were collected from one 45- to 60-minute face-to-face, semi-structured interview with each participant. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. These recordings and transcriptions of the interviews were carefully interrogated and coded, leading to the development of four major themes.

**Summary of Major Findings**

The first research question asked: *What are the fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment?* Analysis of the responses from the seven participants revealed three themes that addressed this research question.
Theme 1: Foundations for self-assessment. This theme referred to three conditions impacting the implementation of the self-assessments in this study: teachers’ fundamental beliefs of self-assessment, the level of preparedness teachers felt when implementing the self-assessment, and the teachers’ perception of the purpose of their self-assessment. The first condition, or prong, was supportive, whereas the latter two conditions were unfavorable to conducting a meaningful self-assessment.

The first condition was the teachers’ fundamental beliefs regarding the value of self-assessments. The data revealed that the teachers felt, in theory, self-assessments were necessary and were a natural part of good teaching practices. The teachers believed that the self-assessment provided information and insight that may not otherwise be available and help them establish areas of focus for improvement. Most teachers mentioned that good teachers should be reflecting on their own practices regularly.

A second foundational condition impacting the roll-out was the teachers’ perceived lack of preparation for self-assessments, mainly in terms of professional development. While the participants understand the importance of the self-assessment process, in all cases there was minimal to no professional development that explicitly taught teachers how to assess themselves. There were inconsistencies in the data that was reported and participants from the same school district had differing recollections of the professional development that was offered. One participant recalled seeing a PowerPoint presentation on the entire evaluation process, which included the self-assessment, while another participant from the same district did not recall receiving any professional development. In all cases, however, there was no focused and targeted professional development on the topic of self-assessments reported. In the instances where there was
some professional development on self-assessments, it was simply embedded into the overview that was offered of the five-step evaluation cycle. As a result, there was a high level of variability in the implementation of the self-assessments.

The last prong within this theme, also not a favorable condition, was the teachers’ perception of the purpose of a self-assessment. This process has been mandated by the state and implemented in all schools with minimal to no professional development on the topic. As a result, and despite their fundamental beliefs that self-assessments were valuable in theory, the teachers frequently implied that they viewed the exercise as a compliance task instead of being intrinsically motivated to conduct a self-assessment to develop and improve their pedagogical skills. On several occasions teachers emphasized that they were “forced” to complete the self-assessment or that “it is part of the requirement.” In many cases it was implied that the self-assessments were done for compliance purposes versus as an exercise to scrutinize their own performance in order to become better teachers.

**Theme 2: Self-assessment and evaluation.** This theme highlighted two limitations that became evident in the self-assessment process due to its connectedness to the teachers’ summative evaluations. Although prior research has indicated there can be strong benefits to self-assessments, this study revealed that the connection to the evaluation may impede on those benefits.

First, when describing the self-assessment process, it was evident the administrators were the intended audience, not the individual teachers. Areas of focus were developed based on areas of importance to the administrators and not from findings identified through teachers’ critical analysis of themselves. When self-assessing, it was
clear that teachers were thinking, *What do my administrators want to hear?* instead of identifying areas they needed to focus on to improve their own practice. Teachers admitted that they often produced goals, which in this process were the concrete outcomes from the self-assessments, that felt “safe” because they were concerned that, if they did not, the administrator may not approve or may think they were “doing it incorrectly.” Having the administrators as the intended audience of the self-assessment, instead of themselves, compromised the essence of the practice.

Additionally, with the self-assessments attached to the evaluation, there were external influences that impacted teachers’ viewpoints when completing the process. In the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, the self-assessments are intended to be used as a way to reflect on one’s own practices against a set of defined performance standards. However, much of the teachers’ foci were predetermined based on new initiatives that were introduced to the school and district, not from analyzing their practices juxtaposed with the performance standards. These predetermined initiatives tended to relate to technology and new curricula. As a result, teachers chose to focus on areas that would have to be targeted anyway, regardless of any findings identified in a self-assessment. These external influences greatly impacted the areas teachers chose to address in their evaluation cycle. Teachers wanted to ensure that their goals aligned with those of the administrators (i.e., evaluators).

