INDEPENDENT SCHOOL TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION

Anne E. Graybeal
S. Eva Gold

This dissertation addressed the teacher supervision process in one independent school in the United States. It explored teachers’ approaches to giving and receiving feedback, their perceptions of students’ motivation for learning versus their own, and the significance of their professional identities as teachers.

The study was motivated by three research questions: (1) What forces shape and mediate independent school teachers’ perceptions of the evaluation process? (2) What do independent school teachers describe as the intersections between student assessment and teacher evaluation? (3) What are the implications of independent school teachers’ experiences of evaluation for the practice of teacher supervision? The goal was to inform the evolution of more a robust model of independent school teacher supervision and to expand the literature on independent school teaching and learning. The focal population was a group of fifteen Upper School teachers at an independent, co-educational, non-sectarian PK-12 independent school in a Midwestern city in the United States. The study included individual interviews, focus groups, and document review.

What emerged was a recognition that, while parallels exist between the feedback that participants give to students and the feedback they prefer to receive from supervisors, their motivations for professional learning differ significantly from those of their
students. Participants’ conceptions of their professional identities, as well as their relationships with administrators and with the institution, yielded useful insights about ways to evolve systems of teacher supervision in independent schools. Systems that offer teachers the opportunity to reflect on their professional identity and experience and that make clear connections between supervision and school mission may be particularly productive.
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CHAPTER ONE

Intersections of Student Assessment and Teacher Supervision

Introduction

Independent schools in the United States have remained largely detached from the national debate over teacher evaluation that has unfurled since the mid-nineteenth century. Untethered to local, state, or federal funding—and thus immune from attendant regulations for curriculum, evaluation, and instruction—inddependent schools have engaged on their own terms and in their own time the conversation about what constitutes good teaching.

Complicating the question of teacher evaluation in independent schools is their longstanding tradition of teacher autonomy, in terms of both school culture and organizational structure. Independent school teachers have generally operated free from the pedagogical confines of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century normal schools, or more contemporary teacher training and certification programs. Consequently, independent schools have developed cultures that place a premium on individual expertise and expertise (Bullard, 1992). The same goes for their administrators, who move from the classroom to administrative roles without formal training or certification. Independent schools are rarely unionized, and thus have far greater freedom in hiring and releasing teachers than do their public school counterparts (Bullard, 1992; Kane, 1992). Consequently, independent schools have not needed to “make a case” for teacher dismissal via the teacher evaluation process in the same way as their public counterparts (Bullard, 1992; Kane, 1992).
A great deal of freedom has arisen from the selective and historically exclusive nature of independent schools. Selective admissions policies mean that schools can offer admission to only the most academically capable students (Kohn, 2012). High tuitions have historically privileged students with higher socioeconomic status, many of whom are white. These students, taught by predominantly white faculty, have generally found academic success within these schools and in the selective colleges and universities to which they matriculate. These external signifiers of (ostensible) academic excellence have allowed independent schools to forgo or delay engaging with the ongoing national conversation about teacher evaluation, which has been amplified by the needs of a student population in public schools with extraordinary diversity across a number of critical markers, such as English language fluency, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and aptitude.

Within this context, the practice of teacher supervision and evaluation in independent schools has been, by turns, absent, haphazard, and contested. When and where it does exist, an essential question remains: is the purpose of the system to ensure a minimum standard of teaching proficiency, thus satisfying the school’s fiduciary obligation to students and parents, or is its purpose to support the ongoing professional growth of committed and capable teachers? Can a performance evaluation system actually fulfill both ends?

Questions around the purpose of teacher supervision and evaluation remain decidedly unresolved in the national debate over teacher evaluation in public schools. One school of thought posits that evaluation systems can effectively differentiate among teachers, motivating high performers with merit pay and other incentives and
“deselecting” ineffective practitioners (Fryer et al, 2012; Hanushek, 2009). Another makes the case for evaluation systems that provide standards-based feedback to increase both instructional effectiveness and professional learning (Almy, 2011; Papay, 2012). Still others argue for a combination of both formative and summative approaches (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). The dearth of formal research on independent schools requires turning to literature on public schools for guidance.

Admittedly, the approach of using research conducted in public schools to frame the study of independent schools raises complications because of the philosophical and structural differences between the sectors. The experience and attitudes of an independent school teacher—who does not belong to a union, who is free to develop her own curriculum, and who is not evaluated based on the results of state tests—are likely to diverge from those of a public school teacher. In the same vein, the culture of a typical independent school—which uses a selective admission process, controls its own budget, and does not qualify for state or federal incentives around teacher evaluation—is vastly different from that of a public counterpart. That said, the culture and practices of any school are unique to the history of that school and the identities of the students, employees, and families who comprise the community (Deal and Peterson, 2016). Such differences make comparison challenging even within sectors. Research on public schools, then, offers a helpful conceptual starting point for a project undertaken in the context of an independent school, while also inviting opportunities to identify areas of both consonance and dissonance between public and independent school contexts.

Regardless of their culture and history, independent schools are likely to be drawn ever closer to the national conversation about teacher evaluation. Race to the Top, the
$4.35 billion program launched by the Department of Education in 2009, highlighted the debate about teacher evaluation by introducing financial incentives for schools that adopted performance-based evaluation systems. As independent schools continue to struggle with the challenge of quantifying and communicating to their current and prospective constituents the value of the education they offer (Gulla & Jorgenson, 2014), questions about the purpose and practice of effective teacher evaluation will likely permeate further into that sector.

Amidst the din of national politics, competing theories of evaluation, and fiercely autonomous independent school cultures, this study approaches the question of teacher supervision in independent schools through the perspectives and practice of teachers themselves. Their perspectives are essential to understanding how to develop effective systems of supervision and evaluation that honor the independent school culture and context, but these voices have too long been absent from the educational research base (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1990). Experts in assessing their students, teachers have valuable insight to share about the intersection of effective feedback and motivation that may help point toward more effective and authentic systems of teacher supervision and evaluation in independent contexts.

This study grew out of my own longstanding fascination with the way in which independent school teachers, myself very much included, have bristled at the teaching supervision and evaluation process. It is rather the fashion in many independent schools for teachers to doubt administrators’ disciplinary expertise and their knowledge of individual teacher practice. At the same time, those teachers confidently assess and grade students, who may well harbor their very same doubts about their teachers. Why is it that
teachers believe ourselves to be offering valuable feedback through meaningful, well-structured assessments while we perceive our administrators to be naive agents of the blunderbuss of teacher supervision—especially when virtually every one of those administrators began her career in the classroom?

In embarking on this study, I hoped that exploring the intersection of teachers’ assessment practices of students and their experiences of the supervision and evaluation process would help to improve the system of teacher supervision at my site of practice, and potentially at other independent schools. If effective feedback has the potential to enhance intrinsic motivation (Anderson & Snyder, 1998; Finnegan, 2013; Frase & Streshley, 1994; Range, 2013; Tracy, 1998; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998), then understanding teachers’ preferences for and practices of giving feedback to students may reveal ways in which supervisory feedback could more effectively complement their motivation for professional learning. I reasoned that if the system of teacher supervision looked more like teachers’ assessment practices, it might result in richer supervisory conversations, inspire a deeper degree of engagement with the process, and mitigate teacher skepticism about supervision.

As the study unfurled, however, my thinking about this potential intersection of teacher supervision and student assessment evolved rather markedly. In our conversations, participants did describe significant similarities between the mechanics and the nature of the feedback they give to students and the feedback they receive from supervisors. They also, however, described a deep divide between their students’ motivations for their learning and their own. They saw their motivations, both extrinsic and intrinsic, as largely unconnected to supervisors’ feedback. Far more relevant to their
experiences of the supervisory process were their perceptions of their professional identities, as well as their perceptions of the administrators and institution that enact that process. Instead of looking to teachers’ relationships with students to inspire a better supervisory system, I ultimately recognized the power of looking to the experiences of teachers themselves as a way of evolving the system.

**Research Questions**

If teachers assess and evaluate students every day believing that they do so thoughtfully, thoroughly, and humanely, why have most schools been unable to construct systems of teacher evaluation systems that teachers perceive to be thoughtful, thorough, and humane? How can a deeper understanding of teacher motivation and teacher identity enhance the supervision process? The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What forces shape and mediate independent school teachers’ perceptions of the evaluation process?
   a. What supports teachers’ being responsive to supervision and evaluation?
   b. What inhibits teachers’ being responsive to supervision and evaluation?
2. What do independent school teachers describe as the intersections between student assessment and teacher evaluation?
   a. What do teachers name as the qualities and conditions necessary for effective feedback in both student assessment and teacher evaluation?
   b. What forces do teachers describe as motivating them and their students?
3. What are the implications of independent school teachers’ experiences of evaluation for the practice of teacher supervision?
The focal population of this study was a group of fifteen faculty at my site of practice, The Telfair School, an independent, co-educational, non-sectarian PK-12 independent school in a Midwestern city in the United States.

**Background and Context**

Prior to embarking on a history of teacher supervision in the United States, it is important to define the terms at hand. Although “supervision” and “evaluation” are often conflated, the terms denote distinct processes and outcomes (Range, 2013). Supervision focuses on improving teacher practice through coaching and formative feedback, while evaluation summatively rates job performance and determines employment status (Anderson & Snyder, 1998; Range, 2013; Tracy, 1998; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998).

Substantial disagreement exists about whether formative and summative evaluation can successfully co-exist in the teacher evaluation process. Popham (2013) argued for the total separation of formative and summative processes in order to preserve the candor necessary for a teacher to disclose the vulnerabilities and areas of interest necessary to conversations about professional growth. Others have contended that evaluative judgments cannot be reached with the data acquired through a formative process, and thus make the case for teacher assessment processes that include both supervisory and evaluative elements—that is, systems that both assist and assess (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Hunter, 1988; McGreal, 1983). Sergiovanni and Staratt (1993) added greater nuance to this dichotomy by articulating three stages of supervision and evaluation continuum: administrative evaluation used for decisions about employment status; summative evaluation used in support of periodic reflection and
assessment of growth; formative evaluation for the purpose of continuous reflection and growth.

In my experience, independent school teachers find the distinction between supervision and evaluation in the teacher evaluation process to be merely academic. For example, teachers may view post-observation conferences as summative in the sense that a conclusion about their performance is being reached by their supervisor (Iwanicki, 1998; McGreal, 1983). In another instance, details from an informal troubleshooting conversation with a supervisor might reemerge in a year-end performance review.

When I began this analysis, I tried to make a clear distinction between the formative and summative elements of the teacher evaluation process writ large and to use that language consistently in both participant interviews and my own analysis. Per the distinctions I outline above, I used “supervision” to capture the formative processes of clinical supervision that are familiar to most teachers and supervisors: goal-setting; classroom observations; pre- and post-observation conferences; and the gathering of additional data sources such as student surveys and teacher portfolios. I used “supervisors” to refer to the administrators charged with enacting that process at Telfair, generally principals and division directors (Anderson & Snyder, 1998). Notably, however, this group of administrators is often involved in evaluative (summative) determinations about employment (Kane, 1992). I also found that many participants experienced the supervisory process as a fundamentally summative one because it was technically connected to contract renewal and job security. Although all participants were experienced and successful classroom teachers, they ultimately saw formative feedback from supervisors as an element, however distant, of summative evaluation.
While “supervision” remains the term I use most often, particularly in analyzing participants’ experiences receiving what is intended to be formative feedback from administrators, the distinction from “evaluation” remains a fine one.

**History of Teacher Supervision in the United States**

Since its inception in the early nineteenth century, teacher supervision in American education has been both contentious and variegated, with the philosophy and practice of supervision evolving to reflect major cultural, political, or demographic trends or anxieties. Nearly constant, however, have been teachers’ negative perceptions of supervision, which has more often than not been experienced as an intrusive, hierarchic, and bureaucratic process conducted by administrators with too little time or training to do the job well. This etiology will address that evolution from the mid-nineteenth century through the industrial, progressive, and Cold War eras to the present.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the work of ensuring school quality fell to local clergy, who, by dint of their own education, were charged with recruiting and monitoring teachers (Marzano, 2011). As the number and influence of common schools grew, so did community interest in a more professionalized system of teacher preparation and evaluation. Supervisory work was increasingly given over to “‘principal’ teachers” (Marzano, 2011) who were charged not only with verifying their colleagues’ content knowledge, but also with ensuring their pedagogical expertise (Khachatryan, 2015; Marzano, 2011). As schools increased in complexity concomitant with the urban population explosion in the late nineteenth century, both principals and superintendents approached supervision as “inspection,” a process in which they determined and communicated acceptable classroom practice in a prescriptive and hierarchic way (Snow-
Gerono, 2008). These inspections were not well received by teachers, some of whom began to refer to the administrators visiting their classrooms as “snoopervisors” (Glanz, 1998, p. 52).

The influence of industrialization and the rise of management theory at the beginning of the twentieth century shifted the focus of supervision from inspection to efficiency, in which “the business of the school [was] to build children according to the specifications laid down” (as cited in Marzano, 2011). Supervision began to incorporate scientific measurements of teaching and learning, including aptitude and proficiency tests for students as well as score-based rubrics for teacher performance (Marzano, 2011; Snow-Gerono, 2008). Teachers remonstrated this approach, which they perceived as highly autocratic, magnifying the power differential between teachers and supervisors (Snow-Gerono, 2008; Sullivan & Glanz, 2005).

The progressive social and political movements of the 1920s and 1930s, marked by the growth and influence of organized labor, informed yet another reinvention of the supervisory process. This iteration drew upon Dewey’s theory of a democratic, differentiated, and interdisciplinary classroom in which teacher collaboration improved instruction and student outcomes (Marzano, 2011; Sullivan & Glanz, 2005). Supervision also took into account the individual identity and experience of the teacher, who was understood to have emotions and lived experiences that influenced and inflected her classroom practice (Marzano, 2011).

The reverberations of the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957 prompted calls for greater curricular rigor in American schools, as well as for increased accountability and oversight of teachers. Within this frame, clinical supervision became the dominant
paradigm for supervision, conceptualizing teacher supervision as an opportunity for continuous education for both teacher and supervisor. Clinical supervision sought to enhance teachers’ awareness of their classroom practice and to improve their capacity to assess their own teaching (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). Goldhammer (1969) articulated the five essential steps of clinical supervision for teachers: pre-observation, classroom observation, analysis of data by the supervisor, supervisory conference with the teacher focused on teacher reflection, and analysis of the analysis: rigorous examination of the supervisor’s practice. Hunter (1980) expanded on this model of clinical supervision by enumerating specific purposes for supervisory conferences: labeling teacher behaviors based on research, encouraging alternate approaches to instruction, identifying ineffective approaches, and promoting teacher growth. Building on Hunter’s work, Glatthorn (1984) argued that supervisory conferences should include discussion of teachers’ career goals, ensuring that teachers could exert agency around the trajectory of their professional development.

These adjustments did little to allay teacher concerns or to ensure the efficacy of teacher supervision on a national scale (Marzano, 2011). A Nation at Risk (1983) provoked national debate about America’s “failing” schools, which was exacerbated by the RAND study Teacher Evaluation: A Study of Effective Practices (1984). The study identified four key problems with then-current supervision practice: lack of principals’ resolve and competence to evaluate correctly, resistance to feedback from teachers, lack of uniform evaluation process, and lack of training for evaluators. The reports reframed the discourse around teacher supervision to one focused on student outcomes measured by standardized state tests and gave rise to an interest in standards-based teacher
evaluation systems comprised of detailed rating scales. Such scales ostensibly minimized supervisors’ subjectivity by providing objective criteria for assessing teachers’ pedagogy and practice. Standards-based evaluation systems typically entail the collection of a broad array of evidence about teachers’ practice (e.g., lesson plans, portfolios, student test scores) and require formal training for supervisors. Charlotte Danielson’s *Enhancing Professional Practice* (1996) channeled this standards-based approach, shifting supervisory practice away from the process-driven approach of clinical supervision and toward discussion of teaching itself. The Danielson Framework acknowledged the complexity of the practice of teaching, offered a shared language for describing teaching, and created a structure for teacher self-assessment and reflection.

In 2009, *The Widget Effect* shifted the national dialogue about teaching and learning in the same way that *A Nation at Risk* had in 1983. Commissioned by TNTP (formerly known as The New Teacher Project), an organization committed to ensuring that poor and minority students have access to excellent teachers, *The Widget Effect* documented approaches to assessing teacher performance in Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, and Ohio. It concluded that “school districts fail to acknowledge or act on differences in teacher performance almost entirely” (Weisberg et al., 2009, p. 2). Nearly all of the teachers included in the study had been rated “good” or “great” by their evaluators (Weisberg et al., 2009). The report attributed this phenomenon to supervisors’ reluctance to give teachers low ratings, an example of the loose coupling between the intentions of educational policy and its enactment by school practitioners (Grossman, 2010; Lipsky, 1980).
The study sparked interest in incorporating value-added measures in teacher evaluation, whether in place of or in addition to standards-based assessment of practice. The United States Department of Education envisioned Race to the Top, a $4.35 billion grant program intended to incentivize states to develop rigorous systems of teacher evaluation incorporating evidence of student achievement (Popham, 2013). In 2009, no state required teacher evaluations as part of the tenure process, and 15 states required data on student learning as one element of teacher evaluation (Zuschlag, 2017). By 2015, 23 states required teacher evaluation as part of the tenure process, and 43 required data on student learning for teacher evaluation (Zuschlag, 2017). In January 2017, the National Council on Teacher Quality found that among 30 states that require data on student learning as a variable in the teacher evaluation process, teachers could still be rated “effective” despite low student learning scores.

While the purpose of this study is not to argue for one approach or another to teacher evaluation, per se, it is instructive to consider its contentious history (and present) as a way to contextualize the role of teacher evaluation in independent schools, which have remained disengaged from this particular fray. The culture of independent schools and of the faculty who teach there resists measures that smack of prescriptive bureaucracy. Thus, any discussion of evaluation in an independent school context can evoke feelings of cynicism or suspicion, especially in light of the current national dialogue.

Supervision and Evaluation in Independent Schools

The history of evaluation is further complicated when one considers it in an independent school context. The term “private school” refers to any non-public school,
including for-profit, parochial, and trade schools. Independent schools comprise a subset of private schools characterized by non-profit status, self-determination of mission and program, self-government, and self-funding through tuition, philanthropy, and endowment (Balossi & Hernandez, 2015; Kane, 1992). The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) supports 1541 member schools in the United States, which enroll 675,115 students (About NAIS, 2015).

Although independent schools are regularly accredited by regional bodies that ensure institutional transparency and program quality, they are not typically bound by state regulations for curriculum. This independence was affirmed in Meyer v. State of Nebraska (1923), which upheld the rights of private schools to determine their own curricula, and by Pierce v. Society of Sisters (1925), which overturned an Oregon law requiring all children to attend public school. Independent schools are also largely free from state prescriptions for teacher training certification.