Both subthemes listed above—having administrators as the audience and the external influences—raise concerns about the direct relationship between the self-assessment and the evaluation. The direct connection of the self-assessment to teachers’ evaluation hindered their ability to complete a true assessment of themselves.
Theme 3: Thoughtful practice vs. reflective practice. This theme addressed the practices that teachers reported using to conduct a self-assessment. The evidence from this study suggests that teachers are not conducting a process that is conducive to exercising introspection in order to learn more about their fundamental nature, quality, and essence of teaching. Based on existing literature, particularly Scaife’s (2010) differentiation between thoughtful practice and reflective practice, the practices used to conduct self-assessments were more thoughtful than reflective.

One common practice that teachers used during the self-assessment process was looking at student data. Teachers who described using student data to self-assess had one of two approaches: some would look at their incoming students’ data and information to determine how to address any shortfalls, while others looked at their previous students’ scores to identify any gaps and then planned to enhance lessons in those areas for the incoming students. Whether the data were from incoming students or previous students, the teachers reacted to deficits they identified by creating goals around them. Using student data is a common practice and emphasis in school districts, however, this practice is categorized as thoughtful practice instead of reflective practice because it lacks the critical analysis of one’s own teaching and the internal reasoning that takes place in reflective practices.

The second common practice that teachers described when self-assessing was to work as a team with their grade-level colleagues to develop team goals; in many cases, team efforts involved looking at student data together. Six of the seven participants indicated that they worked in teams during the self-assessment process. Two of these participants shared that they will not continue working with a group during this process
because they identified that the group’s focus did not reflect their individual needs. This too was a thoughtful practice rather than a reflective practice because it lacked the internal conversations and the critical analysis used to shape the future actions.

Interestingly, when describing the self-assessment process, none of the participants referred to the rubric that defines proficiency in each of the four standards: curriculum, planning, and assessment; teaching all students; family and community engagement; and professional culture. These were the standards the teachers were evaluated on, and I found it noteworthy that the participants did not refer to the performance standards.

**Theme 4: The self-assessment’s direct impact on teachers.** The second research question asked: *What are the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the self-assessment on their teaching practices?* Analysis of the responses from the seven participants revealed one theme addressing this research question.

It was evident that, despite the variability in the understandings of, feelings about, and practices for self-assessment, the process had a positive impact on teachers. In five out of the seven cases, the participants used the information gleaned from the self-assessment process to seek professional development related to the identified topic. The professional development opportunities that teachers described took place outside of the school day, which indicates the teachers’ level of commitment to the topic and to their continuous learning. The two participants who did not mention a search for outside professional development that related to their topic described in-house professional development that connected to their areas of focus.
All seven participants shared examples of specific changes they made to their classroom instruction based on the outcomes of the self-assessments. The changes to their instruction tended to an added action or practice to backfill the deficit identified in student data, as opposed to adjusting pedagogical understandings and practices, which is likely due to the lack of true reflection that is described in theme three. The teachers, however, appeared very proud of the adaptations made to their lesson(s) as a result of the information revealed from their self-assessment exercises. Several participants indicated that they would not have made the changes to their lessons or units if the self-assessment process did not exist.

**Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Frameworks**

This study was grounded in adult learning theory. The underlying assumption across adult learning theory is that “most of the [adult learners] want to take charge of their lives, their learning, and their careers. They are self-directed, meaning they are willing to initiate their own learning efforts when they see the need to do so” (Rothwell, 2008, p. 46). The self-assessment process is intended to provide teachers an opportunity to analyze their practice to develop their own understanding of the areas needing focus. Based on adult learning theory, the teachers, as learners, become invested in their own learning and initiate learning opportunities around that topic.

This study was informed primarily by Knowles’s work on andragogy, along with Rothwell’s four key elements that contribute to a safe learning climate for adults. The first portion of this section addresses Knowles’s three key benefits and the corresponding data collected in this study to illustrate their relationships. The latter part of this section
addresses Rothwell’s questions regarding learning climate and the data that relate to them.

**Benefits of adult learning.** Knowles, along with others in this field, have shared that when adults are learning, they must have an understanding of why the information will benefit them. He stated, “Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy” (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 39). The intention of the self-assessment as the first step of the evaluation cycle is to put the educators in the driver’s seat so they can identify, intrinsically, what areas they need to develop.