NAIS cites “high teacher satisfaction, expertise in their subject matter, and autonomy to make curricular decisions in their classrooms” (Balossi & Hernandez, 2015, p. 7) as essential factors for teaching effectiveness and asserts that teachers choose to work in independent schools because of the opportunities for curricular autonomy, engaged students, and small class sizes (Balossi & Hernandez, 2015). This tradition of institutional autonomy permeates virtually every aspect of independent school culture and practice, particularly issues related to curriculum design, instruction, and teacher supervision. Independent school faculty rarely unionize (Kane, 1992), and thus faculty have historically depended on a trusting relationship with the head of school for job security, trading the safety of a union contract for institutional influence and classroom
autonomy (Bullard, 1992). Kane (1992) wrote that “the freedom to fail is, for independent school teachers, the price of freedom to teach” (p. 12). In this way, independent school teachers share a core characteristic with their public sector counterparts. Autonomy is central to the identity of any “street-level bureaucrat,” including teachers, who tend to resist managerial policies that constrain their discretion and freedom—particularly when it comes to performance measures (Lipsky, 2002).

This institutional emphasis on teacher autonomy, combined with the freedom to operate outside of state regulations for public schools, has meant that many independent schools have not implemented elaborate systems of teacher supervision or measures of teaching effectiveness. Indeed, the NAIS webpage offering resources for faculty supervision and evaluation features just four entries: two case studies, a list of assumptions about evaluation systems (which includes the statements, “People want to do their jobs well” and “Evaluation is based on data”), and a brief entry from the NAIS teacher services committee about peer coaching (Clem, 2004). Balossi and Hernandez (2015) characterized the practice of teacher supervision in independent schools as one in which:

underlying assumptions, rather than clear descriptions, often guide selection and retention of teachers . . . These assumptions are then casually correlated with teacher, parent, and student satisfaction to evaluate the quality of teachers. Often a teacher’s reputation, rather than valid evaluative measurement and feedback, or the combination of reputation and other evaluative measures, inform employment, recognition, and promotion decisions. (p. 7)

In a study of hiring, retention, and evaluation practices at 779 independent schools, Balossi and Hernandez (2015) found that although 55% of independent schools evaluate teachers annually, many teachers described those processes as unclear and ineffective,
particularly for veteran teachers; by contrast, administrators believed their teacher evaluation processes to be clear, thorough, and effective.

During the last decade, independent schools have engaged more intentionally in the work of teacher supervision, informed in part by the national debate about how to measure student learning outcomes, as well as by the reverberations of the Great Recession, which required independent schools to justify more explicitly the “value added” of their programs (Gulla & Jorgenson, 2014). Even so, given the “independent” nature of the sector, the process of supervision varies significantly from school to school, resisting efforts to universalize practice or capture trends.

**Rationale and Significance**

Through an unusual confluence of circumstances, I was appointed English department chair at a southern California boarding school after only four years of full-time teaching; six years later, I became the Upper School Director at Telfair. While it would be disingenuous to say that I hadn’t sought professional advancement, I certainly did not expect that it would come so early. As a result, I have at times experienced my share of imposter syndrome, feeling incommensurate to or undeserving of my leadership position (Clance & Imes, 1978). Consequently, I have often found myself identifying far more with the independent school faculty experience than the administrative one. Even now, as Associate Head of School, I often introduce myself as an English teacher.

That role identification has also meant that I have retained my fair share of skepticism about administrative process and practice, particularly when it comes to teacher supervision and evaluation. At that aforementioned boarding school, I won an award for teaching excellence after having been observed a whopping three times in four
years—for less than an hour combined. The first observation came and went with no acknowledgement from the observer. I received feedback via email after the second of those observations and had to ask explicitly for feedback after the third. Indeed, that “teaching excellence” was determined solely by a survey of the senior class, a demographic known, charmingly, to conflate “excellence” with “entertainment.”

Similarly, as a department chair at the same school, I received no training or guidance about how I was expected to support and evaluate the teachers in my department. With no requirements for observation or feedback—and thus no institutional imprimatur for conducting them—I missed valuable opportunities to discuss teaching and learning with my departmental confrères, a practice that might have saved at least one colleague from a deeply unpleasant series of parent complaints.

Currently, I serve as Associate Head of School at The Telfair School. Founded in 1900, Telfair is an independent, co-educational, non-sectarian school in a Midwestern city enrolling nearly 1400 students in grades PK-12 on three campuses. This three-campus structure, the result of a 1970’s merger, makes the school’s administration and organization fairly complex and necessitates the role of PK-12 department chairs, who coordinate curriculum development and faculty supervision and evaluation across all 14 grade levels. I, in turn, am responsible for the supervision of the department chairs, as well as for school-wide professional development and the faculty supervision and evaluation system writ large.

Telfair has a strong reputation for academic excellence. For each of the last five years, the school has turned out the highest percentage of National Merit semifinalists of any school in the state. In 2015, the mean SAT composite score for students in the senior
class was 1989; the median ACT score was 30. In the same year, 292 Upper School students (out of 526 students in grades 9-12) sat for a total of 626 AP exams, with 64% earning scores of 4 or 5. In 2015, 34% of seniors matriculated to colleges admitting fewer than 25% of applicants. Over 80% of Upper School faculty hold advanced degrees; three are Advanced Placement exam readers, and several are published authors and researchers.

Telfair’s regional stature and the strength of our faculty and student body combine to create a school culture that is highly driven and achievement-oriented. In 2010, the visiting team charged with Telfair’s reaccreditation process made two major recommendations addressing this phenomenon: “Acknowledge, assess and address the sense of ‘stress’ many faculty and staff express” and “Thoughtfully manage the pace of change” (ISACS Visiting Team Report, 2010). In 2012 and again in late 2015, the Upper School partnered with Challenge Success, an organization addressing issues of student workload and wellness in high achieving schools, to survey our Upper School students in order to assess the high level of student stress related to academic expectations.

Within this culture of high performance and high expectations—for students and for faculty alike—it may come as no surprise that questions of teacher supervision and evaluation are highly fraught and sometimes controversial. In 2005, the school phased out a beloved professional growth program based on teacher partnerships and instituted a newly developed supervision process called the Effective Teaching Initiative (ETI). It includes many established elements of clinical supervision, such as informal and formal observations followed by conversations with academic administrators; a number of self-
assessment, goal-setting, and reflection forms; student surveys; and the curation of “supplemental materials” that function something like a portfolio.

Telfair’s ETI process is girded by The Danielson Framework for Teaching. Each year, faculty set two to four professional learning goals for the year, framed by the domains, elements, and components of the Danielson Framework. Created in 1996 as a tool for “professional conversations among practitioners as they seek to enhance their skill in the complex task of teaching” (p. 202) the Danielson Framework is comprised of four core domains of teacher practice: Planning and Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, and Professional Responsibilities (Danielson Group, 2013). Each domain includes five to six “components” of practice, and each component captures specific “elements.” The domains are numbered one through four, and the elements of each domain are lettered. For example, the element “Setting Instructional Outcomes” exists as part of Domain 1, “Planning and Preparation” and would be referred to as “1c” (Danielson Group, 2013). Furthermore, the Danielson offers language to characterize four levels of practice for each element—unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, and distinguished—for a total of 304 qualitative designations.

The Danielson Framework has evolved in the twenty years since its publication. Some changes have been cosmetic (e.g., with domain designations changing from letters to numbers), while some have been driven by the changing landscape of teacher evaluation (e.g., wording of elements changed to offer greater alignment with the Common Core). What has remained consistent, however, is the original purpose of the framework, which was intended to offer a shared language for supervisory conversations about teaching (Danielson Group, 2013).
In 2009, Telfair’s Board of Trustees and the then-head of school introduced a system of performance recognition payments, or bonuses. The program was intended to recognize and reward, via modest bonus payments, the work of distinguished classroom teachers. The school had recently moved to a new “step and lane” salary scale, which guaranteed an annual salary increase for teachers regardless of graduate degrees or performance evaluations. Under the new performance recognition system, experienced faculty (nine years or more at Telfair) who were participating in an evaluation year could opt in for bonus consideration. There were three tiers of bonuses, which were to be paid annually to eligible faculty until their next review: Tier 3 ($4000), Tier 2 ($3000), and Tier 1 ($2000). Tiers were determined by the supervisors’ assessments of teachers’ practice vis à vis the Danielson framework. Tier 3 teachers, for example, were rated “distinguished” in a preponderance of elements on the rubric.

Faculty were almost universally opposed to the program, which they saw as an example of corporate values intruding on independent school culture. They also expressed skepticism about the ability of administrators to evaluate faculty accurately and consistently. A frequent criticism was that Danielson herself had originally inveighed against using the framework for summative evaluation (Danielson Group, 2013). The roll-out of the system exacerbated existing skepticism and mistrust about “top-down” management that did not fully honor or understand the complexities of classroom teaching. Even so, over 90% of eligible teachers opted to be considered for the performance recognition payment.

Given that teachers’ credence in the structure and efficacy of the supervision and evaluation process is essential to its success (O’Pry, 2012; Schumacher, 2010), Telfair
teachers’ responses to both the new supervision and performance recognition systems did not bode well for the success of either. In February 2016, the school conducted a comprehensive survey of faculty experiences of both ETI and performance recognition; feedback on the performance recognition system was resoundingly negative. Subsequently, the head of school made the decision to sunset tiered performance recognition at the close of the 2016-17 school year, while leaving in the place the core components of the supervision process. While this announcement was met with largely positive responses from faculty, the contentious history of this program may continue to influence faculty perceptions of supervision and evaluation at Telfair well into the future.

Indeed, when my colleagues and I discuss the school’s system of teacher supervision, I hear from them many of the same experiences reflected in the literature: the delivery of evaluation complicates otherwise collegial, collaborative relationships between supervisors and faculty; the supervision process is overly complex; the criteria for evaluation are vague; administrators are inadequately or unevenly trained as evaluators. We spend as much or more time identifying the pitfalls of the process as we do teaching itself—an unhealthy and ineffective phenomenon.

Despite the collective angst about our evaluation system, I cannot help but note that the pedagogical approach of most of our faculty embraces practices not unlike those reflected in the teacher supervision system. Teachers gather data about student learning from both formative and summative assessments (akin to informal and formal classroom observations); they ask students to create and share artifacts of their learning (just like supplemental materials); they hold individual conferences with students about their work (similar to post-observation conversations); they assign grades at the end of a course (the
equivalent of performance recognition payments). Presumably, teachers do not believe that they are doing harm to their students by asking them to participate in the formative and summative assessment processes of their courses.

Why do independent school teachers express such confidence in their assessment of students and such discomfort in administrators’ assessments of their teaching practice? After all, Hunter (1980) argued that the same principles of learning apply to both teachers and students: learning requires that the learner be actively involved, encouraged, reinforced, and made to feel successful. McGreal (1983) wrote that a good observation conference resembles a good lesson and that the roles of a teacher in the classroom and the supervisor in a conference are similar. In this study, I wanted to explore the interstices of teachers’ perceptions of their assessment of students and their perceptions of teacher supervision and evaluation. While there are deep bodies of literature exploring these topics individually, there has been nothing written about the way in which teachers’ own assessment practices inform their perceptions of teacher supervision. The significance of these findings lies in their potential to inform a more effective system of teacher supervision at my site of practice.

This study also has significance for understanding of teacher supervision in independent schools. Given the unique culture and practice of independent schools, existing research on teacher supervision in public schools does not provide the clearest lens into the practice and perception of such supervision for independent schools. The particular cultural considerations of independent schools—especially the nearly hagiographic preservation of teacher autonomy in curriculum design and instruction—may mean that independent school teachers’ perceptions of supervision differ vastly from
those of their public sector counterparts. The relative dearth of research on independent schools means that this study’s conceptual framework will rely largely on research done in public schools. The results of this study, however, will help to expand available research in the realm of independent school teacher supervision.

More broadly, professional growth and evaluation are inextricably connected to motivation and job satisfaction, which inform independent school teachers’ decisions to stay or leave a given community (Balossi & Hernandez, 2015). Within independent school cultures where stress is a currency (Porter, 2007), the additional stress brought on by a poorly conceived or executed process of teacher supervision and evaluation may contribute to teacher burnout and turnover (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Given that high teacher quality is a significant factor in parents’ decisions to choose independent schools, ensuring a stable and highly capable faculty is an essential component of independent school institutional health.

The dissertation contains seven chapters. Chapter Two offers a conceptual framework for this study. Chapter Three describes the study’s methodology and research design. The structure and content of Chapters Four, Five, and Six reflect the evolution of my understanding of the intersection between teacher supervision and student assessment—most notably the complexities of trying to establish a clear relationship between the two. Chapter Four explores participants’ practices of offering feedback to students and their preferences for receiving feedback from their supervisors, finding that a great deal of consonance exists between these parallel processes. In the experience of these participants, good feedback looks the same for both students and teachers.
Given the connection between teachers’ perceptions of high quality feedback and their motivation around professional learning (Finnegan, 2013; Frase & Streshley, 1994), Chapter Five addresses participants’ perceptions of students’ motivation for learning, as well as their descriptions of their own motivation. In contrast to findings about feedback, however, this study revealed major differences between the way participants characterized students’ motivation, which they saw as largely extrinsic, and the way they characterized their own, which they saw as largely intrinsic. Indeed, while participants appreciated praise from their supervisors, they did not identify any connection between supervisory feedback and intrinsic motivation. Instead, participants most often framed their perceptions and experiences of supervision in the context of their identities as teachers and their relationships with supervisors.

Consequently, Chapter Six explores participants’ responses to supervision in the context of their professional identities, their perceptions of administrators, and their relationship with the institution as a whole. Chapter Seven offers a summary of findings in relation to the research questions, shares implications for independent schools, and suggests opportunities for future research.
CHAPTER TWO

Conceptual Framework

As teaching and learning organizations, schools are engaged in near-continuous assessment of practice and performance. Assessment is reproduced along the institutional hierarchy, with supervisors assessing teachers who in turn assess their students. (While students are sometimes asked to share feedback on teachers, school leadership, and school culture, their input does not typically determine summative outcomes for school personnel.)

Based on my experiential knowledge (Maxwell, 2013), I find most independent school teachers to be skeptical of the teacher supervision process. While they may recognize the merit of supervision generally, they often express frustration about the process: its complexity, their supervisors’ lack of understanding of their teaching practice, the pro forma nature of conversations about classroom observations. These personal observations and experiences align with research about teacher perceptions of supervision (Bullard, 1992; Glatthorn, 1998; Kane & Mason, 1992; McGreal, 1983).

By contrast, I do not find that many teachers believe that they hamper or harm their students’ learning and growth through their assessment of student work. In an independent school, teachers are able to design learning experiences for their students and provide feedback on that learning with the express intention of motivating students to grow as learners, whether in metacognition, in skills and habits of mind, in their command of content knowledge, or in some combination of those. While participants in this study chafe at assigning grades, which they see as damaging extrinsic motivators,
they believe that the learning experiences they design for students and the feedback they offer on that learning are authentic, engaging, and personal.

The study originated in a desire to understand how the system of supervision could be improved by learning from teachers’ philosophy and practice of assessing their students. This conceptual framework begins by articulating the relationship among the variables that inform teachers’ perceptions of supervision and their philosophy and practice of student assessment: feedback, motivation, and teacher attitudes toward supervision.

Because supervision is largely a formative process, focused on improving teacher practice through coaching and feedback, to be successful it must resonate with teachers’ motivation to grow professionally (Anderson & Synder, 1998; Range, 2013; Tracy, 1998; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). Except in the relatively rare cases in which regular supervision reveals a significant deficiency in a teacher’s practice and triggers evaluative decision-making about job status, there is often little formal accountability in the independent school context for the formative feedback and recommendations made during the supervision process (Balossi & Hernandez, 2015). Research has indicated that teachers are most likely to act on the feedback they receive if they perceive the feedback to be of high quality, amplifying their intrinsic motivation to grow professionally (Finnegan, 2013; Frase & Streshley, 1994).

The literature on teacher motivation, however, has had little to say about highly motivated teachers’ experience with supervision. Every participant in this study has been recognized either formally or informally by Telfair as being a highly successful teacher; this recognition has included tier bonuses, leadership roles, or major professional
development opportunities, such as sabbaticals. During this study, Telfair’s teachers did not describe feeling professionally motivated by the feedback they received during the supervision process, nor by any official accolade from the school. Instead, their motivation for professional learning arose from elements central to their identities as teachers, such as a desire to support students’ learning. Similarly, their attitudes toward supervision were influenced most significantly by their relationships with their supervisors and with the institution as a whole, not by the quality of the feedback they received. Thus, this framework also seeks to offer relevant research on teachers’ professional identity, which will offer a lens into understanding participants’ attitudes toward both professional learning and supervision.

**Self-Determination Theory and Teaching**

Understanding motivation is an essential component of understanding the learning process writ large, whether for teachers or for students. If the supervision process can tap into teachers’ intrinsic motivation, it has the potential to spark a process of professional growth that can continue beyond the boundaries of supervision, enhancing teacher practice and, potentially, teacher investment in the school and the profession (Finnegan, 2013). Done poorly, a supervision process may actually demotivate teachers or reinforce a fixed mindset, creating or exacerbating friction between both the teacher and supervisor and the teacher and the institution (Finnegan, 2013).

Self-determination theory distinguishes between amotivation and motivation. Amotivation results from an activity not having value or from a perception of being incompetent to perform it; motivation results from a belief that engaging in an activity will yield a sought-after outcome (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Motivation for professional
learning correlates positively with three factors: expectancy, value, and affective impact (Thoonen et al., 2011). For teachers, expectancy involves beliefs about their capacity to perform a task, or their self-efficacy (Finnegan, 2013). Value represents their goals for a task, as well as their perception of its significance and their own degree of engagement. The affective component is comprised of their feelings about the task or about the school writ large (Thoonen et al., 2011).

In turn, motivation is divided into intrinsic and extrinsic categories, although for teachers a third category of school-based factors—comprised of leadership, climate, and infrastructure—has also been shown to affect motivation (Eyal & Roth, 2011, Finnegan, 2013; Mertler, 2002). Intrinsic motivation involves performing a task without external prompt or reward and is therefore closely linked to feelings of autonomy (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Firestone, 2014). Intrinsic motivation is optimized in what Csikszentmihalyi (1991) described as “flow”: a state of complete engagement with the task at hand. For Csikszentmihalyi, an autotelic job is one in which the worker finds deep intrinsic motivation; such jobs offer explicit goals, heterogeneous tasks, meaningful challenge, and timely feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Frase (1992) argues that teaching is an autotelic job because teachers enter the profession primarily to support students’ learning and feel most gratified by students’ achievement (Frase, 1992; van Veen & Sleeegers, 2006).

Frase and Streshley (1994) argued that the greatest opportunity for supporting teacher success and self-efficacy arises from fostering intrinsic motivation. In order for teachers to shift from extrinsically motivated behavior to intrinsically motivated behavior, “the self-regulation of that behavior and the value attributed to that behavior
must be internalized” (Eyal & Roth, 2011, p.258). This transformation may be achieved via high-quality feedback, which inspires new goals for professional growth that, when accomplished, result in increased internal motivation (Finnegan, 2013; Frase & Streshley, 1994).

Intrinsic motivation also exists when a teacher feels aligned with the school’s mission and values, creating a consonance between personal and institutional goals (Thoonen et al., 2011). Gokce’s meta-analysis (2010) of studies on teacher motivation found that motivation correlated positively with autonomy, recognition, respect, responsibility, advancement, and achievement. Teachers who believe that their school meets these needs tend to experience increased motivation (Gokce, 2010). Intrinsically motivated teachers perceive teaching tasks as engaging and thus feel more energized than other teachers. Intrinsic motivation allows teachers to remain resilient in the face of quotidian organizational friction, and, in turn, may diminish the likelihood of burnout (Eyal & Roth, 2011).

The role of autonomy in intrinsic motivation is particularly salient in an independent school context, in which autonomy within and beyond the classroom functions as both a defining element of school culture and a major reason why teachers choose to teach in independent schools (Balossi & Hernandez, 2015; Bullard, 1992). Logically, a supervision process at an independent school that is perceived as abrogating teaching autonomy would elicit negative reactions from teachers. If teachers perceive too many elements of Telfair’s supervision process as undermining their autonomy within and beyond the classroom, the process may actually (and unintentionally) demotivate teachers.
Extrinsic motivation involves performing an otherwise uninteresting task because it results in an external consequence. As opposed to the autonomy that characterizes activities driven by intrinsic motivation, activities framed by extrinsic motivation tend to be experienced as controlled and prescriptive (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Eyal and Roth’s (2011) meta-analysis showed that external motivation most often correlates with fixed mindsets and feelings of powerlessness, whereas intrinsic motivation is associated with successful performance, self-efficacy, long term professional satisfaction.

Jesus and Conboy (2001) found that, compared to professionals in other fields, teachers experience lower motivation and higher stress. Because stress can inhibit cognition, teacher stress may create a significant barrier to perceiving feedback as constructive and, in turn, to developing internal motivation (Finnegan, 2013; Garmston, Lipton, & Kaiser, 1998). Mid-career teachers are generally less satisfied and motivated than teachers at the beginning and the end of their careers (Mertler, 2002). This finding may correlate with research on teacher supervision showing that experienced teachers perceive feedback as less useful unless it is directly related to a path for professional development. By including experienced teachers as participants in this study and asking them to describe the feedback that they find to be most effective, I hope to determine whether this phenomenon is borne out in the independent school world, as well.

The supervision process itself is not a motivator for teacher professional growth. I believe that the relationship between teachers’ intrinsic motivation and teacher supervision is best understood by the literature that connects the two: feedback.
Feedback Intervention Theory and Teaching

Research on feedback and its effects has evolved significantly over the last century. Early researchers of feedback, Thorndike (1913) and Ammons (1956) described a direct correlation between positive feedback and reinforcement, and between negative feedback and punishment. For much of the twentieth century, the belief that feedback has a positive effect on performance was axiomatic. Kluger & DeNisi (1996) found that feedback actually has the potential to impair performance; they found no evidence to support the belief that positive and negative feedback have differential impact on performance.

As teaching and learning organizations, schools thrive on feedback, which lies at the heart of both teacher supervision and student assessment. Intrinsic motivation is positively linked to feelings of recognition and respect, and constructive feedback constitutes a significant source of those feelings among teachers (Gokce, 2010; NNCES, 1997). Recognizing that feedback is an essential tool for activating intrinsic motivation (Finnegan, 2013), feedback intervention theory can shed light on the impact of and best practices for offering feedback to teachers.

Feedback is information from an external source about the recipient’s behavior, understanding, or task performance (Alder, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1998). Feedback can be understood as a consequence of performing a task. Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT), described in a meta-analysis by Kluger and DeNisi (1996), makes five core arguments about the connection between feedback and performance:

(a) Behavior is regulated by comparisons of feedback to goals or standards,
(b) goals or standards are organized hierarchically,
(c) attention is limited and therefore only feedback-standard gaps that receive
attention actively participate in behavior regulation,
(d) attention is normally directed to a moderate level of the hierarchy, and
(e) FIs change the locus of attention and therefore affect behavior (p. 259).

Kluger and DeNisi (1998) cited discrepancy between feedback-standard and performance
(item c) as a fundamental source of motivation.

The literature distinguishes between feedback sign and feedback constructiveness.
Feedback sign indicates whether the feedback denotes acceptable or inadequate
performance relative to a standard or a goal (Alder, 2007). Feedback constructiveness
describes the manner in which feedback is offered: specifically and kindly, or generally
and unkindly (Alder, 2007). Recipients associated constructiveness with fairness, which
resulted in increased motivation to engage with the task at hand (Alder 2007).

Khachatryan (2015) described three types of feedback: self-feedback, which
shifts the recipient’s focus to the self; product-feedback, which evaluates how well the
recipient performed or completed a particular task; and process-feedback, which outlines
how the steps in that task or performance were undertaken. Process-feedback often has
the greatest positive effect on a learner’s future performance (Khachatryan, 2015) while
self-feedback may actually deplete cognitive resources and limit performance by causing
recipients to become preoccupied with self at the expense of attention to the task or goal
(Alder, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Khachatryan, 2015; Kluger & DeNisi, 1998). In
other words, the most effective feedback allows the recipient to direct attention toward
the task, not toward self, and contains information related to the process by which the
task is being accomplished (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).
Kluger and DeNisi (1998) complicated this argument about self-feedback by differentiating among the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. These conceptions of self represent, in turn, what a person believes themselves to be, what a person wants to be, and what a person thinks they should be. They argued that when feedback recipients identify discrepancies between the actual self and ideal self, the feedback intervention may be positive, allowing a focus on “promotion goals (possible gains)”, whereas interventions that identify discrepancies between actual self and ought self are negative, resulting in a preoccupation with obligations and a focus on “prevention goals (possible losses)” (Kluger & DeNisi, 1998, p. 70).

Goals and goal-setting play a significant role in effective feedback, just as they do in the development of intrinsic motivation. Feedback has the greatest impact for a recipient who has set goals that are both specific and challenging, albeit with low task complexity (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), effective feedback should allow recipients to address the following goal-related questions: “Where am I going? (What are the goals?), How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?), and Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?)” (p. 86). Offering feedback in terms of process and goals minimizes possible threats to self-esteem, allowing recipients to pay more attention to the feedback itself (Khachatryan, 2015; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

**Teacher Feedback to Students**

Because independent schools do not typically require their teachers to hold state certification, many independent schools teachers have not received formal training in assessing students’ work or assigning grades (Bullard, 1992; Guskey, 2006; Kane, 1992).
As a result, many teachers simply channel their experiences as students and then develop practices that they believe are “fair, equitable, defensible, and educationally sound” (Guskey, 2006). This phenomenon offers a clear parallel to the training (or lack thereof) of independent school administrators charged with teacher supervision, who may also lack formal training in feedback and observation practices and thus assess teachers through the biased lens of their own teaching practices and proclivities (Marzano, 2011).

Teachers typically deploy two types of assessment practices: formative and summative assessment. This distinction was first articulated in 1967 by Michael Scriven, who was attempting to offer states a lexicon for evaluating their teacher education programs in order to qualify for federal funding through the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Popham, 2013). This nomenclature began to be applied to the evaluation of teachers themselves, and, eventually, to student assessment. The theory behind formative assessment for students began to be articulated in the late 1990s. One of the first reports on the topic came from the Cambridge University Assessment Reform Group (ARG, 1999), which provided a roadmap toward a participatory classroom culture emphasizing student inquiry. Subsequent research, summarized by Clark (2011), has focused on systematizing and clarifying formative assessment practices, framing them as an essential component of student learning, motivation, and engagement.

In formative assessment, students’ responses shape the direction of future learning opportunities for the individual and for the class as a whole. Formative assessment is also intended to inflect the recipient’s cognition or behavior in order to improve learning (Frase & Streshley, 1994; Sadler, 1989; Shute, 2008). Feedback from students’ teachers and peers is a core element of formative assessment; effective formative feedback is
timely, concrete, and tailored to the individual (Sadler 1989; Hyland, 2013). Formative assessments are often low-stakes and ungraded, allowing students to engage with the task at hand without cognitive threat.

By contrast, summative assessment attempts to describe or define the “achievement status” of a student (Sadler, 1989, p. 120). Summative assessment is offered as an evaluation of an individual’s performance or understanding relative to external measures, standards, or benchmarks. For students, summative assessment takes the form of graded assignments with more significant quantitative weight (such as tests, essays, or oral exams) or of standardized tests such as Advanced Placement exams and SAT subject tests. In a public school context, summative assessment could also include state proficiency tests.

At Telfair, a growing number of Middle and Upper School faculty have begun to adopt skills-based (also known as standards-based) grading practices. Instead of giving students a single grade on each assignment and averaging those grades across a term, teachers using skills-based grading identify the particular skills and habits of mind for their course—everything from “integration of primary sources” to “effective collaboration with peers” to “varied diction and syntax”—and assign grades to each skill, rather than giving a single grade each assignment. Through multiple opportunities to rehearse and refine each skill throughout the term, students have the opportunity to improve their skill mastery—and, in turn, their final grade.

The advent of this practice in combination with longstanding faculty interest in Carol Dweck’s (2007) growth mindset research has led to a number of organic professional development opportunities for faculty, including a skills-based grading
Professional Learning Community (PLC), and some formal conversations at the Middle and Upper Schools about how and why we assess students. Additionally, Telfair faculty are interested in any feedback system that can help to mitigate students’ significant feelings of stress about their summative academic performance; many see skills-based grading as an opportunity to reframe conversations with students to focus on mastery goals, not final grades. In conceiving this study, I reasoned that these conversations had also amplified our teachers’ awareness of and sensitivity to the ways in which feedback is delivered during Telfair’s teacher supervision process. The following section offers insight from the literature into the feedback that teachers find most useful in the context of the supervision process.

**Teacher Supervision and Evaluation**

Effective feedback helps to tap teachers’ intrinsic motivation by allowing them to set and meet challenging and specific professional goals (Finnegan, 2013; Frase & Streshley, 1994). Regardless of institution-specific administrivia of teacher supervision, such as policies, forms, and schedules, the literature on teacher supervision describes the affective criteria and structural conditions necessary for that feedback to take place. This section addresses characteristics of effective teacher supervision, teacher perceptions of supervision, role complexity in teacher supervision, and teacher emotions relative to supervision.

**Characteristics of Effective Teacher Supervision**

Although beliefs about the elements of effective supervision have evolved markedly over the past century, contemporary research reflects some unanimity in recommendations for best practices in teacher supervision. Successful teacher
supervision requires a clear philosophy that derives from the specific mission and cultural context of each school community (McGreal, 1983) and privileges the meaning of the process over its methods. It also creates a clear link between individual needs and school goals, defusing the vulnerability teachers may feel by connecting faculty growth with the larger health, mission, and vision of the institution (Tracy, 1998).

In a review of the literature on evaluation, Darling-Hammond, Wise, and Pease (1983) articulated four foundational concepts for successful teacher supervision that continue to anchor current research and practice. They asserted that in an effective supervision system:

1. All actors in the system have a shared understanding of the criteria and processes for teacher evaluation;
2. All actors understand how these criteria and processes . . . capture the most important aspects of teaching . . . ;
3. Teachers perceive that the evaluation procedure enables and motivates them to improve their performance, and principals perceive that the procedure enables them to provide instructional leadership;
4. All actors in the system perceive that the evaluation procedure allows them to strike a balance . . . between control and autonomy for the various actors in the system (Darling-Hammond et al., 1983, p. 320).

Beyond these core tenets, the current literature describes several common characteristics of successful teacher supervision. Formative assessment allows teachers multiple opportunities for reflection and feedback and defuses the tension inherent in summative performance conversations (Danielson, 1996; Iwanicki, 1998; Khachatryan, 2015; Shute, 2008). Effective supervision allows participants to gather data from multiple sources, including frequent observations, teacher portfolios, student surveys, and data on student outcomes (Range, 2013; Younger, 2004). Recognizing that teaching is deeply inflected by institutional context and teacher identity, effective supervision systems are often co-
constructed by teachers and administrators, reflecting the values and practices of the community (Hoerr, 1998; Snow-Gerono, 2008). Finally, administrators need to hone their feedback and instructional skills through regular training (Range, 2013; Stoelinga, 2010). Such training also addresses the tendency to evaluate others’ teaching based on one’s own preferences and practices (Marzano, 2011), a particular challenge in independent schools, where administrators are often former faculty who developed their teaching practice on the job, without formal training (Bullard, 1992).

**Teacher Perceptions of Supervision**

Although debates over teacher supervision can be an “extraordinarily controversial and disruptive influence” in a school community, teachers are not averse to the concept of supervision or to the opportunities for professional growth that it may create (McGreal, 1983, p. vii). While McGreal (1983) asserted that negative teacher perceptions arise not from the concept of supervision, but from its execution, the nature of teachers’ professional identity and independent school culture may prevent any system of supervision from being experienced positively.

Notably, teacher hopes for and experiences of supervision—both positive and negative—have remained fairly constant during the last century. Schoonmaker, Sawyer, and Brainard (1998) described a 1929 study that showed that teachers wanted encouragement, sympathy, and favorable comments from their supervisors and that teachers need to be made to feel comfortable in order to benefit from supervisory feedback. Schoonmaker et al. (1998) also chronicled a 1930 survey of teachers in Michigan, whose complaints about supervision included infrequent visits by supervisors,
supervisors unskilled in the discipline, supervisors’ reluctance to offer concrete feedback, supervisors’ preference for “catching” teachers rather than offering constructive support.

More recent research has demonstrated similar findings: teachers cite constructive feedback, reflection, opportunities for professional growth, and trusting, professional relationships as essential characteristics for effective supervision (Range, 2013; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). Teachers perceive supervision as useful when they believe that they have a positive and supportive relationship with their supervisor (McGreal, 1983).

Teachers cited the opportunity to reflect on their teaching along with a supervisor as being a transformative and empowering practice, particularly when it sets the stage for future reflection and collaboration with peers (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). Indeed, teachers who have changed their practices in response to supervisory feedback and assessment cite peer collaboration and self-awareness as the primary drivers of that change (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). In other words, a supervisor’s most effective move is to ask questions and prompt reflection that will prompt teachers’ exploration of their practice with their colleagues, not to deliver prescriptive or summative assessments of that practice.

Teachers new to the profession were most positively influenced by hearing the observer’s report, receiving constructive feedback, building trust, and identifying areas for future growth (Range, 2013). Veteran teachers preferred their supervisors to link the conversation to professional development and to hear positive comments from the observer (Hinchey, 2010; Range, 2013; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). This finding for veteran teachers is consonant with Kluger and DeNisi’s (1998) research showing that
feedback becomes more positive for the recipient as the task at hand is perceived as being increasingly familiar or simple.

Frequent visits by supervisors also affirm teachers’ perceptions of the utility of supervision (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). The frequency of these visits, particularly when combined with complimentary feedback, helps teachers feel like trusted, professional partners in the supervisory process (Danielson et al., 1996; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). Feedback intervention theory, however, lends one cautionary note to this finding: feedback that is too frequent may increase the degree to which the recipient is reliant on or influenced by the source of that feedback, resulting in a loss of agency for the recipient (Alder, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). A perception of having control over one’s environment is a necessary component of motivation (Alder, 2007; Kane & Mason, 1992). Supervisors must strive to find the sweet spot in the amount of feedback they offer by cultivating trusting, dialogic relationships with teachers that include asking them for input on the frequency of observations and feedback.

Trust is essential for effective supervisory relationships, since the process often requires teachers to articulate their areas of weakness and opportunities for growth to their supervisors. Teachers must believe that their supervisors will treat them fairly, objectively, and confidentially (Hoerr, 1998; Tuytensa & Devo, 2013). When teachers perceive both supervisors and feedback as fair, they will be more likely to focus on how to apply that feedback to their work (Alder, 2007). Successful supervisors established a relationship between equals predicated on trust, collegiality, and commitment to professional growth (Hinchey, 2010; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998).
In the supervision process, trust is built by establishing positive tone, genuine interest, frequent and ongoing observations, prompt and specific feedback, exhibiting good listening, providing support (Beerens, 2000; Glatthorn, 1998; Goleman, 1998). Designing a process that is participatory and collaborative rather than directive or nondirective is also likely to build trust (Glatthorn, 1998) Explicitly framing the supervision process as formative and improvement-oriented, rather than summative, may also help to build trust (Iwanicki, 1998).

McGreal (1983) found that teacher feelings toward evaluation are negatively impacted by high supervisor/low teacher involvement, rating teachers, and heavy emphasis on administrative criteria rather than the specific instructional moves unique to the teacher’s discipline and practice. In particular, teachers feel frustrated in the absence of timely, specific, and positive feedback from supervisors (Younger, 2004). The multifarious demands on supervisors’ schedules make timeliness and thoroughness in supervision and feedback difficult to achieve, a challenge that has characterized the work of school administrators from the early twentieth century through the present (McClure, 1933; Range, 2013). Similarly, when supervisors do not demonstrate full knowledge of a teacher’s practice—when observations and conversations are perfunctory or performative—teachers lose faith in the supervisor and in the process (Murname & Cohen, 1986; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). In this context, even positive feedback lacks meaning for teachers because it does not inspire self-reflection or growth and does not appear to be rooted in an authentic understanding of the teacher’s practice (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998).
An overly complex supervision process, or one that is perceived to be so, can frustrate teachers, decreasing their sense of self-efficacy and, thus, motivation (Finnegan, 2013; Iwanicki, 1998; McGreal, 1983; Schumaker, 2010). Applying expectancy theory to teacher motivation, Schumacher (2010) found that teachers wanted to believe in the idea that their performance might improve as a result of supervision but lost motivation because of the effort required to participate in a complex process. Teachers perceive supervisory systems that are overly complex or hierarchic as abrogating their “autonomy [and] professionalism” (Snow-Gerono, 2008, p. 1505).

Role Complexity and Teacher Supervision.

Teacher evaluation, which entails summative rating of job performance or determining employment status, may take place explicitly or implicitly as part of the supervision process. As a result, supervisors and teachers must often strike a delicate balance between collegial partnership and hierarchic oversight, complicating an already vulnerable and sometimes contentious process (Glatthorn, 1998).

There is some debate about whether to separate the roles of non-supervisory instructional coaches and supervisors. Glatthorn (1998) explained that the process of supervision is complicated by the dual roles inhabited by supervisors, who may be asked to both coach (formative) and evaluate (summative), causing teachers to fear that asking for guidance will be read as a sign of weakness. Others have argued for such separation, making the case that professional growth must be rooted in feelings of trust and good faith among all parties (Cetroni, Miller & Waylett, 2013; McGreal, 1983; Popham, 2013; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). Milanowski (2005), however, found no difference in
teachers’ perceptions of fairness when working with pairs of supervisors with combined or split roles coaching and supervisory roles.

In independent schools, these relationships between faculty and supervisors may be complicated by what Bullard characterized as the “family ethos”: “Teachers who have developed familial relationships with students may tend to project those into unexamined expectations about their relationships with the school’s administration, looking to it as a kind of benign parental authority that should protect and nurture them” (Bullard, 1992, p. 170). Contributing to this ethos is the traditional independent school approach of:

select[ing] the most trusted teachers as department chairs because their stature allows them to run their departments more by consensus than decree. This practice creates a professional climate [of] mutual trust, a belief in collaboration, and a willingness to subordinate personal interests to group needs (Bullard, 1992, p. 158).