Knowles emphasized the importance of adults learning through intrinsic motivation due to the three main benefits, as noted by Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin (2004): self-directed learners are better learners, adults do not need teachers, and the deinstitutionalization of education creates a need for learners to develop appropriate skills.

**Self-directed learners are better learners.** Knowles indicated that adult learners who establish their own direction and are therefore invested in the learning are more likely to embrace new information on a given topic and become better learners. This concept became evident in this study during the interviews with the participants. The teachers interviewed were enthusiastic and motivated to address the areas that were identified through the self-assessment. When referencing professional development that they sought, several participants indicated that they would not have otherwise chosen to participate in those learning opportunities had the self-assessment not been conducted. It was clear that they were leading their own learning based on areas they chose. Despite the fact that, as articulated in Theme 2, there were external influences that jaded the lens
of the teachers’ self-assessments, it was evident that the teachers felt ownership of the goals developed from the self-assessments and held themselves accountable for meeting them.

**Adults do not need teachers.** Knowles indicated that adult learners do not need teachers because when they are intrinsically motivated, they can take charge of their own learning. This became evident in the interviews when teachers shared different strategies of addressing the areas in their teaching that they identified for further development. The participants did not have any person, other than themselves, guiding them through the achievement of their goals. Most teachers sought professional development opportunities as one means to increase their knowledge. In five out of the seven cases, the professional development was done outside of the workday. It was initiated by the individual teachers and was intended to address the needs that they identified for themselves.

Additionally, many participants took the approach of collaborating with and leaning on colleagues to share, compare, and elicit information to learn from one another. This was a voluntary use of the resources the teachers had at their disposal within the schools. The teachers took initiative in achieving their own goals and finding resources to help them with the process.

**The deinstitutionalization of education creates a need for learners to develop appropriate skills.** For Knowles, a third benefit of adult learning is that adults develop learning skills when they are in charge of their own learning. The open and independent learning systems that comprise the structure of adult learning theory help adults develop the learning skills that are important and transferable. These self-help skills of seeking out information necessary to enhance knowledge and performance are valuable. Each
teacher in the study had her own way of addressing the needs she identified for herself during the self-assessment process. There was no prescribed course of action to address each person’s specific target area. Instead, each teacher used a learning methodology that worked for her to achieve the results she set forth for herself.

**Summary.** As described in this discussion, the interviews showed evidence of each of the three benefits Knowles outlined. The teachers demonstrated a willingness to continue learning in the area they identified for themselves; they were self-directed, with no indication that they needed others to continue their learning in that area; and there was evidence that they used skills to learn information in a way that worked for them individually.

**Learning environment.** In addition to Knowles’s assertion of the need for intrinsic motivation to learn something new, Rothwell (2008) shared that adults need a learning environment where they feel psychologically safe to learn. To assess safe learning environments, Rothwell (2008) suggested the use of four guiding questions.

**A climate of encouraging development.** Rothwell’s (2008) first question was *Do individual workers feel that they are encouraged or discouraged from developing themselves professionally?* Rothwell (2008) stated that there seems to be little doubt that learning can and does have an impact on organizational and individual performance (p. 6). However, for performance gains to be achieved, the encouragement of learning must be embedded in the climate. The data gathered in this study relative to Rothwell’s first question was favorable. The districts required a self-assessment process for all staff, with the development of a concrete outcome (i.e., professional goals). The goals require an action-oriented approach to addressing the areas identified. The educators and
evaluators alike become aware of the individual goals that the educators set forth for themselves. All seven participants implied that identifying areas of growth and addressing them was nonnegotiable and an expectation for all. The findings in this study indicate that there are variables that interfere with the self-assessment process, however, in most cases, from the teachers’ perspective they had control over their self-assessments and goal development. The results from this study indicate that the teachers feel they are encouraged from developing themselves professionally.