Given this context, independent schools may be well positioned to leverage administrators in the teacher supervision process.

As the sector becomes increasingly bureaucratized and professionalized, however, such separation may become increasingly necessary. Bullard (1992) characterized independent schools as having “an enlightened spirit of amateurism” in which teachers “learned their craft by observing models rather than by professional training” (p. 157).

He described the impact of the cultural shift in which:

heads of school [are] referred to as ‘CEOs’ and their division heads as ‘managers,’ a discourse that places both real and symbolic distance between administrators and teachers and threatens the very culture that . . . accounts for their spirit of enterprise. (Bullard, 1992, p. 154)
Within this context, the growing characterization of school administrators as corporate functionaries rather than as avuncular colleagues with administrative duties may sully teachers’ perception of the supervision conducted by those administrators.

**Teacher Emotions and Supervision**

Understanding teachers’ emotions related to supervision is essential, since the affective component of motivation is driven by teachers’ feelings about the task at hand or about the school as a whole (Frenzel, 2014; Thoonen et al., 2011); negative emotions around supervision may demotivate teachers, damaging their self-efficacy and their willingness to engage in the supervision process.

Emotions, which can influence cognitive tasks such as memory and decision-making, can either encourage or discourage people from engaging in a learning opportunity (Dolan, 2002; Gorges & Kandler, 2012; Varlander, 2008). In a meta-analysis, Frenzel (2014) identified the six most common emotions for teachers, in order of decreasing frequency: enjoyment, happiness, pride, anger, anxiety/nervousness, shame, and boredom. Ingleton’s (1999) findings differed slightly, identifying shame and pride as two of the most common emotions in education for both teachers and students. Feelings of anxiety include physical effects such as sweating and shaking, in addition to cognitive impairments such as worry and escape fantasy (Frenzel, 2014). Situations involving uncertainty or threat are most likely to trigger anxiety, which is exacerbated by low self-efficacy. Teachers most often report anxiety when they are dissatisfied with their performance or experience low self-efficacy (Finnegan, 2013). Feedback that is hierarchical, summative, and destructive is likely to trigger anxiety, inhibiting the focus
on task-process and growth (Alder, 2007); effective feedback must therefore take place in a climate of trust and care (Garmston, Lipton, & Kaiser, 1998; Varlander, 2008).

Teachers experience feelings of uncertainty, often precipitated by institutional change initiatives around teaching and learning practices. Their response depends on their tolerance of uncertainty (van Veen & Sleegers, 2009). Uncertain teachers tend to be extrinsically motivated and often have a fixed mindset; they work routinely and avoid risk, whereas more certain, intrinsically motivated teachers demonstrate a growth mindset by seeking knowledge, remaining flexible in their approaches to their work, and engaging in professional development (Thoonen et al., 2011).

**Teacher Identity**

Beyond the literature exploring the emotions of teaching exists a body of work that aims to understand the uniqueness of teachers’ professional identity. Because teaching is such an immersive act, that professional identity is also highly personal (Buchanan, 2015; Hargreaves, 2001; Nias, 1996; Zembylas, 2003). While research on teacher identity is as variegated as the multiplicity of identities teachers bring to the classroom, it is helpful in the context of this study to consider in particular the attractions of teaching, its status as a semi-profession, and the “unstaged” nature of career title and compensation.

In his seminal phenomenological study of teachers, *Schoolteacher*, first published in 1975, Lortie (2002) cited the following inducements of the profession: meaningful relationships, associations with social service, opportunity for teachers to replicate their positive relationships with schools when they were students, material benefits, and time compatibility. In Lortie’s research, teachers spoke to the importance of a role that
allowed them to have meaningful relationships with young people. They also hoped to fulfill a mission of service, honoring what Gulla and Jorgenson (2014) called a “fundamentally sacred (though nonsectarian) partnership between parents and schools” (p. 34). Teachers spoke about the influence of their own experience in schools as an impetus for teaching; per Lortie (2002), “some who attend school become so attached to it that they are loath to leave” (p. 29). Some attractions of teaching are more prosaic: teachers also cited predictable compensation and school vacation schedules as reasons to join the profession (Lortie, 2002).

Notably several of these personal proclivities and professional attractions—core elements of teachers’ identity—are threatened in the current cultural climate surrounding education. Teachers often face the challenge of establishing respect and receiving public recognition for their work, contributing to teaching’s status as a “semi-profession” (Mehta, 2013). Mehta (2013) identified three core characteristics of a profession: “monopoly over knowledge,” “social trustee status,” and “ability to set standards for practice” (p. 123). Each of these characteristics is threatened in teaching. There is, for example, not a universally agreed-upon body of knowledge that a teacher must master before entering the classroom: certification requirements vary from state to state, and teacher education programs offer courses reflecting work drawn from a variety of other established disciplines, such as psychology and sociology. This ambiguity stands in contrast to more explicit expectations for codified disciplinary mastery in professions such as law and medicine. Teachers’ social trustee status, which Lortie (2002) had found to be a significant attraction of the profession, is threatened by the presence of unions, which are often seen as protecting the interests of members rather than the interests of
children (Mehta, 2013). Scandalous news stories about salacious, abusive, or incompetent teachers have further sullied the profession’s trustee role. Finally, the introduction of state and federal initiatives such as Common Core can be seen as abrogating teachers’ agency to design curriculum that reflects both students’ needs and their own expertise. Consequently, teaching has come to be seen as “deskilled” in the public eye (Gurl, 2016, p. 22).

Further complicating the discussion of teacher identity is the historical basis for the current model of teacher compensation. In the early twentieth century, high turnover within the profession led to union efforts to elevate salaries for new teachers (rather than advocating for increases for experienced teachers) and to standardize salaries across grades and divisions (Lortie, 2002). The result of this effort is an “unstaged” salary scale, in which compensation increases on a gentle incline, with limited ways to reward years of classroom experience. Exacerbating this gentle incline of compensation is the fact that teaching, unlike most other middle-class professions, offers little opportunity for organizational or even titular advancement. With the exception of department chair or instructional coaching roles, there are few opportunities for teachers to “move up” that do not also require them to leave the classroom. Moreover, because teachers are perceived not to be motivated by “money, prestige, and security” (Lortie, 2002, p. 34), becoming an administrator complicates and confounds one’s identity as a teacher, and teachers may often disdain or eschew such opportunities (Bullard, 1992; Glatthorn, 1998; Lortie, 2002). Thus, since teachers feel that their commitment to the profession has deprived them of both prestige and income, they may hold fast to their professional identity in their interactions with school administrators, doubling down on the idealistic associations of
social service and self-sacrifice in contrast to the apparent careerism of their supervisors (Glatthorn, 1998). Compounding this commitment to preserving professional identity is the belief that the nature of their work is so specialized that it cannot be appreciated or understood by anyone except other teachers (Lipsky, 2010). These phenomena may render any system of supervision suspect for teachers, regardless of structures or practices designed to make it more palatable.

Understanding these elements of teacher professional identity illuminates the key components of teachers’ professional motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic. It also offers a helpful lens to understanding teacher attitudes toward supervision, which represents additional intrusion of hierarchy into their daily experience and a concomitant attenuation of their professional autonomy.

**Summary**

Teachers spend the majority of their time navigating the interstices of motivation and feedback for their students and for themselves: at the same time that they are helping students set and reach goals by giving them information about their mastery of skills and concepts, they are receiving input from supervisors about their own goal attainment. In essence, teachers must look both upstream at the feedback they receive and downstream at the feedback they give. This study aimed to meet teachers in that medial space, with the belief that understanding the philosophy and practice that teachers bring to assessing their students could offer unplumbed insight about their perceptions of teacher supervision.

What unfurled in conversations with participants, however, was the recognition that for highly motivated teachers in independent schools, their understanding of their
professional identity as teachers was a far more significant factor in their attitudes toward supervision than the feedback they received from their supervisors. For the group of teacher participants in this study, their professional self-concept and the quality of the relationships they have with their supervisors and with the institution as a whole are far more relevant to supporting their ongoing motivation for professional learning than the specific feedback they received during the supervision process.
Questions of assessment and evaluation are central to teaching: not only do teachers assess their students nearly continuously, both formally and informally, but they themselves are frequently evaluated by school administrators. This qualitative, phenomenological study seeks to understand the ways in which independent school teachers’ practices of evaluating students may influence their perceptions of the teacher evaluation process, as well as to identify the degree to which their visions for their professional growth align with the teacher evaluation process.

A phenomenological approach best suits this study because of the highly personal way in which teachers experience feedback about their practice and the very particular philosophies and methods that inflect their own assessment of students. Phenomenological research privileges the lived experience of the participant, not the preconception or lived experience of the researcher (Creswell, 1998). Given that the supervision process is intended to help teachers grow their professional practice, their perceptions of supervision and its impact on their individual experiences are essential to understanding its efficacy (or lack thereof). Phenomenology’s privileging of the individual experience also aligns well with the ethos of teacher autonomy that lies at the heart of independent school culture.

Independent schools hold both personal and professional interest for me—as an alumna, a teacher, and an administrator, I am their lifelong affiliate. Moreover, a major component of my current administrative role is to oversee the teacher evaluation process writ large. While teacher evaluation is a thorny topic in all schools, it is particularly
freighted in independent schools, which pride themselves on curricular and programmatic autonomy. Indeed, many independent school teachers explain that a primary benefit of the sector is the freedom from public school bureaucracy, particularly in areas such as student assessment and teacher evaluation (Balossi & Hernandez, 2015). Consequently, even the most streamlined evaluation system may feel intrusive or bureaucratic for independent school teachers.

Questions of teacher evaluation and student assessment entail far more than quantitative metrics, although they are often reduced thereto through ratings and grades. Both teacher evaluation and student assessment are ways of telling the story of an individual’s evolution over time. This individual evolution is often inextricably linked to the larger school culture. Particularly in a college-preparatory context that values achievement, questions of personal performance cannot easily be separated from larger institutional dynamics. Maxwell (2013) frames qualitative research in terms of process theory, which “tends to see the world in terms of people, situations, events, and the processes that connect these” (p. 29). Qualitative research creates the opportunity to understand the way in which participants make meaning of their experiences, as well as to explore the impact of participants’ context on their experiences (Maxwell, p. 30). As teachers’ educational philosophies and practices change over time, so do their methods for assessment, their perceptions of supervision, and their needs in the supervision process (Khachatryan, 2015), an evolution which qualitative research is particularly well suited to explore. In order to elicit teachers’ perceptions and to situate them relative to the teacher evaluation process, the data collected for this study included questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, document reviews, analytic memos, and a research journal.
Site and Participant Selection

For this study, I selected The Telfair School, my current site of practice. Telfair has developed a robust system of teacher evaluation that has been in place for ten years, developed and evaluated by a committee of both faculty and administrators. The system, anchored in Charlotte Danielson’s *Framework for Teaching* (1996, 2013), includes different phases for “entry level” and experienced faculty. A typical evaluation year includes goal setting and reflection, formal and informal observations, student surveys, and regular conversations with administrators. This system captures many of the best practices for teacher growth and evaluation, including gathering data from multiple sources, formative and summative components, and co-construction by faculty and administrators (Danielson, 1996; Hoerr, 1998; Khachatryan, 2015; Range, 2013; Shute, 2008; Snow-Gerono, 2008; Younger, 2004).

Participants were all Upper School faculty members. When first envisioning the study, I had hoped to speak with teachers from each division: Lower (grades PK-5), Middle (grades 6-8), and Upper (grades 9-12). I wondered whether the very different attitudes toward student assessment in each division would influence faculty perceptions of teacher evaluation. And, as Telfair’s former Upper School Director, I did not want to be seen as privileging or favoring that division over the other two.

Eventually, in reflecting on the quantity of data that I hoped to collect from each participant—separate interviews about student assessment and teacher evaluation—it became clear that I needed to structure the study in a way that was both methodologically robust and logistically manageable for me as a researcher. Having just five participants
from each division would have limited the generalizability of findings for the divisions as a whole.

Thus, I chose to focus on the Upper School. There, teachers assess students in a relatively high-stakes context. Student grades are a key metric in the college admission process, and thus teachers often balance an investment in formative assessment for student growth with an institutional requirement for clear summative evaluation.

Telfair’s Upper School has also engaged in a number of conversations about skills-based grading (also known as standards-based grading) that has prompted many faculty in the school to evolve their grading practices, foregrounding the conversation about why and how to assess students.

To be eligible for this study, participants need to be on a Telfair faculty contract and have experienced at least one full year of Effective Teaching Initiative. At the Upper School, there are a number of administrators who teach classes, including grade deans, the Assistant Upper School Director, and the Director of College Counseling. While many of these people continue to think of themselves as teachers, their practice is not evaluated based on the Effective Teaching Initiative (often to the consternation of their faculty colleagues). I wanted to ensure that participants in this study were fully familiar with Telfair’s supervision process from a participant perspective.

I decided not to extend invitations to faculty in their first year at Telfair for logistical and cultural reasons. I wanted to ensure that all participants had experienced one full year of Telfair’s supervision system, which concludes in mid- to late May. I also did not want to task faculty new to Telfair with additional demands on their time during a
year that can often feel overwhelming. This exclusion turned out to be moot, since I did not begin interviews until June 2016.

**Methods and Research Design**

In the study, I used the following data collection methods: a demographic questionnaire, document reviews, interviews, member checks, memos, and a researcher journal. In a phenomenological study, multiple interviews and member checks allow the greatest opportunity to capture the breadth and depth of individual participants’ experiences (Creswell, 1998). The memos and researcher journal provided a mechanism for me to “bracket” my experience, identifying and setting aside my own assumptions and prejudgments as much as possible—a critical element of a phenomenological study (Creswell, 1998).

**Data Collection**

**Participant selection.** In mid-April 2016, I sent an invitation by email to 54 eligible faculty describing the purpose of the research and my work in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program. Because of my role as Associate Head of School, I underscored that I was making the invitation in my role as a student in the University of Pennsylvania Mid-Career program, not in my formal institutional role. I sent all correspondence through my personal email account. Although that distinction may be a fine one in practice, my intention was to allay the skepticism of faculty who might have perceived the invitation to be a crypto-initiative on the part of the school.

In the invitation, I described the requests of participants during the study: a questionnaire, review of course documents (syllabi, assignments) and Effective Teaching Initiative goal-setting forms, two interviews (about an hour each), and a member check.
I explained that I would de-identify participants to ensure confidentiality, hopefully creating the opportunity for greater transparency during data collection, especially interviews.

Thirty-five faculty replied, and 30 indicated initial interest in participating. Worried about faculty workload and about their feelings of obligation relative to my role at the school, I was surprised at the high number of responses. In separate conversations, two Upper School faculty mentioned to me that each of them had been asked by a colleague about whether to participate in the study, wondering whether there might be some institutional consequence if they said no. Neither of the teachers who had asked that question indicated interest in participating. Although I was disappointed that I had been unable to allay those concerns in my initial invitation, I used this information to inform the next phase of my communication with prospective participants.

In early May I followed up with a questionnaire to those 30 interested faculty, asking them to indicate length of tenure in current school, years of teaching experience, characterization of assessment practices, and departmental affiliation. In that message, I acknowledged the complexity of summer travel schedules and the value of family time and reiterated that they were under no obligation to participate.

Ultimately, fifteen faculty committed to the study. I was glad about this drop in the number of participants, which indicated to me that several of them had taken to heart my assurance that this study was not formally related to their role at the school. Participants included seven women and eight men, all of whom had been teaching for at least 11 years. Two participants identify as people of color. By comparison, Telfair’s Upper School faculty (in the 2017-18 school year) is approximately 53% women and
84% white. Participants reflect all disciplines, with a preponderance of humanities teachers. While participants reflected a cross-section of years of experience at Telfair, no participant had taught for fewer than 11 years. Given that the study was framed expressly around student assessment and teacher evaluation, I believe that teachers may have been more inclined to participate if they felt generally confident in their practice, a confidence that often correlates to the number of years spent in the classroom (Papay & Kraft, 2016).

Table 1

*Participants’ age*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>25-34 years</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
<th>55 &amp; over</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper School faculty</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Participants’ gender identity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper School Faculty (incl. participants)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women | (46%) | Men | (54%)
Table 3

Participants’ years of teaching experience and years of teaching experience at Telfair

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Teaching at Telfair</th>
<th>1-5 years</th>
<th>6-10 years</th>
<th>11-15 years</th>
<th>15+ years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years Teaching</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(47%)</td>
<td>(53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Teaching at Telfair</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(13%)</td>
<td>(40%)</td>
<td>(33%)</td>
<td>(13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper School Faculty,</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Teaching at Telfair</td>
<td>(38%)</td>
<td>(22%)</td>
<td>(10%)</td>
<td>(29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(incl. participants)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

Participants’ departmental affiliation. Departments are clustered to preserve confidentiality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>English &amp; Social Studies</th>
<th>Arts &amp; Modern and Classical Languages</th>
<th>Math &amp; Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper School Department Totals</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(incl. participants)</td>
<td>(33%)</td>
<td>(47%)</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two participants in this study do not identify as white. Because the number of faculty of color at Telfair’s Upper School is fairly small (11 faculty, or 19%), I have not shared additional details about these participants’ racial/ethnic identity to preserve confidentiality.

On the questionnaire, participants could characterize their practice as “primarily assignment-based grading,” “primarily skills-based grading” or “a mix of assignment-based and skills-based grading.” Skills-based grading has been gaining traction at Telfair’s Upper School during the last five years, as faculty have sought to de-emphasize
summative letter grades and refocus students on specific skill development. Like many independent schools, Telfair does not require faculty to use a particular assessment system, so individuals—and, to some degree, teaching teams—construct systems that best suit their logistical needs and the learning goals of their courses. Six participants indicated that they used primarily assignment-based grading; six indicated that they use primarily skills-based grading, and three use a combination. In asking this question, I intended to gather data that might help me distinguish whether a participant’s assessment structure and practice correlated with their attitudes toward teacher supervision. That is, would those who use skills-based grading seek a different kind of feedback from their supervisors than those who use assignment-based grading? As the focus of the study shifted from exploration of specific feedback practices to an understanding of the role relationships and identity teacher play in the supervision process, these data about grading practices came to seem tertiary and did not play a significant role in my findings.

The selection bias in this study would have arisen primarily from participants’ self-perceptions of their teaching. To a degree, their willingness to participate was likely influenced by their level of trust in me and in the school writ large. Because of the highly personal nature of teaching and the vulnerability associated with discussing areas for growth in professional practice, participation would have been most likely from self-confident teachers who felt recognized by their supervisors as capable practitioners (Buchanan, 2015; Hargreaves, 2001; Nias, 1996; Zembylas, 2003). This would explain the exclusive presence of experienced teachers, as well as the preponderance of teachers with six or more years of experience at Telfair.
I changed participants’ names and have obscured identifying details in the analysis of our interviews. Throughout this study, I refer to participants with pseudonymous first names. This choice most accurately captures the informal tone of our interviews, which often took place in participants’ homes, and the collegiality of our existing relationships.