**Encouragement of learning in real time.** Rothwell’s (2008) second question was *Do individual workers feel that they are encouraged or discouraged from learning in real time to solve work-related problems?* When describing the approaches of continuous learning in the areas identified in the self-assessment, the participants perceived that they were encouraged to solve real-time work-related problems. In the context of this study, I explored the participants’ experience with the self-assessment process. The problem areas identified in the self-assessments were addressed through the development of action-oriented goals that stemmed from the “problem areas” that surfaced. The data used for the self-assessment were current information so that the teachers could address areas of need accordingly. The premise of the self-assessment process and the full Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System is to promote growth and development of teachers, and therefore, the process itself encourages teachers to solve work-related problems in real time.

**Encouragement of career goals.** Rothwell’s (2008) third question was *Do individual workers feel that they are encouraged or discouraged from declaring their career goals and pursuing them, even when they are not aligned with their supervisors’*
The data in this study suggested that teachers tended to develop goals from the self-assessment that aligned with the supervisors’ expectations or initiatives, yet they were not cognizant of these outside influences. However, there is insufficient data to support that teachers would be discouraged from developing goals that did not align with the supervisors’ expectations. In other words, most teachers naturally aligned their goals with the school initiatives, but in six out of the seven cases the administrators did not provide the teachers with a pre-determined area of focus as a required goal. That said, as stated in Theme 2 of the findings, the data implied that the tying of the self-assessment to the individuals’ evaluations was a factor in teachers’ choice of focus areas that aligned with the administrator’s interest. Although administrators’ interests tended to influence the development of the teachers’ goals, the teachers perceived they had autonomy in developing their own goals based on their self-assessment process. It seems they chose to target areas that they would have to address anyway as a school initiative, and created a self-assessment process that would lead them in that direction. While the findings show that self-assessments as part of the evaluation interferes with the effectiveness of the self-assessment, most teachers did seem aware of the negative influences and therefore, they felt that there was a supportive and encouraging climate. Sarah, who was one of the two who articulated that there was administrative influence, still expressed that she felt autonomy within the areas encouraged by the leadership. This suggests that they perceived the climate as encouraging autonomy in the establishment and pursuit of personalized career goals.

Interestingly, the one teacher participant whose principal prescribed the topic for the goals, is the person who spoke least favorably about the self-assessment. Katherine
was the only person who expressed negative feelings about the evaluation system. That said, with the other six participants, it was evident that developing goals independently was a regular practice and was encouraged.

**Use of resources to learn.** Rothwell’s (2008) final question was *Do individual workers feel that they are encouraged or discouraged from using work time and organizational resources to enhance their knowledge, skills, and attitudes to achieve higher performance and productivity?* When participants described the self-assessment process and some of the actions they took to address focus areas identified from the process, it was evident that they had the flexibility to address the areas in a way that worked for them. That said, the nature of their job limited the available use of work time, as the students were in the classrooms. Teachers have very little flexibility to structure time how they wish. However, no participant indicated that she was not provided with the resources necessary to achieve a goal that was developed through the self-assessment process. In regards to the financial aspect of the resources, the professional development that teachers sought was either free or qualified for reimbursement. All evidence suggested that the use of work time, albeit minimal, and organizational resources such as funding to enhance teachers’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes to achieve higher performance, were encouraged and supported.

**Summary.** Based on Rothwell’s (2008) questions to identify a supportive learning climate, the data in this study provided evidence of a supportive learning climate. Any practices that were not being implemented with fidelity were not a result of a lack of a supportive learning climate.
Adult learning theory is the basis for the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System. The intention is to encourage teachers to identify their areas of need through the use of a self-assessment, and therefore the four subsequent steps in the evaluation process are based on an area identified by the individual teacher. The premise of adult learning theory was observable throughout the interviews. Despite the variability of the implementation of the self-assessment process, teachers felt they were in control of identifying areas of focus as they did not appear cognizant of the external influences, and they appeared invested in their self-prescribed learning process to improve those areas.

Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

The existing literature reviewed for this study can be summarized in three emerging themes:

1. The importance of self-assessment
2. Obstacles interfering with self-assessment
3. Self-assessment processes that have been deemed successful

These three themes were extensively discussed in chapter 2; therefore, this section provides only a summary of themes and their relationship with the findings of this study.

Importance of self-assessments. A significant amount of research indicates that self-assessments are a critical component to initiating and sustaining positive change. The self-assessment processes reviewed in this study were part of the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System and were intended to be a formal process for reflection driving teachers to design their own course of professional growth and development based on the needs they identified. This process lays the foundation for positive changes because, as underscored in adult learning theory, adults are much more invested in
learning if they understand the need for and benefit of the new information. Osipova et al. (2011) asserted, “Although we can only hypothesize what precludes [necessary changes], we think that guided critical self-reflection is a necessary component for successful change” (p. 159). The self-assessment process is intended to provide an avenue for teachers to initiate and complete a reflection on their own teaching.

Although the current study indicated that self-assessment played a vital role in teachers understanding areas needing improvement and embracing changes necessary to enhance their skills, this study also revealed influences that impacted the process’s efficacy. One highlight of the process is that teachers are able to choose their own area of focus. Although the data showed that the areas of focus were influenced by external variables, the participants did not appear cognizant of these influences. As a result, the teachers felt ownership and a level of investment in the areas selected. Judy verbalized with enthusiasm, “I think because we get to come up with our own goals, it’s really important to go through the process to figure out what you’re going to work on.” The teachers were clearly devoted to the areas that they identified as their focus.

**Obstacles to self-assessments.** The literature review revealed two main obstacles that can interfere with the self-assessment process. Below, both obstacles are listed, along with related findings from this study.

**Conditioning of top-down decisions.** The existing research revealed that teachers do not naturally feel confident or comfortable making judgments about themselves. Studies have shown that teachers are used to being told what to do and have even found comfort in that model. Humphreys (1992), for example, found that teachers were more likely to “attend courses that were either of interest to them or that they were asked to
participate in through their school” (p. 118). The findings in this study are congruent with Humphreys’ findings. Theme 2 showed that, based on participants’ descriptions of their self-assessment process, they considered the administrators as the audience members and tended to focus on administrators’ interests and initiatives. Although the data in this study suggest that the top-down view may be related to the connection of the self-assessment to the evaluation process, it is difficult to fully differentiate Humphreys’ notion from the influence of the evaluation.

**Lack of support and understanding.** The second obstacle outlined in existing research was a lack of understanding or buy-in of the knowledge and skills a teacher should possess. Sharil and Majid (2010), for example, indicated that teachers doing the self-assessments “were only describing their actions and their lessons without much attempt to synthesize relevant literature and evaluate them.” Although there have been studies supporting the use of self-assessments, some studies showed a lack of growth and development with participating teachers when there was minimal guidance and support to help them through this discomfort. Prior research demonstrated a difficulty in identifying why something works or does not; ergo, the reasoning part of the reflection is omitted. In this study, the experiences teachers shared about the self-assessment process suggested there was little to no critical analysis of the reasoning and the synthesis necessary to fully reflect on their own practices. Unlike some other studies, in this study the participants had a performance standards rubric that defined best practices in four main standards: curriculum, planning, and assessment; teaching all students; family and community engagement; and professional culture. Each standard provided a knowledge base and description of best practices. Interestingly, there was no mention of the rubric in any of
the interviews, and the self-assessments tended to be directed toward the administrators and their interests. The data connected to this obstacle did not come from the participants’ direct responses, but from information absent from their responses.

**Processes deemed successful.** Although prior research presented several different approaches to self-assessments, one theme common to successful self-assessment practices was the empowerment embedded in the process. Teachers who felt empowered took ownership of their learning and were therefore more invested in the process and in the outcomes. This thought also ties directly to Knowles’s adult learning theory, as empowerment is the essence of adult learning. In this study, although the participants described self-assessment processes that tended to lack critical analysis of their practice, they felt the self-assessments resulted in successful change. The ownership and empowerment that these teachers experienced produced a high interest and investment to develop and improve the area identified from the process.