Throughout this study, I use the word “participants” instead of “teachers” to refer to the colleagues who joined the process with me. I made this choice because while I believe that many of my findings are generalizable, questions remain about the extent of that generalizability. To what degree do these findings apply to early-career teachers? To what degree do they apply to teachers from other divisions? In my diction, I wanted to take care not to paint “teachers”—even “experienced Upper School teachers in independent schools”—with too broad a brush. More broadly, this choice reflects an ongoing commitment in my own professional practice to avoid whenever possible using “we” and “they” to refer to administrators or faculty. I want to resist falling into patterns of thought that amplify distinctions or encourage generalizations between and among school employees.

**Document review.** I reviewed course syllabi provided to me by participants, with a particular eye to statements about grading policy and philosophy. I also asked participants to provide at least five examples of de-identified student assessments that contain teacher feedback. These documents were intended to offer insight into the underpinnings of the teacher’s philosophy and practice (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013) and allow me to identify elements of participants’ assessment practices that are both aligned with and discrepant from the practice they described in interviews.
Additionally, I asked each participant to share their most recent round of fall goal-setting and spring reflection forms. These forms comprise a key element of the teacher supervision process at Telfair and ask teachers to identify in narrative form areas for growth and plans for professional development. These forms provided additional insight into the ways in which teachers experience the supervision process and allowed me to see the degree to which their written reflections—which are shared with supervisors—aligned their comments in our interviews.

I also reviewed all available documents about Telfair’s teacher supervision and evaluation process, including its goals and structure. This information lives online in a learning management system run by the school and accessible only to employees. The majority of documents are logistical, outlining the timeline for the Effective Teaching Initiative and the requirements for key review years (e.g., classroom observations, student surveys, supplemental materials/portfolios). The parameters for the performance recognition payment system are also outlined in these materials. Hardest to find was information about the overarching purpose and goals of the system, as well as documents about its history and evolution. This information I pieced together from copies of presentations, committee meeting minutes, and archival files, all of which are accessible to me by dint of my role as Associate Head of School.

Finally, the results of a survey about Telfair’s teacher supervision process that was given to all faculty in February 2016 allowed me to generalize about faculty perceptions of supervision at Telfair, based on their assessments of the utility of the individual components of the supervision process.
**Interviews.** In qualitative research, interviews offer a chance to establish personal and professional rapport for conversations that will include confidential or challenging information, hopefully increasing the opportunity for teachers to speak candidly about complex and sensitive subjects; in short, interviews afford the opportunity to explore the “perspectives and goals” of the participants (Maxwell, 2013, p. 102).

By addressing the topics of student assessment and teacher supervision in two separate interviews (or, based on participant preference, two discrete sections of the same interview), I hoped to minimize participants’ conflation of these topics. Given McGreal’s (1983) contention that the roles of a teacher in the classroom and a supervisor in a conference are similar, I anticipated that these separate interviews would yield parallels between teachers’ assessment practices and their perceptions of supervision. The interview questions were not intended to elicit information that would be damaging to participants’ professional reputations or employment status. Regardless of the responses that participants offer, transcripts will remain confidential and will not be used for any other purpose than this study.

Participants could choose whether they wanted to combine the two interviews in a single session or meet on separate days. Most participants preferred to meet for two hours on a single occasion. I also invited participants to choose the time and location of our interview. We met at school, at participants’ homes, and in restaurants and coffee shops. In addition to recording these interviews and having them professionally transcribed, I made jottings during each interview and transformed these jotting into field notes, an additional data source (Emerson et al., 2011; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013).
Per Maxwell’s (2013) recommendation to ask about “specific events and actions” in order to trigger the “episodic memory” that reveals the specifics of unobservable past events, I crafted questions that asked each participant to identify and describe in detail one particularly frustrating and one particularly positive experience involving student assessment and administrative supervision of their practice (p. 103). Unfortunately, these questions did not yield as much rich data as I had anticipated. It seemed to be easiest for participants to identify a situation in which they had experienced a conflict with a student or a parent over grades, but these situations were generally short-lived and quickly resolved. Most participants had extensive general comments to make about their most recent experience with the supervisory process, but very few stories or anecdotes emerged. Most were positive. I attribute this absence of narrative texture partially to the fact that these teachers are all highly capable classroom practitioners who were not likely to have encountered particularly challenging feedback from supervisors while at Telfair, and partially to my positionality: participants may likely have felt reluctant to share negative experiences with their direct supervisors, many of whom are my direct reports.

Although it would have been technically possible to develop a more variegated group by reaching out directly to faculty who may have had less classroom practice or who have experienced greater classroom struggles while at Telfair, I was keenly aware of my positionality in the study and did not want any faculty to feel pressured to participate. Additionally, I believe that the results of this self-selection process are interesting in and of themselves. If the teachers who are most inclined to participate in conversations about supervision tend to be more experienced and more successful, independent schools may
need to work intentionally in order to engage less experienced or less confident faculty in these conversations.

**Member checks and focus groups.** After completing the interviews and reviewing the transcripts, memos, and journals, I conducted three focus groups in mid-February 2017. These focus groups served as member checks and as opportunities to address more fully the questions of teacher emotion and teacher identity that had arisen during the interviews. While I had not anticipated so much rich data about professional identity and emotions, in the process of coding and analyzing the interview transcripts I recognized how deeply intertwined those topics were with questions of professional motivation. In order to explore the topic more fully, I needed to gather more data.

Nine participants were able to attend the groups, which took place at the Upper School. At these focus groups, I shared a full outline of my findings, as well the current version of my research questions, and invited participants to ask questions about my findings (Maxwell, 2013). We then shifted to a conversation about professional identity and emotions, framed in part by quotes from participant interviews. As with the interviews, I recorded these conversations and had them professionally transcribed.

By reconnecting with participants, I hoped to underscore for them the significance of their contributions to the study. I was uncertain how many would choose to participate. Not only would it entail another 45 minutes to an hour spent on this project, but it would also require participants to reveal their participation to one another. I was pleasantly surprised by the number of attendees. As with the individual interviews, the tone of the groups was convivial and candid. Participants spoke about their mental health, feelings of professional insecurity, and their relationships with spouses and
partners. I followed up individually with several participants who could not attend a focus group, sharing with them the outline, research question, and general findings that I had shared with the groups. Eleven out of the fifteen participants participated in a member check or focus group.

**Memos.** I wrote several memos throughout the process, including a researcher identity memo exploring my own positionality in terms of personal identity and professional practice. Given that my thinking on evaluation has been shaped by several emotionally challenging interactions and that I hold primary responsibility for overseeing the school’s evaluation system, I tried to explore both my positionality and my evolving thinking on this topic throughout the data collection process via these “first draft self-reports” (Emerson et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013, p. 100). Maxwell (2013) makes clear that although meaningful research often stems from a topic of personal interest, that very interest brings with it motives and desires that can obscure or significantly inflect both process and analysis. Memos help to capture and contextualize these motives and desires. These memos proved particularly helpful in that they allowed me to separate my own fraught experiences of Telfair’s system of supervision and evaluation from those of participants, whose accounts of their supervisory experiences at the school were largely (and, to me, surprisingly) positive.

After each interview, I also wrote a fieldwork memo; per Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013), such memos should be “prioritized” and written “as soon as field data start coming in” (p. 99). These memos helped to memorialize my own questions, reactions, and connections during the interview process, especially those I had not explored during the interviews themselves.
Researcher journal. I journaled throughout the process to note ideas, resources, and questions. Journaling before and after reviewing interviews allowed me to note any differences between my initial gleanings from an interview and the participant’s specific commentary. Spontaneous conversations with faculty and administrators, emerging evaluation or assessment situations, and interactions with colleagues from other schools also prompted entries.

Methods sequencing. I gathered data in the general sequence I have outlined above, with multiple analytic memos written throughout the collection and analysis process and a research journal kept throughout. This sequence allowed me to triangulate data and to interrogate my bias on an ongoing basis. I conducted formative analysis throughout the process, especially after each interview, to identify weaknesses (e.g., ambiguous terminology, leading questions) and emerging themes as well as to interrogate my own developing interpretations and conclusions (Maxwell, 2013, p. 4). Maxwell (2013) emphasized that qualitative research is inherently iterative and recursive; its component parts, from research design to research questions, may evolve in response to moments of “interconnection and interaction among the different design components” (p. 3).

Data Analysis

My coding schema evolved throughout the research process as my thinking about the topic transformed (Maxwell, 2013; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015). I used both a priori and in vivo codes (Maxwell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2013). A priori codes, drawn from the literature of motivation, feedback, and teacher evaluation helped identify the ways in which teachers’ classroom documentation and narrative responses cohere
with research in those areas. *In vivo* coding allowed me to parse teacher thinking and practice that are specific to independent school culture and to teachers’ perceptions of the evaluation process. For example, while the literature uses the term “supervision” to describe the process of formative feedback on teaching, I felt certain that that independent school teachers would chafe at this nomenclature. By allowing participants’ diction to drive the coding process, I hoped to mitigate the researcher bias that I bring to the work.

My initial code set was too complex, reflecting over thirty codes. I tested this set on transcripts from my first two interviews and found it unwieldy. As the interview process unfurled during June, July, and August 2016, I also found my focus evolving from more technical questions about specific assessment and feedback techniques toward an exploration of teachers’ experience, identity, and emotions. Consequently, I collapsed into more general categories some of the codes that had been intended to point to particular feedback moves. My final code set included 25 items, with only about half of those codes used with real frequency.

Maxwell (2013) cited categorizing analysis as a particularly helpful tool in assessing patterns of similarity and difference in the data; this approach involves “fragmenting the initial text into discrete segments and re-sorting it into categories” (p. 112). I took advantage of the technique in two ways: first, by combining all participant answers for a given question into a single document, and second, by combining all comments that spoke to a general topic, such as motivation or professional learning.

Per Maxwell, the drawback of this approach, however, is that it prevents a single interview or transcript from being understood holistically. To combat the challenge
presented by fragmentation, he recommended using connecting strategies, which allow the identification and investigation of key elements within the same text. Connecting strategies allow a researcher to understand the relationship of elements to one another, such as the juxtaposition of ideas in narrative and influence of one idea on another. Given the significant demographic differences that existed among participants, both categorizing and connecting strategies were useful. Following Maxwell’s (2013) recommendation, I began reviewing transcripts as soon as they were available, affording the opportunity for initial connecting analysis before shifting into categorizing analysis once the data set was complete.

**Researcher Roles and Issues of Validity**

Teacher evaluation and student assessment are highly personal and emotionally charged topics. In assessing students, even in a supportive or highly democratic school environment, a teacher inherently positions herself as an expert in both content and pedagogy. The teacher supervision process seeks to interrogate and, hopefully, elevate a teacher’s competence in both of those areas, putting the teacher in a potentially vulnerable position (Lasky, 2005).

Asking teachers to reflect on their assessment of students and on the ways in which they are evaluated cuts to the quick of professional identity, and because teaching is such an immersive act, that professional identity is also highly personal (Buchanan, 2015). Consequently, teachers may articulate perceptions of the evaluation and assessment that are intended to mask or minimize those feelings of vulnerability, or to articulate an aspirational approach to evaluation or assessment that does not fully align with their actual belief or practice (Buchanan, 2015).
In addition to triangulating data collection (questionnaires, document review, interviews), I tried to address this phenomenon by being fully transparent about my own identity and positionality in this work. As a neophyte qualitative researcher whose dissertation work is being reviewed and critiqued by professionals in the field, I have been managing and mitigating my own feelings of exposure and vulnerability in an academic setting throughout the writing process. By naming this shared experience, I hoped to defuse participants’ assumptions or expectations about what they “should” say versus what they may actually experience or believe.

As an upper-level independent school administrator who often describes herself first as an English teacher and second as an “accidental administrator,” I bring to this work a strong affinity and empathy for the teacher experience, as well as a native distrust of most complex institutional policies and systems. I approach this research with a complex combination of bias against administrivia as well as a belief in the power of reflective conversations to promote professional growth. I essayed to address this bias via memos and member checks in which I interrogated my own perceptions and explored my evolving synthesis of participant interviews, ensuring that “the data speak more loudly than the researcher” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 216). When a participant inquired about my stance on teacher evaluation and student assessment, I shared my past and current thinking out of professional respect and a desire for transparency in the research process (Maxwell, 2013).

Throughout this study, I worried continuously about imposing on the time and trust of my Telfair colleagues. Early on, I delayed sending my initial invitations, concerned about the prospect of receiving a lackluster response—or none at all. At every
turn, I was astonished by the generosity and goodwill of the responses. Even colleagues who declined to participate in the study itself have checked in from time to time about my progress. And those who did participate have done so graciously and enthusiastically: returning to school in the summer to find examples of student work to share, inviting me into their homes, spending multiple hours of their vacations answering my questions about assessment and supervision. Writing about practitioner research, Anderson, Herr, and Nilien (2007) called out “how, particularly in middle and high schools, administrators, teachers, students, and their parents can remain relative strangers to one another” (p. 154). The colleagues who joined this study have been anything but, and I present the following chapters with respect and gratitude for their professionalism, thoughtfulness, and engagement.
CHAPTER FOUR

“IT’S UNCOMFORTABLE, IT’S INCONVENIENT, BUT IN THE END IT’S GOOD”: FEEDBACK PRACTICES IN STUDENT ASSESSMENT AND TEACHER SUPERVISION

As teaching and learning organizations, schools thrive on feedback. Every day, teachers offer feedback to students about their academic work, while athletic coaches and theater directors critique students’ performance. Academic administrators visit classrooms as part of the formal supervision process. Students are asked to complete surveys about their class experience. Parents and guardians receive invitations to give feedback about the success (and failure) of everything from Back to School Night to the annual fund to visiting administrative candidates.

The systems and structures for teacher supervision, as well as the ways in which it is enacted and experienced by supervisors and teachers, are often deeply contested. The original idea for this study was sparked by the question of whether a better understanding of teachers’ practices of giving feedback to their students could help to improve Telfair’s system of teacher supervision. If teachers can give feedback—formal and informal, summative and formative—to their students nearly every day, could Telfair understand more fully teachers’ experience of supervision by understanding their practice with students?

This chapter explores teachers’ beliefs about the qualities and conditions for effective feedback, both to their students and in the course of the teacher supervision process. The findings are based upon questions I asked participants about the qualities and conditions they believed to be necessary for effective student assessment and teacher supervision, as well as the potential obstacles to those processes.
Each section addresses participants’ feedback to students and their experiences with teacher supervision. The first section explores the particular feedback structures and moves that participants perceived as being most effective for students and for themselves. The structures that participants cited as being most effective for students and for teachers model transparency, simplicity, limited quantity, and timeliness. According to participants, the most effective feedback moves are specificity, dialogue, and candor. These structures and moves align with research about feedback interventions for teachers (Brinko, 1993; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1998) The second section describes the relational conditions that teachers cite as being necessary to effective feedback: trust, relationship quality, and evaluator’s expertise. Participants’ practices and preferences in this arena also align with literature on teachers’ hopes for supervisors’ expertise (Brinko, 1993) and for their relationships with those supervisors (Blase & Blase, 2000).

A high degree of consonance exists between what teachers believe to be the most useful feedback for students and the feedback that they find most useful from supervisors. They identified simplicity, speed, and specificity as being equally effective for them and for their students. Participants cited differences between the teacher and student experience when it came to the relational and institutional context in which feedback took place. The connection of teacher feedback to professional identity and, by extension, job security magnified participants’ feelings of vulnerability and exposure when receiving feedback. They also described having less well-developed relationships with supervisors than they did with their students, a fact that made them feel more vulnerable when hearing feedback about their teaching.
Data in this chapter originated from interviews and focus groups with participants, as well as from Telfair’s website. All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from interviews conducted between June 13 and November 23, 2016, or from focus groups conducted on February 15, 2017. See Appendix A for information specific to each participant.

**Structure of Effective Feedback**

Participants, all of whom were experienced teachers, described having changed their assessment practices during the course of their teaching careers. Some had shifted from traditional assignment-based grading to skills-based grading, whereas others had experimented with different weights for categories of class performance. No participant indicated having found the ideal mechanism for assessment, and most indicated that their assessment practices were constantly evolving. Generally, they described their methods of assessing students, both in a course and on specific assignments, to have shifted from complex to streamlined, moving away from complicated rubrics and systems of grade calculation. They saw this evolution as creating grading structures that were more accessible to students and, more importantly, more effective in communicating key learning goals. Edith captured the sentiment of most participants when she said: “When I think about all of the time I spent building rubrics and designing gradebooks, I realize that I should have been focusing on just getting clear and quick messages to students about their work.” Participants preferred to spend their limited time with students identifying opportunities for improvement rather than justifying the structure and mechanics of their grading systems.

In that vein, consistent across participants’ responses was their belief that effective systems of feedback for both teachers and students are marked primarily by the
transparency and simplicity of the system itself, an intentional limitation of the quantity of feedback offered, and a quick turnaround for feedback. They expressed particular frustration when the process of teacher supervision did not reflect these qualities.

**Transparency and Simplicity**

Participants cited transparency and consistency as essential characteristics of effective systems of student assessment, which they characterized as a long-term process in which students “need to be able to see where [they] went and why” (Angela, interview). Diane captured the beliefs of many participants when she observed: “If the kids don’t think you’re transparent it just doesn’t matter if you think you are.” At the beginning of each school year, she spends a great deal of time educating students and their parents about her grading practices to ensure that everyone understands the parameters of the course. Bradley described having similar goals:

> For me, simplicity. It’s probably the overarching thing that drives it. I just want it to be crazy simple so they get it without a lot of explanation from me. The parents can get it when the parents are looking at it as well. And utility, that it works well, what it needs to do.

Recognizing that parents are often involved on behalf of their students in the (figurative) litigation of teachers’ grading decisions, Bradley designed his system for easy interpretation by multiple audiences: students, parents, and—by extension—the administrators who might be involved in those conversations.

Participants described a delicate balance between quantitative transparency and student growth, evolving their practice to streamline the former and deepen the latter. On one hand, they described the ways in which having a numerical component to a rubric can help to create a consistent and legible assessment system for students. On the other,
many had found points-based conversations to interfere with the actual work of supporting student growth. Recalling her shift to skills-based grading, Angela said:

> I was very tired of having conversations with kids... about numbers, and points, and we weren’t talking about words and my discipline is words. I didn’t want to be talking about percentages… I wanted to move away from that to give them vocabulary to know themselves.

Sam described a similar shift that allowed him to move away from quantification and towards conversation:

> I used to assign points to each of those and now I just give comments. Yes or no, you did this. It wasn’t as good as it could have been and I just give it a grade, as opposed to, ‘This section, the intro’s worth 10 points and this section’s worth 5 points and so on,’ I think it’s more holistic at this point.

Both of these shifts may be easier for a veteran teacher than for someone new to the profession. Indeed, Bradley made a clear distinction between his practice as a newer teacher and as a more experienced practitioner: “There are some things that I used for years and probably now would look back at and like, ‘Wow, that was a cumbersome chunk of whatever.’” All participants preferred to spend their time and energy developing relationships with students rather than articulating or defending the grading systems they created for their courses. Notably, participants described their own grading rubrics as tools for sparking conversation with students, similar to the way in which the Danielson Framework for Teaching was originally intended to foster among teachers and supervisors (Danielson Group, 2013).