**Study Limitations**

The following study limitations were identified for this research:

- The study was conducted in two school districts with similar demographics, which may have resulted in a homogenous sample.
- All participants in the study volunteered to participate, which may have skewed the sample population to include only teachers who were willing to participate in tasks beyond their regular “call of duty.”
- My career as an assistant superintendent may have caused a higher level of response effect bias, “where people tell interviewers what they want to hear” (Butin, 2010, p. 97).
Future Research

There is strong research to support the benefits of self-assessments when implemented under certain circumstances. The studies that exist describe conditions that have resulted in successful self-assessments and those that have not. This study explored the experiences of seven fourth-grade teachers in two school districts through the use of an interpretative phenomenological analysis. It serves as a starting point to begin to understand the implementation of the self-assessment as used in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System. There are several suggestions for future research that will paint a more detailed picture of the effectiveness of this process.

It is recommended that a similar study be conducted in a different setting, such as at the high school level, in urban or rural communities, or in one of the other states using a comparable evaluation cycle. A comparison of results would offer insight to whether or not the similarities or differences in the studies are influenced by a certain setting.

A future study to analyze the outcomes and evaluate the success of the self-assessments in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System is warranted. Additional research may include quantitative or qualitative data with a predefined set of criteria to measure the impact the self-assessments have on teachers in each of their areas of focus. It would be constructive to objectively measure the teaching practices identified in the self-assessment prior to any changes being implemented and comparing it to the same data after the adjustments are made.

Additionally, it may be valuable to establish a focus group of participants with similar credentials to those in this study and provide them with comprehensive training on self-assessment. Then conduct similar research to compare the experiences of those
who had extensive training to those in this study who perceived to have minimal to no training on self-assessments.

It would be beneficial to conduct an action research project and observe a small number of teachers conducting their self-assessment. The researcher could make observations about the process and note any procedures or thought processes that were not surfaced in the data collected in this study. Additionally, there could be a comparison of what the researcher observes during the self-assessment process to how teachers perceive their process.

Lastly, a comparative study is suggested to examine a teacher’s self-assessment results with an evaluator’s assessment of that teacher. Comparing a teacher’s perspective on his/her own strengths and weaknesses with the evaluator’s perception of the teacher’s strengths and weaknesses would provide insight into the similarities or discrepancies of expectations between the individuals. This is particularly interesting in Massachusetts because of the self-assessment’s direct relationship with the evaluation system.

**Conclusion and Reflection**

This interpretative phenomenological analysis investigated two research questions focused on the perception of teachers about the self-assessment used in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, both the process used as well as its impact. This study was built on the voice of seven dedicated teaching professionals in two school districts, Crystal Falls and Hillville. Data from the seven face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were analyzed to understand the participants’ experiences relative to their self-assessments. The conversations that occurred during these interviews provided sufficient data to answer the two research questions. The themes that emerged from these data
connected to and, in some cases, substantiated the existing research discussed in the literature review section of this study. Additionally, the themes directly related to adult learning theory, the theoretical framework used to conduct the study.

As an assistant superintendent with experience in two different Massachusetts public school districts over the past several years, I have been very involved in the implementation of the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System. Throughout the study, I was cognizant of this unique insight and connection I have to the content. During the interviews, I was cautious of the potential bias that may impact participants’ responses and their ability to relay their true feelings because of my role as an assistant superintendent.

I was most concerned about the credibility of responses from the participants in Hillville because that is the district in which I currently work. I anticipated their responses to be seemingly more favorable than those in Crystal Falls in the fear of sounding unsupportive about the process. Despite this uncertainty that I had, there was no evidence indicating the participants responses were unauthentic. The responses from Hillville were very similar to those in Crystal Falls and there was no clear delineation between the perceptions of teachers in each of the two districts. This indicates that working in the same district as some participants did not influence their responses more than the teachers from Crystal Falls. Additionally, all participants’ responses indicated that they were willing to vocalize concerns about parts of the process with which they disagree. Therefore, there was not a sense of inflated answers that came from either school district.
The results from this study identify teachers’ current experiences with the self-assessment process and variables that influence the implementation and outcomes. I view these results as an opportunity to capitalize on the strengths that became evident with regards to the self-assessment process and make the necessary improvements that will contribute to a higher likelihood of teachers implementing true self-assessments with efficacy and fidelity.

Personally, I intend to use this information to improve the self-assessment process that occurs within my current district. The existing research, along with the themes that emerged in this study, will guide my steps to make the necessary improvements so that our teachers have the proper understanding and support to conduct a valuable and reflective process. I also plan to communicate these findings to other administrators to raise their awareness of teacher perceptions and practices that were revealed in my research.

Specifically, I intend to establish a voluntary self-assessment pilot program in my school district with the use of grant funds. The participants will gather regularly throughout the year and review the existing research, including this study. Then, the group will collectively establish an understanding of best teaching practices and what they look like, and implement continuous self-assessments throughout the year. The final step will be to compare and evaluate the outcomes, and develop a plan to build the capacity of conducting true self-assessments district-wide. The goal is to raise teachers’ awareness of the external influences described in this study. This guided process will empower them to overlook these influences and focus on their own individual needs in order to cultivate an environment that fosters the true essence of self-reflection.
I have also shared an overview of these findings with two representatives from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. There was interest to further review this information and come up with realistic approaches to help inform administrators on how the implementation of this system can be improved.

Additional training that focuses on reflective practices versus thoughtful practices is warranted. Having teachers dissect the definition of proficiency in the four standards in the state rubric would be beneficial because those teaching practices do not seem to be considered during the self-assessment process. Also, encouraging teachers to work individually on the self-assessment would be more conducive to a personalized reflection. A group effort is less likely to address the needs of each individual member.

Understanding the experiences and perceptions of teachers due to this research has given me direction for improving the self-assessment process in my school district.

In addition to the future actions discussed above, other Massachusetts districts’ staff and administrators who read this study and review these findings may reflect on their districts’ implementation of the self-assessment procedures. Modifications and enhancements to their processes may be prompted from these themes. The research provides an opportunity for administrators to reflect on the conditions established for success of the self-assessment process, as outlined in Theme 1; the foundations established for self-assessments, as indicated in Theme 2; the self-assessment process and its relationship to the evaluation, and as discussed in Theme 3; the tendency to be thoughtful in the assessment instead of reflective. It also provides information about how teachers use the data that they glean from the self-assessments, as described in Theme 4; the direct impact that self-assessments have on teachers. This information can prompt
administrators to consider whether or not the actions taken by the teachers in this study as a response to their self-assessment represent the intended outcome of the self-assessment process.

In short, this research process and these findings have expanded my skills, knowledge, and understanding of the self-assessment process. Analysis of the data has shed light on strengths and weaknesses of the current self-assessment model and provided information that encouraged me to take actionable steps for improvement in my own district and beyond. This study reveals valuable information that can stand alone, or it can lay the groundwork for subsequent data to be collected in the future.
References


Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Project: Fourth Grade Teachers’ Perception of the Self-Assessment Process: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Date: ___________ Time: ___________ Location: __________________________

Interviewee: __________________ School District Represented: _______________

Release form signed, collected, and copy made for participant (check): _____

Requested and was granted permission to audio record the interview (check): ____

Welcome:

Thank you for your participation. I believe your input will be valuable to this research and in helping grow our professional practice.

Confidentiality of responses is guaranteed, and you can feel free to stop the interview at any time.

The approximate length of the interview is 45 to 60 minutes, and it involves a series of about 14 questions.

Purpose of research:

The purpose of this research is to get an understanding of fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment process, which is Step 1 in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System. I want to learn about your perception of the experiences related to the self-assessment process.

Methods of disseminating results:

Results will be analyzed and data will be triangulated through the process of coding in order to identify common themes from the responses of everybody I am interviewing. The data will be summarized and reported in chapters 4 and 5 of my dissertation without offering information that identifies participants. Most information will be detailed in generality, but any specific information will be given with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Interview Questions

(Key prompts to keep in mind if necessary: “Tell me more...” “What exactly do you mean?” “Can you give me an example?” “Can you explain that again?”)

Research Question 1: What are fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment?
1. Tell me about your teaching experience. How long have you been teaching? Have you always taught fourth grade? Have you been in this school throughout your entire career?
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

2. In general, how would you describe your level of reflectiveness in your work?
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

3. How does that translate to the self-assessment process in the evaluation cycle?
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

4. Describe the specific self-assessment process that you use at the beginning of your evaluation cycle (what data are used, what steps take place, etc.).
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

5. When you’re self-assessing, what do you use to measure your performance? (If applicable: Do you feel that these standards reflect excellent teaching?)
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

6. What parts of the self-assessment process are you comfortable and confident doing?
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

7. What parts of the self-assessment process do you feel uncertain or less confident about?
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

8. Describe the emphasis that your school or district has placed on self-assessments (training, discussions, etc.).
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

9. Think about the way your school or district suggests the self-assessments be conducted. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

   **Research Question 2:** What are the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the self-assessment on their teaching practices?