> Participants’ comments about the transparency and consistency of teacher supervision echoed many of the qualities they describe as necessary for student assessment, albeit with an explicit desire to acknowledge the vagaries and complexities of the experience of teaching. Indeed, Danielson (2016) describes teaching as a
“complex profession requiring nuanced judgment,” which makes it very difficult for teachers or supervisors to quantify excellent teaching. For example, participants spoke to the diverse instructional needs and academic personalities of students in different sections of the same course. Edith illustrated this challenge when she described “needing to teach the same content an entirely different way between Block 4 and Block 5.” Participants believed that in order for a supervisor to truly understand a teacher’s practice, especially in an independent school culture that privileges the needs of individual students, that supervisor needs to acknowledge and account for the way in which a teacher’s practice can be inflected by the class composition and student dynamics across course sections.

**The Danielson Framework for Teaching.** Many of our conversations included participants’ extended commentary on the Danielson Framework for Teaching, which girds Telfair’s system of teacher supervision. Participants acknowledged that having a “shared language” for during supervisory conversations about classroom teaching was ideal, even as they expressed some qualms about a framework as highly articulated as Danielson’s, whose structure would seem to run counter to the simplicity they prized in their own rubrics and grading systems.

A key motif in participants’ responses was the way in which a rubric like Danielson’s can allow for a degree of objectivity between a teacher and any observer. Jason described the importance of a “language of teaching”:

The Danielson Framework… was supposed to be a shared vocabulary… Teacher evaluation ultimately means that somebody other than the teacher themselves is called upon to observe the act or the art of teaching and draw some conclusions. Can the teacher and somebody other than the teacher agree on what’s happening in that classroom, and agree on a set of objectives and goals, and agree on whether or not those objectives and goals are being met?
Carolyn expressed similar appreciation for the presence of the framework: “it helps me when some structure comes from the outside to say, ‘This is what we’re looking for.’” Carolyn’s imagery of the supervisor arriving from “outside” captures the spirit of many participants’ comments about supervision; to a degree, supervision felt like an incursion on the private space of the classroom, and the presence of the Danielson helped to mitigate some of the fear or confusion about the qualities that a classroom outsider might be looking for in a teacher’s practice.

The scope and complexity of the Danielson rubric, however, left the participants frustrated. They chafed under its breadth: “I’m not sure I love all their rubrics, there’s a lot of subcategories,” said Grace. Ava, who has been working at Telfair for more than ten years, revealed, “I look at that framework every fall, and I don’t know what to pick. Here’s what I want to do, and should I throw some 3d on it or 2a, or whatever sounds appropriate.” Her engagement with the rubric was purely performative. For Angela, its “jargon” felt artificial and alienating in conversations with supervisors. This alienation may be magnified when the jargon is most strongly associated with supervisors, who are already “outsiders” in teachers’ conceptions of their own practice.

In a similar vein, a small number of participants described the Danielson as projecting an ideal that they considered unattainable. Jason summed up the ways in which a rubric can create tension in a school culture that ostensibly values a growth mindset:

If the administrator is holding fast and true to an idealized outcome as articulated in the framework, where is the room then for an imperfect execution of practice?… The administrator can’t extract the ideal from the teacher, and the teacher can’t achieve the ideal. Does that cause some stress? Yes.
Jason’s use of the word “extract” underscores a hierarchical and transactional way of thinking about the supervisory relationship. Much as a mining company might “extract” mineral ore or an interrogator “extract” a confession from a suspect, Jason’s comment positions supervisors as wresting a certain standard of performance from teachers, rather than collaborating to achieve that ideal.

**Quantity and Time**

Reflecting on feedback in the context of student assessment, all participants agreed that turning back student work quickly was essential to students’ ability to learn from feedback. The time required to give thoughtful commentary, however, had negative consequences for participants’ work-life balance. Participants also questioned students’ ability to internalize and apply extensive feedback. Consequently, participants described tapering the volume of their feedback to support both student learning and self-preservation—in terms of the time and energy that they were inclined or able to spend giving meaningful feedback.

All participants believed that a quick turnaround on feedback is good for students. Diane said: “I recognized that fast feedback, after a discussion, after a quiz, fast feedback that’s important.” Ava explained that the frenetic nature of students’ academic lives makes this quick turnaround both valuable to students and challenging to accomplish:

> [E]ven if you turn it around the next class period and there are two days between it they’ve already had like 14 other things that’s happened to them academically that they’re like, I don’t know if I remember it anyway.

This belief aligns to a degree with Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) synthesis of meta-analyses of feedback research, indicating that more difficult tasks, which require greater degrees of processing, can benefit from a delay that allows that processing to occur.
Delaying feedback on tasks with easy or intermediate difficulty, however, was “unnecessary and undesirable” (p. 98).

Maintaining a fast pace of feedback on student work proved difficult for many participants, who described the personal toll that student assessment can take. Diane said, “I used to try to do, I used to religously do like a one week turnaround. It just totally killed me.” Angela described how feedback “sucks away the hours of many nights.” The diction of physical force in these characterizations (“killed,” “sucks”) is noteworthy: the desire to give quick feedback and the energy required for that feedback elide distinctions between school life and home life and cause emotional exhaustion for teachers. Stephen acknowledged the quixotic nature of offering feedback on student writing:

It’s an intense activity and emotionally it is too because I foolishly believe that I might have the ability in one comment or two or three or whatever to really change that person’s writing off in the future and that that will be really meaningful for them.

While Stephen wryly rued his “foolish” commitment to commenting on student writing because of the time and energy it required, his sense of a personal, emotional obligation to his students prevented him from pulling back on his commentary.

To combat this phenomenon of overwhelm, participants described evolving their assessment practices to ensure both that students receive timely, digestible information and that they maintain some kind of work life balance. Diane said, “I write ‘nope’ a lot. No that’s just wrong, ‘nope’. I just say no because I’ve got so much to write on every kid, so much reading.” Bradley reflected, “What gives me the most bang for the buck? How can I do the least work and get the most information? It sounds lazy, but it’s more
efficiency.” Neither Diane nor Bradley believed that they were shortchanging students with this efficient feedback. Both teachers spoke confidently about their practice and the value they offer to their students and to the school. Perhaps this confidence allows them to streamline their feedback without worrying that they will compromise themselves as professionals or diminish supervisors’ perceptions of their practice. Notably, neither Diane nor Bradley teaches courses that are writing-intensive, distinguishing their experience from those of Stephen and Angela. The conundrum of quantity versus efficiency seemed most vexing for the participants whose courses emphasize student writing.

Participants felt at ease with this streamlining of commentary because it took place within the context of a larger and longer process of student learning, which had greater value for them than did performative, quotidian mechanics. They described a continuous process of editing their feedback in order to make it more accessible for teenagers, asserting that “less can be more.” Reflecting on her practice, Angela said, “I think we’re mostly cognizant of how much they can digest. How much can they handle? I need to tell you these ten things. If I tell you all ten, you’ll shut down.” She described a direct correlation between simplifying the number of skills assessed and students’ increased ability to understand the nuances of each of those skills. Phillip asked:

How do you not overwhelm the student? How do you bring it up to maybe the 30,000-ft view and say, okay, here are two or three things I see you doing really well. Here are two or three things you can work on… As opposed to them just getting all that ink and not really knowing what to do with it.

This consideration for students’ experience of feedback appears rooted to some degree in participants’ recognition of the competing demands on busy students’ time and attention. Several participants have adapted their systems of feedback—streamlining previously
complex methods of tracking and rating myriad discipline-specific skills and minimizing the number and quantity of narrative comments—to match the highly scheduled reality of high-achieving independent school students. Jerry acknowledged: “They are being torn a million different directions. I have to realize that whatever I say to them about [my class], that may not be their passion thing. Their passion thing may be hockey.” Colleen echoed, “You’re busy.... you’ve got six or seven classes and you’re leading the Backpack Buddies Tutoring, or you’re, whatever it is you’re doing outside of your time at school, you’ve got a lot to juggle.” Both participants had considered at length the high school student experience and tried to adapt their grading practices accordingly, indicating that empathy is an essential element of successful systems of feedback.

This empathy was present as participants managed their frustration at students’ focus on summative outcomes, often evolving their practices accordingly. Of watching students leaf through piles of work looking only for the final grade, Angela said:

I wrote this feedback and now you’re not going to read it? That can be a huge barrier in motivation. To be like, now not only do I know you didn’t just not read this for the grade but you literally had no opportunity to read this.

As with Stephen’s “foolish” belief that his comments might have a meaningful impact on a student’s intellectual life, Angela considered her comments to be part of an ongoing relationship with her students, and their occasional dismissiveness had a personal impact on her. In the same vein, Edith described there being “nothing more demoralizing” than handing back work to students only to see them flipping to the grade. She had tried many different approaches to combating this phenomenon, such as withholding letter grades until the end of class or even a later date, but she felt guilty for what she considered to be “subterfuge”: “I know that they’re stressed. I know they want to do well. I know that, in
their own way, they care about my class. And I don’t want to exacerbate their anxiety by making grades into a game.” Bradley proposed his own theory about students’ interest in grades rather than qualitative feedback: “I think it’s just part of the teenage brain. Numbers are digestible and easy. Anything else takes effort, and they don’t want to put the effort in. There’s almost an evolutionary biology to it. How can a teenager save energy?” Interestingly, this response also allows Bradley to depersonalize student responses to grades: to him, their preference for grades over comments is developmental, not relational. No matter how finely-tuned the system of feedback, no participant felt as though she had solved for the influences of school culture or adolescent development. They acknowledged their thoughtful systems of feedback to be imperfect and continuously evolving.

Participants’ reflections on the role of feedback time and quantity in their teacher supervision process revealed close parallels with their experience with student assessment. They cited the time required for effective feedback as a significant obstacle to effective teacher supervision and also took issue with the quantity of feedback—whether too much or too little—they had received.

When it came to feedback on their teaching, participants indicated the same appreciation for a quick turnaround that they sensed from their students. “Immediate is helpful,” said Grace; “timeliness is critical,” said Sam. He described the benefit of “situations where someone will watch and then literally we’ll talk, or I’ll get an email a little bit later.” Phillip said: “If we’re talking about a discussion that took place and then you get the email 15 minutes later that has eight attachments for different modes of class discussion. It’s awesome.” Given the frequency with which participants described their
professional lives as overwhelmingly busy, their appreciation for expedient feedback is perhaps not surprising. Just as they identified students’ myriad curricular and co-curricular obligations as a reason to get them feedback before they lost memory of the assignment, so too did they cite the frenetic cycle of classes, student conferences, and meeting obligations as an obstacle to being able to make sense of feedback when it came too long after the class in question.

Participants cited the inherent time constraints of classroom observations as another obstacle to receiving meaningful feedback. They were frustrated at the degree to which their observers could see only “snapshots” of their practice. Colleen said: “I always felt like 45 minutes wasn’t enough. How can you possibly see anything in 45 minutes? What if I have a crappy day? We all have crappy days, right? What if my lesson flops?” Bradley echoed, “I see the students four days a week. Nobody observes me other than the students every day, four days a week... Administrators can’t be in the classroom every single day.” When describing student assessment, participants pointed to vast sources of data about student performance such as class discussions, labs, quizzes, journals, tests, essays, oral presentations, citing this wealth of data as a challenge because of the sheer amount of time required to offer feedback on it all. By contrast, they believed that supervisors’ relative dearth of evidence about classroom practice made meaningful feedback difficult, or at last difficult for them to credit.

Participants acknowledged the reality of constraints on their supervisors’ time and the difficulty of solving for this discrepancy between student and teacher feedback, expressing some frustration that the same pattern seemed to be repeated year after year. Sam commented: “The evaluators need to also figure out that they need to have time to
do it and do it well.” Ava reflected: “Having effective conversations and effective feedback when you have 30 people you’re evaluating is probably not going to do anyone any good, teachers and administrators alike.” While they expressed sympathy for the logistical challenges for their supervisors, they also acknowledged the impact of those challenges on their experience of the supervision process. Edith said:

My administrators are so damn busy. I just feel bad for them, because I don’t know when they have time to really do this in a meaningful way, but then when I’m committing myself to the process, and then the other person doesn’t have time to do it in the same way, I feel really crappy.

Edith’s comment evokes Angela’s and Stephen’s frustration with their students’ preoccupation with grades. It indicates the degree to which teachers must navigate relationships with two groups of people, students and supervisors, who have competing demands on their time that sometimes supersede their ability to engage with and acknowledge the relational efforts that teachers are making.

Multiple participants described the presence of supervisors in their classes during formal evaluation years and their palpable absence during other years. Their frustration at this phenomenon was perhaps unsurprising given their own investment in students’ growth during the course of a semester or a year. It may indicate that participants view the learning cycle of a teacher as one that takes place across multiple years, not during a single year arbitrarily incorporated into the supervisory process. Similarly, they described classroom observations and post-observation conversations that seemed to be taking place solely to meet supervisors’ deadlines, not to engage in genuine dialogue about instructional practice and growth. Indeed, no participant ever described being observed too much. Jason said, rather pointedly:
The thing that I find the most difficult is the lack of presence in my classroom of colleagues, department heads and administrators. I want colleagues and I want administrators in my room every damn week for a variety of reasons. For any reason, that door should be open for all of us.

Participants identified few solutions to this problem. Bradley jokingly proposed having a school with two teachers and one supervisor, who would still need to reconcile the impossibility of observing both teachers at once. Eventually, he decided that “robot administrators” were the only reasonable recourse.

Participants’ comments about the quantity of feedback from their supervisors mirrored their comments about their own feedback to students. Phillip described as “overwhelming” supervisors’ emailed responses to class observations that contain too many additional resources (links, attachments) or suggestions. Reflecting on the ways in which an observer shares data after a classroom observation, Angela said: “I want to have that person distill the information for me so it’s manageable. Too much information can... cause inertia of just like, there’s no chance that I can ever change.” Drawing an explicit parallel to student feedback, she continued:

It’s like giving too much feedback [to students]. That was a bad situation. If I’m with a doctor, I don’t want to know about what the data is on the MRI and the measurement and different waves. I don’t want to know that because I don’t understand it and it just scares me. It’s so much data.

Angela then recounted her mixed emotions at receiving lengthy narrative feedback from a supervisor:

I think, ‘Oh great, you spent too much time on this. You didn’t need to spend so much time on this.’... It’s like [student semester] comments writing. You write this crazy long comment, and it’s lovely, but I could just state some bullet points, and the information would be the same... In the same way that I feel like, ‘Is comment writing worth anyone’s time? Is comment reading worth anyone’s time?’ I feel the same way about the letter. I feel like, ‘Just give me some data.’
Generally, participants valued the frequent presence of observers in addition to their expedient, pithy feedback more than they wanted lengthy narrative commentary or what they considered to be an overabundance of suggestions for evolving their practice. Much as they had adapted the structure and nature of their feedback to accommodate students’ busy schedules, they hoped for a similar level of frequency and quantity from their supervisors.

Notably, participants described having control over virtually all of the structural components of their systems of student feedback. With the exception of the academic calendar itself, with its deadlines and requirements for grades and comments, they could alter every aspect of their courses’ assessment architecture, from the creation of scales and rubrics to the design of assessments to the quantity and timing of feedback. Frustration arose in the teacher supervision process when they felt a lack of agency, whether in the language and design of the Danielson Framework, the timing of observations, and the timeliness and depth of feedback. Chapter Five will explore more fully the role of autonomy in teachers’ self-concept and its role in the supervision process.

**Qualities of Effective Feedback**

As with participants’ commentary on the structure of feedback, significant similarities existed in participants’ descriptions of the qualities of the feedback they offered to students and that they hoped to receive from supervisors. They described effective feedback as offering specific ideas or suggestions for growth, sparking conversation or contemplation, and striking the balance between being both candid and supportive. These practices and preferences mirror the findings of Brinko’s (1993) meta-
analysis of feedback studies, which call for “accurate,” “specific,” and “concrete” data (p. 579), offered with “a moderate amount of positive feedback with a selected and limited amount of negative feedback” (p. 583).

**Specificity**

Almost every participant strove to offer students highly specific feedback on their work. Sam explained: “it’s about pointing to specific language or things... that they have not done correctly... ‘This is the phrase you use and it would be much better if you could tweak that phrase. Make it more powerful or change its structure.’” Diane characterized this approach as being “prescriptive”: “I think kids have got to see where they can improve. ‘This isn’t good enough.’” Participants described the importance of offering students concrete pathways for evolving their work, while also underscoring that the feedback is about the current quality of the work, not about the student’s worth as a person. Phillip characterized this approach as “validating” the student. In the eyes of participants, specific commentary from the teacher, rather than general reminders or platitudes, indicates to the student that their work has been fully “seen” and thoughtfully assessed in terms of the student’s unique strengths and opportunities.

Participants sought the same kind of specific and prescriptive feedback from their supervisors. They saw the benefit of having an extra set of adult eyes in the classroom who could help them to make immediate changes to their practice. Bradley wanted to hear “what I can do better and what changes could be made.” Edith asserted: “You can come into my class anytime you want, but please tell me what I can do better, whether it’s a small thing or a big thing.” Angela described wanting to hear “suggestions for follow up the next day or how you might take that same lesson with the next class period
coming in in 15-20 minutes and revamp, tweak, improve.” Sam appreciated “feedback specific to the teacher’s activities, specific to what they’re doing in that class” that came with both description and prescription. Notably, multiple participants used the word “validating” to describe this kind feedback, which they believed to indicate that their practice had been “seen” by their supervisors with the same care and thought that they gave to students’ work. Phillip appreciated a year-end conversation when his supervisor could cite specific examples from several lessons during the year as a whole: “That not only validates, right? It’s specific.” Participants often talked about the reality of working in relative isolation, even if they were part of a teaching team. A supervisor’s job, then, becomes about truly seeing and acknowledging teachers’ work, just as teachers strive to fully see and acknowledge the work of their students.

**Inquiry**

Participants saw effective feedback as framed by the opportunity to engage in inquiry with both their students and their supervisors. Reflecting on his work with students, Phillip estimated:

I would say 75, if not more, percent of my feedback, my comments, are questions. Asking them. The construction of the question can be tricky but giving feedback in a question form that allows the student to figure out, well, what is the criticism here? What is it that he’s identified?

Bradley uses the same approach: “They’re coming to me and asking ‘Why it isn’t a three?’ It isn’t the right question. I’m bouncing it back to you. Why is it a two? You need to explain to me why it is a two and then figure out what you can do to change that.”

Such question-based approaches to feedback are in keeping with Telfair’s stated
commitment to cultivating critical thinking in the context of the liberal arts (Telfair website).

Of teacher supervision, Grace described an effective supervisor as someone who needs “to ask good questions to let the teacher explain” the complexity of the interpersonal dynamics and instructional choices at work in any given class. She also believed that her supervisors’ questions, rather than their praise, were most likely to prompt learning: “It’s nice to get a pat on the back, but when you think about what’s going to make me better for next time, then asking me questions why I did that or how or what brought me to that [is most effective].” Angela discussed the importance of supervisors’ questions in relation to specific observations:

‘Did you know that you talked to the left side?’ No, I didn’t know that... You want the student, you want the teacher to see that information for herself, but it is nice to have somebody on the outside notice. That’s something I feel like, even somebody later in their teaching career, could not see. Just from fresh eyes to see, ‘Did you know that you do this?’

She explained that when observers follow their specific descriptions of practice with questions, they create the opportunity for conversation and discovery between the supervisor and the teacher and, in turn, preserve the teacher’s agency. Sam advised, “Don’t say, ‘Here’s my thoughts about your management of the classroom.’ Feedback would be more about, ‘Have you thought about rearranging your classroom this way, so that maybe they don’t have the ability to fade and look at their videos on YouTube?’” Questions such as this appealed to participants because they do not presume that the teacher is unaware of the observation, and while they offer a possible solution, they do not present that solution as being inherently correct. Clearly, the balance between prescription and query is a fine one.
Honesty

Participants saw honesty as a paramount to effective feedback for both students and teachers. Phillip positioned his feedback as “carefully balanced” constructive criticism: “I don’t want to sugar coat, nor do I want to tear them down.” His goal was to allow students to “keep their dignity intact,” an acknowledgement that feedback has the potential to hurt feelings or disrupt relationships when the recipient experiences it as harsh or directed at their person, rather than their product. Sam has sought to strike a similar balance: “here are three things that I thought you did well and here are three things that I thought you need to improve on... so that they’re feeling good about some stuff and at the same time understanding things they need to do better.” These statements illustrate the ways in which participants think about feedback in the context of their relationships with their students, and in terms of their students’ capacity to separate feedback on their work from personal critique.

Similarly, participants yearned to hear candid observations from their observers. Indeed, Sam described his ideal feedback from supervisors in terms nearly identical to the feedback he gives to students, as a “balance of positive and negative language.” Going a step further, both Angela and Diane expressed appreciation for “negative feedback.” Angela explained:

I don’t need to be told, ‘Good job. Patting your head. You really got those kids excited about learning.’ Okay, that’s my expectation. I’d better. If I’m just doing that, then I’m doing a bad job... I feel like I’m in a place like, ‘Tell me what’s not working.’

Diane said, “I could use like a really prescription, like ‘Do this, try this one, take one unit, and don’t do it [your typical] way. Let’s do something that’s just one unit. Just do this.” Notably, both women described themselves as emotionally resilient: Diane said that she
is “not touchy feely,” and Angela reveled in being “in a place [professionally] where there’s no tears... I would like to think that I can handle that ruffling of feathers so I can get better.” Both participants also described a belief that their supervisors struggle to be candid. Angela explained, “I feel like for [a supervisor] to tell us negative things is really, really, hard. It physically hurt. Letting [the supervisor] couch it amongst all of these other things is part of the process.” Diane articulated a desire for a supervisor to say, “This is what we’re going to do because you work here and actually I’m in charge,” before conceding, “nobody wants to do that.” In these instances, these participants described needing to accommodate their supervisors' discomfort with candid, directive feedback even though they were ready and willing to hear it. While not all participants were fully comfortable with the experience of receiving feedback—a phenomenon explored in the next section of the chapter—they all did express a desire for supervisors to be honest about their observations of class and suggestions for growth.

**Conditions for Effective Feedback**

The second section of this chapter explores the institutional and relational conditions required for feedback to take place. Throughout our interviews, participants described the importance of trust to effective feedback, as well as the conditions that contribute to trust. Trust was a critical component of their relationships with students and with supervisors, as well as for the efficacy of the supervision process writ large. Their experiences aligned with research on the connection between trust and feedback. Because of the significant vulnerability that accompanies the experience of receiving feedback, for both students and teachers, trust between parties is foundational to the feedback process (Brinko, 1993; Danielson, 2016; Kluger & DeNisi, 1998).
Grace summed up the perspective of most participants when she said: “Good feedback comes back to that trust. If you already trust that person, you’re going to take that a different way than if you don’t.” In recounting their experiences building trust-based relationships with students and navigating the complexities of trust in the teacher supervision process, participants described the conditions necessary to build trust as being remarkably similar for both students and supervisors: an investment of time, a commitment to a dialogic relationship, and recognition of the expertise of the person offering feedback.

**Vulnerability**

Participants frequently cited the ways in which feedback can trigger feelings of vulnerability for students and for themselves as teachers. They drew a distinction, however, between the significance of that vulnerability for each group. According to participants, students, by dint of their age and role, have permission to try, fail, and learn. Teachers approach their own learning in a similar fashion—that is, with a desire to try fail, and iterate—but they do not always feel the same freedom to “fail” in the way that students do.

Many participants, almost exclusively those who teach the humanities, acknowledged students’ emotional challenge of receiving feedback. They articulated two particular challenges for students: receiving feedback from five or six different teachers (not to mention coaches and other co-curricular advisors) in the course of a given semester, and receiving feedback on their writing, where feedback can feel directed at the person, not the product. Notably, these acknowledgements of this emotional aspect of the student learning experience were made almost in passing: the participants who mentioned
vulnerability (over half of those interviewed), only did so when comparing or contextualizing students’ vulnerability with that of teachers.

Generally, participants indicated fewer similarities between the vulnerability of students and of teachers than they did in other aspects of the feedback process. Angela’s distinction pointed to the higher stakes experience of a teacher being evaluated on the entirety of her practice versus students who receive feedback across multiple modes of performance from many different evaluators, which helps to “defuse the intensity of the relationship.” While workload and wellness advocates might identify packed assessment schedules a source of stress for high school students, Angela saw these student schedules as liberating: as an opportunity to demonstrate versatility and to mitigate the high-stakes nature of a teacher supervision process with far fewer “data points” for supervisors to assess. Ava’s analysis addressed both similarities and differences:

It makes you remember what it was like to be a student in some ways. You’re having people come in and evaluate you, talk with you about what you’re doing. You don’t know necessarily what’s going to happen from that conversation. You are having that vulnerability... Maybe it feels a little more raw as an adult because we don’t have [an assessment] every two weeks.

Reflecting on teacher supervision, participants described the complex relationship between a genuine desire to improve their practice and the feeling of emotional exposure elicited by hearing critique of that practice, even when constructively delivered. No participants cited the supervision process itself as the cause of this vulnerability. Instead, they located that feeling in the inherent challenges of admitting a supervisor into the relatively private space of their classrooms.

Several participants described the act of teaching as “intimate.” Edith spoke about the highly personal nature of teaching: “You’re thinking so much about the
intricacies of the mind of this other person and their ego. To give feedback is about how their brain works so that you’re giving it to them in a way that makes sense.” Introducing a supervisor as a new player into that relationship creates additional opportunities for uncomfortable exposure. Jason said: “Teaching is such a personal practice, as is something like acting or singing, or performing arts. One of the hardest things for us to do is to hear about ourselves in the act of teaching.” Additionally, that new player can disrupt the interactions between teachers and students or even the mood of the space. Angela recalled: “sometimes kids will say after the evaluator leaves, ‘Okay, I was going to say this before but now I’m going to say it.’” Grace agreed: “Any time another person comes into the classroom, it changes the dynamic of the class. You can get a feeling, but it’s never how class really goes.” The participants who spoke on this point believed the Hawthorne Effect to be at play and wondered about the degree to which their supervisors could gain an accurate understanding of the experience of the class. After all, participants spoke at length about the importance of building relationships with students as part of the feedback process: if an observer lacks relationships with those students or lacks familiarity with the dynamic that teachers and students have forged together, participants are likely to feel skeptical not only of the impact of the supervisor’s presence on the class, but also their ability to gauge the nuances of the class dynamic.

Even as participants acknowledged the importance of feedback to professional growth, they spoke to the emotional difficulty of remaining open to that feedback. Jason explained:

Teachers do need to avail themselves to feedback. They have to have thick enough skin or they have to have an understanding of the culture and the nature of the feedback to be able to hear it... That is so challenging and difficult, more so
or less so depending on the teacher, but I think it’s at the heart of how teachers engage in feedback and assessment process. So much has to do with how they feel about themselves and their vulnerabilities and their willingness to hear unsolicited or solicited feedback. Then, of course, once they deal with having heard it, what they will do with it?

Several participants described a desire to be “perfect” practitioners. Phillip said:

There’s a certain vulnerability in saying ‘This is something I don’t see myself being that great at, or maybe it’s good enough but I don’t want it to be [only] good enough.’ Then throwing it out there and saying, all right: This is not me at my best but that’s not the point of this.

He drew an explicit parallel between the experience of students and teachers: “If we’re asking students to open up and be vulnerable in service of improvement, we’ve got to do so ourselves. That can be really hard. It’s made possible by the buy in and the trust between parties.” Colleen echoed the tension between vulnerability and desire for growth:

I’m super defensive when it comes to criticism, but constructive criticism gives me a way to envision how things could be different in a realistic way, right?... Could I see myself going there, and if so, do I have what it takes to get there?

According to Jason, in an ideal world teachers would “let go of the ego, let go of the fear of being judged, let go of the idea that we don’t always have to be perfect.” Participants illustrated through these comments the challenge of maintaining a growth mindset as a professional. Diane said:

The thing is people aren’t real when there’s such high stakes because they don’t want to show vulnerability. They don’t want to show the holes, perhaps, in their practice or whatever or some place where they wish they could improve.

Based on participants’ comments, it would appear that mitigating vulnerability is essential to engaging productively in the supervision process.

This “raw,” higher stakes experience that some participants described may make it more difficult to enact a growth mindset during the supervision process. While
participants regularly encouraged their students to take risks and to seek improvement, not perfection, that approach seemed to be more elusive for teachers reflecting on their own practice.

**Trust**

Participants identified trust as an invaluable ingredient to successful feedback, both with their students and with their supervisors. Although participants were not asked expressly about trust in the initial round of interviews, virtually everyone spoke to its importance. Given that the Telfair community is structured, both formally and informally, on close relationships between and among students and faculty, it is not surprising that participants would identify significant relational components in reflecting on both teaching and supervision.

“Trust,” however, embodies a broad range of experience and emotion. Participants’ reflections on trust revealed three elements that participants believed to be essential to building the trust required to give and receive effective feedback: relationships, reciprocity, and expertise.

**Relationships.** The power of relationships for participants is not surprising given that Telfair’s community prides itself on rich connections between students and adults. Its website reads:

[Students] also get plenty of individualized attention. Classes are small, and our student-adult ratio is just 11:1. Faculty, counselors and learning specialists provide academic advising and student support. Intensive one-on-one college counseling helps upperclassmen find the college that’s the best fit. (Telfair website)
A common refrain at the school is that every student should feel “seen, heard, and valued” (Fieldnotes, October 11, 2016). Indeed, Stephen seemed to invoke this very phrase when recalling his experience with the supervision process:

For me there was significant risk that I would not be seen. I was like I don’t want to discover that the place I work doesn’t understand me, doesn’t see me. If they don’t see me, then I... don’t know how this relationship is going to continue.

Participants described the ways in which they cultivate close relationships with students and their desire to feel similar connections with their supervisors. Very few participants felt that they had relationships with their supervisors that were as well-developed as those they had with students. The depth and degree to which Telfair faculty cultivate the “one-on-one” relationships with students touted by the school’s website may set an unreachable bar for comparable relationships between faculty and supervisors.

All participants talked about their intentional efforts to build community in their classes, often describing a correlation between the quality of interpersonal relationships and the ease of giving and receiving feedback. Angela said:

I think I spent a lot of time in the beginning of any course... maybe not saying to the kids we’re building a community but doing that and spending time building through others just getting to know them in other ways or just acknowledging that they have other classes and that mine isn’t the only one. Or just trying to know them more than just a student… and just build a foundation of community because invariably there’s going to be a time when I have to give back some feedback that’s going to hurt.

For Angela, the relationship becomes more than the gateway to feedback; it also functions as a bulwark for students against the potential discomfort caused by feedback. Jason affirmed: “[Students] need to feel good about themselves and about the relationship with their teacher. That doesn’t negate the importance of honest conversation between student and teacher; actually it supports honest conversation.” The frequency with which
students and teachers spend time together at Telfair—220 minutes per course per week, not to mention the opportunity to connect in advisory, assembly, and extra-help sessions—very likely supports the development of these relationships. When both teachers and students feel “safe” with one another, a word cited by four participants, candid feedback becomes easier to offer.

Just as they acknowledged the ways in which preexisting relationships facilitate the process of giving feedback to students, participants described the importance of having a relationship with a supervisor that has been built over time, both prior to a formal supervision year and throughout that year-long process. Sam emphasized that a “better relationship” helps to create “a more trusting situation,” allowing the teacher to see that the supervisor has a true “motive to help.” For participants, feeling that they had a genuine relationship with a supervisor depended on the length of time they had known their supervisor, as well as the frequency with which they saw that person. Edith represented about half of study participants when she said, “Look, our administrators are busy. I get that and I respect that. But it makes really knowing each other feel awkward. I see my kids every day. I make sure I know them; and they know me. Period.” This description seems to lay responsibility for developing a relationship at the feet of the supervisor, on whom it is incumbent to take the same steps to be available and accessible to teachers as teachers take with their students.

Multiple participants described parallels between classroom and supervisory relationships. Ava said that effective supervision means “people have to watch you multiple times... where people are in your room getting to know you and talking with you about what you do or what they notice.” Her comments echo the rhythm of observation
and feedback that takes place every day between teachers and students. Grace underscored her belief in the importance of being able to leverage an existing relationship during the supervisory process:

We had had three years of working together and establishing that trust. She had been in my classroom so often and knew who I was and she was bringing some of that to the table, too, I think. She wasn’t only relying on either the set-up meetings, observations or the walk-ins, she was actually probably thinking of the whole picture all along, because we’d already worked together for so many years.

Although a pre-existing relationship with her supervisor did not completely efface Grace’s “nervous” feelings prior to the supervision process, which introduced a formal dimension to their interaction, it did mitigate some of her angst because it allowed her to feel known as a practitioner. Phillip described a successful supervisory relationship as one that seems to mirror the incremental relationship-building between a student and a teacher:

It keeps the conversation going hopefully in a healthy way… reflecting a larger process at work and one that has some staying power in that we return to it in conversational form in those follow up meetings or in the end of the year commentary. It makes me feel like, all right, you’re … taking the long view going forward into the next year, build upon those goals, those skills, and feel like there’s an art. There’s a sequencing to what we’re doing over time.

Notable in Phillip’s assessment are his references to time: teachers and supervisors have the luxury of “taking the long view” and developing a rapport “over time.”

Indeed, it might be next to impossible for a teacher at Telfair to feel “seen, heard, and valued” by her supervisor to the same degree that students are. After all, Telfair’s Upper School teachers work within a curricular structure that allows them to see students for 220 minutes a week for either 18 or 36 weeks a year. There is no reasonable way to replicate for adults the frequency and intensity of that contact without adversely affecting the student experience. As a result, it may be more important for teachers to feel that
their supervisors know them over time, in the same way that Grace describes the power of her multi-year relationship with her supervisor. In such a structure, trust may accrue over the years, rather than simply during the course of a single year. On one hand, this long view might relieve some of the pressure for supervisors who feel that they need to build relationships with teachers on the same accelerated timeline as teachers do for students; on the other hand, it presents the challenge of needing to cultivate those relationships on consistent, ongoing basis with all teachers, not simply those who are going through the supervisory process in a given year.

**Reciprocity.** For participants, successful relationships are developed not only by repeated contact and connection throughout a year, but also by a commitment to dialogue, such that each participant’s needs, learning, and growth informs the relationship going forward. Such reciprocity was apparent in participants’ descriptions of their work with both students and supervisors.

Speaking of her students, Angela said: “We value the right to conference, and the conversation... Shoot me an email of what your thesis statement is going to be. Give me a little preview and let me ask you some questions to further you along your path.” With the word “preview” Angela positions herself as an audience who can “ask questions,” not as an evaluator who is continuously passing judgment on student work. Jason made an explicit connection about the importance of reciprocity to both successful student assessment and teacher supervision: “Ideally the expectations that administrators and teachers have for a teacher’s work are co-constructed. They are a product of the dialogue… In a classroom you have co-constructed expectations as well.”
While no participants described having had a particularly negative supervisory experience at Telfair, they were quick to identify the possibility that a supervisor has the capacity to impose goals, expectations, or assumptions on a teacher, and several seemed wary of that prospect. Jason spoke to the need for a “co-constructed vocabulary and common understanding,” indicating that open dialogue signals “the willingness of both parties to assume certain roles and to agree upon certain understandings.” This agreement between teacher and supervisor lays the groundwork for a true partnership, not a process of hierarchical scrutiny or rote performance. Ideally, Jason said, “this is a collaborative effort in the interest of becoming better educators.” Phillip emphasized that successful supervision must feel “welcoming” for teachers, indicating that the power to establish that tone lies largely with supervisors, who are the ones welcoming teachers into the process. Grace spoke to the power of a truly bi-directional relationship:

It’s also, again, if you trust that the person’s going to come to the table and be open to ideas and work with you… I could ask about what [the supervisor] was doing in a classroom without feeling like I was criticizing. We were just coming from a place of, ‘Oh, why do you do that? Oh, okay. Why do you do that? Okay,’ and then coming together and working together.

Although the phrase “come to the table” evokes a degree of wariness and behavior more typically associated with potentially hostile negotiations rather a collaborative professional relationship, Grace did not report any experience of such tension. Indeed, her level of comfort with the supervisory process was rooted not only in a pre-existing relationship with her supervisor, but also in her ability to observe and ask questions about her supervisor’s classroom practice—a reciprocal rather than hierarchical mode of engagement.
Angela also identified the power that supervisors have to create this reciprocity by asking teachers after observing a class, “What would you do differently next time?” Such questions, she said, “I think that can give the person being evaluated a little agency back, or a sense of agency back.” Her shift of “a little agency” to “a sense of agency” seems noteworthy because it speaks to the degree to which teachers may perceive themselves to be at the mercy of both system and supervisor, underscoring the necessity for supervisors to “welcome” teachers into the process. Jason spoke about this same need for teachers to “own” their experience in order for the supervisory process to be effective:

A conversation that allows me, through dialog and through a line of questioning from a third party, that allows me to kind of discover for myself the nuances or the vagaries of my teaching and where I am meeting or not meeting what I am trying to do can be very helpful... If I come to these conclusions... through dialogue, I can be helped to gain some insight into my teaching and therefore potentially own that insight. That’s one thing that I think is the most powerful. The process that allows teachers to discover for themselves what’s working.

In this conception, the supervisor facilitates teachers’ learning by creating the opportunity for reflection. Angela made a direct connection between this aspect of supervision and teachers’ co-curricular work with students: “It’s like service learning. You need the pre-reflections, you need the actual service, you need the reflection. Otherwise it feels like a one off, and feels empty in the same way that a one-off service learning does.” For Angela, well-designed supervision should mimic the best practices of a well-designed student learning experience.

It is noteworthy to consider these observations in the context of participants’ desire for “prescriptive” feedback from supervisors after classroom observations, language that would seem at first blush to indicate a more dogmatic or hierarchical approach to the supervisory process. The distinction between these seemingly
contradictory threads of commentary may lie in the difference between supervisors’ role in classroom observation and their role in the supervisory process writ large. Participants welcomed supervisors’ feedback—constructively framed via questions—about real-time instructional moves or the design, execution, and evaluation of student assessments.