10. What information does the self-assessment process give you?
    Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:
11. Describe the impact, if any, the self-assessment step has had on your teaching performance.
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

12. If the self-assessment process was removed from the evaluation cycle, describe how your practice would be different.
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

13. Based on your experience with your self-assessments, would you want to see it maintained or omitted as a step in the evaluation process? What argument would you give to support your position?
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

14. How have the results of your self-assessment impacted any professional development you may have received?
   Follow-up questions, notes, and/or observations:

Reflection by Interviewer
   • Closure
     o Thank you to interviewee
     o Reassure confidentiality
     o Ask permission to follow-up: ______
Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Dear Fourth Grade Teachers in [District Name],

My name is Kerry Clery and I am currently an Ed.D. candidate at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. As part of my doctoral research, I am conducting a qualitative study that will allow me to explore fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions of the self-assessment process in two different school districts in Massachusetts. I am seeking three fourth-grade teachers from your district, who meet the criteria below, to volunteer to participate in my research, which will consist of one face-to-face interview with me. The criteria for participants is as follows:

— A public school teacher in Massachusetts
— Teaches fourth grade
— Has been a certified teacher for at least 3 years

I will arrange this interview at a time and location that is convenient for you. The interview will consist of overarching questions related to your perceptions about the self-assessment process in the Educator Evaluation System.

There are no known risks to your involvement in this study. I assure you that the information I collect and the identity of your school/district will be treated confidentially. Your participation is completely voluntary. If at any time you wish to discontinue participation, you may do so with no penalty.

If you are interested in assisting me by participating in a 45- to 60-minute face-to-face interview, please contact me by email at clery.k@husky.neu.edu. At that point, I will send you a consent form and we can schedule a convenient time and location for the interview.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kerry Clery
Ed.D. Candidate
Northeastern University
## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northeastern University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name of Investigator(s):</strong> Kerry Clery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title of Project:</strong> Fourth-Grade Teachers’ Perception of the Self-Assessment Process: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. There is no obligation for you to participate in this study; this researcher is simply looking for volunteers who can assist in the research process by participating in one face-to-face interview. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

### Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You have been asked to participate because you meet the criteria of being a fourth-grade public school teacher in Massachusetts who has more than 3 years of experience and you have graciously expressed interest in volunteering to participate.

### Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to get an understanding of fourth-grade teachers’ perceptions about the self-assessment process, which is step 1 in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Cycle. I want to learn about your perception of the experiences related to the self-assessment process.

### What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to participate in one face-to-face (1:1) interview. I will ask you a series of about 14 questions related to your perception and experience in the self-assessment process. These questions have no right or wrong answers; they are simply meant to elicit your perception of the self-assessment process and how it pertains to your teaching. In order to capture our full conversation, with your permission, I will audio record the interview.

### Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. The face-to-face interview will take about 45 to 60 minutes; however, you are welcome to stop earlier, at any time, if you wish.
Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

Your answers will not be identifiable in the research, and there are no foreseen risks to your participation.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help teachers and educational leaders to reflect on the self-assessment process and, if deemed necessary, make changes to optimize the use of the process.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way as being part of this project. The audio recording of our interview will be sent to a qualified person for transcription. This individual, through his/her organization, will sign a confidentiality agreement. In the coding process, your name will not be used.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to, and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Karen Harbeck, Northeastern University Advisor, at 781-321-3569 or k.harbeck@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115; tel: 617.373.4588; email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

There will be no payment for your participation.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

You will endure no cost for participating in this study.
I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of person agreeing to take part ____________________________ Date ________________

Printed name of person above ___________________________________________________________________________________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent ____________________________ Date ________________

Kerry Clery
Printed name of person above ____________________________________________________________________________________________