By contrast, they seemed to chafe at the idea of a supervisor making more global observations about their practice or identifying a specific goal or direction for professional growth, which they saw as an abrogation of their “agency” in or ownership of the supervision process. After all, a teacher’s colleague is fully capable of making the same kinds of pointed or prescriptive observations of classroom practice as a supervisor, but only a supervisor has the authority to direct a teacher’s goal-setting or professional development trajectory. Indeed, Brinko (1993) found in a meta-analysis that feedback from people with similar or lower institutional status can be more effective that feedback from a supervisor. In general, participants in this study seemed wary of the potential for a supervisor to dictate the supervision and evaluation process in a rigid or authoritarian fashion, despite not having had (or not revealing themselves to have had) such an experience at Telfair.

**Respect and Expertise.**

Participants identified respect and expertise as an essential component of a trusting relationship between student and teacher, as well as between teacher and supervisor. They described underscoring their own knowledge and competence for their students as a way to lend credence and authority to their feedback. In turn, they described their desire to see their supervisors’ expertise in either content or instructional practice. Although they saw themselves as “professionals” and “expert” in their field
when it came to their work with students and colleagues, they were not always as confident in their supervisors’ expertise, which, for some, undermined their credence in the supervisory process itself.

Most participants described being respected for their disciplinary expertise by their students and feeling confident in that expertise. Angela characterized Telfair’s culture as one in which “kids... are super respectful and just acknowledge the teachers know more than they do,” which makes them more willing to hear feedback from a teacher. She described her intent with students: “I’m going to give you enough feedback that you can trust what I’m saying and know that I know you as a human, I’m not trying to destroy you but I am trying to make you a better writer, better speaker.” Sam said:

I can take any [student assignment] and make twenty suggestions on improvements. That’s because I’ve been doing it so long and sometimes, someone… will be like, "Oh, so it wasn’t good?" It’s well, no, no, no, it’s not that it wasn’t good. It’s just that’s my role and that’s what I do and I’ve been doing this long enough that I can find some ways for you to make it better.

Even though parents might sometimes question the accuracy or the subjectivity of a student’s grade on a particular assignment, Edith said: “At the end of the day I believe they know that I’m a professional, particularly in [my discipline]. The fact is that I know things that they don’t, that I have a body of knowledge that they don’t.” Every participant who raised the subject of teachers’ expertise spoke confidently about their own, rooting it in factual and theoretical command of their subject area and length of time spent teaching.

In terms of teacher supervision, multiple participants spoke specifically to the importance of feeling “respect” for their supervisor, a significant component of which was either disciplinary or pedagogical expertise. Stephen said: “The assessor has to be
professionally worthy of respect by the person who’s being assessed.” For him, that professional worthiness included “thoughtfulness and experience,” someone that he “can admire professionally.” Grace underscored the importance of “having evaluators that understand the discipline or understand the pedagogy or the best practices.” According to Diane, if a teacher perceives that an evaluator lacks a “base of knowledge” the supervision process can feel hollow. She elaborated: “Do the people that are evaluating you know what the hell they’re doing? It’s hard to take feedback if you don’t think they either have the understanding of your discipline or the pedagogy.” Diane made an explicit connection between the experiences of students and teachers:

If they don’t trust that the teacher really knows what an English paper is, you’re just not getting off to square one with that kid in terms of their assessment feedback. I think that that’s probably, you know, that’s why people talked about learning how to do observations and going to observation workshops and I’m like, oh my god.

For Diane, such training feels artificial and compensatory: in her eyes, supervisors either have the experience and expertise to give feedback, or they don’t. These comments reflect Charlotte Danielson’s concern that the national preoccupation with rating teachers overlooks the need for well-trained supervisors with specific skills in distinguishing great teaching (Danielson, 2016). This challenge is exacerbated in an independent school context, which rarely, if ever, requires formal certification or training for employees moving from the teaching to administrative roles (Marzano, 2011).

This awareness of supervisors’ experience and expertise may be particularly pronounced for participants because they are all experienced teachers. Angela admitted that the supervision process as she had experienced it did not create “much opportunity for new information.” She explained: “Can you tell me something I don’t already know?
That’s hard because you’re doing this in and out for a decade.” Indeed, she contrasted the disappointment of that experience with her efforts with her students:

As a teacher I’m trying to always expose people to something that they wouldn’t necessarily see, ‘Did you know that this show’s coming up? Did you know about the Arab American Film Festival? Did you know about….’ Creating those conditions. That, I feel like, even though it’s not really evaluating, it’s setting that table.

Stephen expressed significant frustration at his recent experiences with supervisors who were unable to “add value” to his practice: “I dream of, or I used to dream of, having a person or people in the hierarchy, the structure, that are more capable, more informed, far more informed than I am.” Citing a number of administrative transitions in Telfair’s recent past, he described feeling frustrated by his supervisors’ inability to offer him new insight into his practice. For someone like Stephen, who has taught at both the high school and college level for close to twenty years, this desire to learn from someone “more capable” brings diminishing returns. It is likely that, for many of his colleagues, Stephen himself represents a source of professional learning and inspiration. This dynamic may explain why some veteran teachers express greater skepticism or frustration with the supervision process than do their less experienced colleagues. For Diane, who teaches advanced and highly specialized courses, skepticism arose from a belief that the supervision process did not allow for an authentic understanding of her work in the classroom, even by a supervisor who has expertise in her discipline:

[My supervisor] has said really nice things to me and I appreciate that and it is heartfelt, do you know what I mean? But on the other hand I know the depth of my practice that [the supervisor] really gets and what [the supervisor] doesn’t get. That doesn’t mean quite as much to me.

Interestingly, the most powerful affirmations of Diane’s practice come from former students who write to her to describe how they are pursuing her discipline as a graduate
Students. This opportunity to support student learning is deeply connected to teachers’ intrinsic motivation and to their professional identity, areas that will be explored in Chapters Five and Six.

**Summary**

Participants described a high degree of consonance between the specific structures and moves that are most successful in delivering effective feedback to both students and teachers: transparent and simple systems, reasonable quantity and timely turnaround, specificity and candor. These feedback moves can be understood as context-agnostic: for participants, good feedback looks very similar for students and for teachers.

When participants reflected on the relational conditions necessary for effective feedback, they identified some similarities between the student assessment and teacher supervision but drew key distinctions between the student and teacher experience. Participants believed that teachers, by and large, feel more vulnerable than their students because they are receiving feedback that affects their livelihood and professional identity. They also identified the challenges that arise when comparing the depth of their student relationships with that of their relationships with supervisors, as well as the difficulty of offering feedback to a veteran teacher.
“Okay, I got another A, but what do I need to work on?”: Learning Motivations of Students and Teachers

This study’s findings about feedback open the door to an exploration of participants’ perceptions of motivation, their own and that of their students. Research has indicated that feedback is an essential tool for activating intrinsic motivation (Finnegan, 2013). It constitutes a significant source of the recognition and respect that correlate positively with the intrinsic motivation for professional learning and growth (Gokce, 2010; NNCES, 1997). In asking participants about their practices and preferences for giving feedback to students and receiving feedback from supervisors, I hoped to learn how an independent school could adjust the structural design of teacher supervision. In turn, I hoped that exploring participants’ pedagogical responses to their students’ motivation, as well as the intersection of their own motivations for professional learning with the system of teacher supervision, would illuminate possible evolutions to Telfair’s system of teacher supervision.

Participants’ reflections on students’ motivation for learning and on their own motivation held far fewer moments of consonance than their reflections on the qualities and conditions of effective feedback. Participants saw their feedback on assessments as an important extrinsic motivator for students, but they did not describe feedback from supervisors as a significant source of motivation around their own professional learning. While most participants described their students as intellectually capable and curious, they perceived their students as being extrinsically motivated: driven by the pursuit of
high grades and the promise of selective college admission. To some degree, participants believed that parents contributed to this preoccupation with extrinsic goals.

By contrast, although participants described themselves as both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated, their motivations had virtually nothing to do with institutional recognition or reward, and very little to do with the feedback they received from supervisors. Almost uniformly, they cited love of their discipline, their commitment to students’ learning, and an ongoing interest in professional growth as key motivators for professional engagement and professional learning. The one exception to this self-characterization lay in participants’ perceptions of themselves as providers for their families. Ensuring their families’ welfare caused them to feel additional anxiety about the supervision process and created extrinsic motivation for wanting to be positively evaluated. Exploring participants’ reflections on their motivations and those of their students reveals that there may not be a clear connection between supervisory feedback and motivation for professional learning for high-achieving independent school teachers.

Participants’ comments on motivation are best understood in the context of school culture. Telfair’s highly regarded regional stature, selective admissions, and rigorous hiring practices combine to create a school culture that is highly driven and achievement-oriented. In the 2015-16 school year, 292 Upper School students (out of 526 students in grades 9-12) sat for a total of 626 AP exams, with 64% earning scores of 4 or 5 (Telfair College Counseling Profile). In 2015, 34% of seniors matriculated to colleges admitting fewer than 25% of applicants (Telfair College Counseling Profile). Over 80% of Upper School faculty hold advanced degrees; three are Advanced Placement exam readers, and several are published authors and researchers (Telfair College Counseling Profile). In the
first two-thirds of the 2016-17 school year, an Upper School faculty of 58 applied for and received 57 separate school-funded professional development opportunities. The motto for the school’s comprehensive campaign is “Excellence, Accelerated.” Creating motivation for Telfair faculty is typically not a problem; in fact, the greatest challenge lies in helping faculty temper particularly high expectations for both themselves and their students.

Data in this chapter was derived from participant interviews and focus groups, as well as several public and internal school documents, including the annual College Counseling Profile. All quotes in this chapter, unless otherwise noted, are from interviews conducted between June 13 and November 23, 2016, or from focus groups conducted on February 15, 2017. See Appendix A for information specific to each participant.

Perceptions of Student Motivation

Participants situated students’ motivation in the context of school culture, which fostered competing, nearly paradoxical narratives around learning and achievement. While some participants described students as being motivated by a love of learning or pursuit of social justice, all of them perceived their students to be predominantly extrinsically motivated: by grades, college admission, and parental influence.

On one hand, Telfair students demonstrate intellectual charisma and curiosity. Phillip said:

I do think the environment, the community that fosters intellectual creativity and independent thinking, I definitely think that helps. It is a school where you can as part of your larger identity, identify as a smart student, as an academic, as someone who is more than just the football captain or the lacrosse all time goals leader... It’s cool to be smart.
On the other, according to Phillip, students must navigate the “triangulation” among “expectations… for themselves versus their parents’ expectations of them and [teachers’] expectations of them.” This triangulation muddies the waters between quantitative success and learning for learning’s sake. Sam also spoke to the tension between students’ intrinsic motivation and the pull exerted on them by their parents and by institutional metrics for success:

[For] a lot of them [motivation is] based on grades. I also think that willingness to please adults. I do think that, my students at least have a desire to change the world and make an impact and then I think a lot of them are just curious about things… I think that it’s a matter of each Telfair student probably has all of those, but it just varies as to what really is the strength of those motivators.

Participants described needing to navigate these competing motivations without devaluing students’ priorities: encouraging students to see beyond external signifiers such as grades, advanced courses, or standardized tests while acknowledging the importance those variables play in the college admissions process. While no participant laid blame for this phenomenon squarely at the feet of the school or of parents, they clearly felt frustrated by the ways in which students’ external preoccupations could make them more cautious and conservative in their learning. Given that participants described the importance of risk-taking and “newness” to the continuing evolution of their own professional learning, a subject explored later in this chapter, students’ risk-aversion and focus on outcomes was particularly frustrating for them.

**Grades**

Without hesitation, every participant described grades as a primary motivator (if not *the* primary one) for Telfair students, especially given the “pressure cooker” of a
school that markets itself as college preparatory (Edith, interview). Describing student attitudes about grades, Diane said: “desperate might not be the right word but they are very anxious to do well.” According to Phillip, grades are “currency” for students.

Participants described grades as serving a number of practical functions for students, whether as shorthand during the college admissions process, a wake-up call for a struggling student, or an affirmation of their effort. Sometimes, according to Angela, “I think they do help students sort of see improvement, see, or lack of improvement I guess. It needs to be that weighty letter to motivate.” Diane said ruefully: “Kids all think they turn in A work” and occasionally need to be brought back to reality with a low mark.

Bradley offered a different perspective,

I tweak grades occasionally because it’s what the kid needs to hear, not what the kid actually earns… What they really need to hear right now is to hear something positive. It’s a minor change on the numerics. I’m not like ‘This kid needs a C to give them a real big kick in the pants.’ If a kid is on the borderline of a grade, whether I flex that or not depends on what they need to know.

By and large, participants described grades as a necessary evil for which they could not envision an alternate solution that satisfied the needs of the student and the institution.

According to Phillip, students’ preoccupation with grades is “something that [he tries] to fight back against while also realizing it’s the world we live in.” Participants positioned themselves as the bulwark against the encroaching culture of extrinsic achievement and reward.

To counter students’ grade fixation, about half of participants had adopted skills-based grading, hoping to refocus students on conversations about their mastery of skills and concepts, as opposed to quantitative outcomes. (In skills-based grading, teachers grade each student assignment not with a single grade, but with individual ratings of the
key skills and habits of mind the student is expected to master. A student’s semester
grade is calculated not by her average assignment grade, but by her level of mastery of
each skill.) Others described engaging in continuous conversation and calibration with
students about the limited meaning of grades outside of the independent school bubble.
In either case, participants described themselves as acting counter-culturally: providing
students with alternate ways to think about their progress and their learning. Describing
his exploration of skills-based grading, Sam recalled: “It got them away from the grade
grubbing and maybe to more authentic learning because they were trying to figure out
what they needed to fix, not how they got more points.” Unlike most of his colleagues in
the humanities, Stephen rarely ever develops rubrics for individual assignments,
preferring to exert as little control as possible over students’ authorial choices. He
believed that individual conferences and his own narrative and margin comments offered
students a more nuanced understanding of their strengths and areas for growth.
Similarly, Edith deliberately spends very little time describing for students the grading
schema of her courses or assignments. She said, “At the end of the day, I have to
communicate to them my professional judgment of their work, and that needs to happen
in complete sentences, not decimal points.” She conceded that this system leaves her
“exposed” to parents who might dispute her grades, but she relies on well-developed
relationships with students to stave off parental interference or complaint. Whatever the
mechanism, participants consistently positioned themselves in opposition to a system that
values summative outcomes. This perspective helps to contextualize participants’
resistance to a tier-based ranking system for teacher performance. Regardless of the
system’s intention, its basic structures mimic the grade-based system that teachers decry.
College and Parents

Telfair students’ preoccupation with grades, at least according to participants, does not exist in a vacuum. For students, the specter of the college admission process and their parents’ well-intentioned expectations for achievement require a continuous focus on the extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, rewards of the learning process.

Every year, 100% of Telfair graduates are admitted to college. In 2016, 44% of the graduating class matriculated to schools with selectivity indexes below 25% (Telfair College Counseling report, 2016). The most popular schools for Class of 2016 graduates included The University of Chicago, Yale, Dartmouth, Northwestern, Princeton, and Stanford. Telfair regularly touts the number of National Merit Semifinalists and AP Scholars in its junior and senior classes and invites guest speakers from high-profile colleges and universities to educate students and parents and guardians about the admission process.

Given this context, it comes as little surprise that Telfair students are preoccupied by the college admission process, and the stress and expectation of that process is their lingua franca. Multiple participants referred to the “anxiety” of college applications. Ava talked about students’ belief that “If you aren’t perfect, no one will take you. By no one I mean Harvard, Yale, Stanford.” Phillip said: “I do think grades and their purchase, meaning college selectivity or admission ... most motivate academic performance. Probably for better and worse, just the competitive aspect between classmates, peers.” Edith believed that “it’s like [students are] assessing or sizing up themselves, whatever that means, their identities as students, as people, against their peers in their class.” Phillip described students’ miscalibrated understanding of the significance of college
admission: “From a 17 year-old’s perspective, it’s the whole perception that my grades will determine which college I get into, which will determine what job I get out of college, and it’s like, that’s everything. My future depends on this grade.” Managing these expectations leaves students in “fear” and “frozen,” focused entirely on the immediate outcomes—the grades—of their academic work.

Intertwined with what participants’ saw as students’ fixation on college were parents’ expectations for success. Ava contextualized these expectations as the “commodification” of the college search for independent school families: “I’m sending my kid, I’m paying X amount in tuition every year,” so quantifiable success is requisite. Bradley described “parent panic and freezing” as they wonder, “‘How will my kid get into college?’” Sam, a parent of a recent independent school graduate, pointed to parents’ lack of control in the college process: “They don’t seem to understand it as much, so they want to see A’s and B’s,” quantifiable markers of success. Consequently, students worry about grades in terms not only of their own expectations, but also those of their parents. Angela described students’ difficulty “in not seeing this as an opportunity to learn something but rather, ‘I have to bring this home to my parents and I’m going to get in trouble.’”

These fairly grim assessments of students’ extrinsic motivation were tempered by acknowledgement that, for many students, learning itself was a goal. Ava said, “‘There’s also a lot of kids... that are intrinsically motivated and find education interesting. They just want to learn more about whatever they’re doing.’” Diane believed that “most students just like” taking advanced classes, even if they also benefit from a transcript
bump. Several teachers acknowledged the complexities of tapping this intrinsic motivation in an extrinsically oriented culture. Angela said:

I try to impart the intrinsic motivation, but I am external. It’s this idea of trying to create the life long learner, but the thing is you have to create conditions where that can happen, but I can’t leave my fingerprints on it.

Throughout our interviews, participants expressed sympathy for students who were navigating their expectations for themselves as well as their parents’ expectations about college. Within this reality, however, they saw themselves as contributing to student learning by committing to counter-cultural discussions about learning and personal growth that will lead them “to being a good 35 year-old,” not just an 18 year-old with an Ivy League sweatshirt. Their feedback on student work, both in structure and in content, is intended to move students out of this performative, achievement-oriented mindset.

**Teachers’ Motivation**

In comparison to their assessments of students’ largely external motivation, participants described their own motivations for learning in both extrinsic and intrinsic terms. Extrinsically, they pointed to the importance of receiving recognition from students, colleagues, and supervisors. Notably, however, they distinguished between supervisors’ “praise” and their “feedback.” When it came to professional learning, they valued the former, not the latter. As intrinsic motivators, they cited delight in students’ learning, their own professional growth and an overwhelming love of learning. Several participants cited their roles as household providers as an extrinsic motivator, which caused them to feel fearful and suspicious of the supervision process. Finally, they took pains to underscore that, unlike students, they are not motivated by competition with peers, systems of performance ranking, or financial recognition for their work.
Extrinsic Motivation

Praise. Participants spoke about the motivating importance of praise, affirmation, or validation from students, colleagues, and supervisors. Teachers who know that their needs for recognition and respect will be met may experience increased motivation (Gokce, 2010). Veteran teachers enjoy hearing positive comments from observers (Hinchey, 2010; Range, 2013; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). In this study, however, participants’ discussion of praise tended to focus on informal interactions outside the supervision process and connect more closely to comments from students and colleagues than those from supervisors.

Student affirmation was an important external motivator for participants. Ava said: “It motivates me when I hear them say, ‘I don’t talk in any other class, but I talk in this class.’... I’m glad that they’re comfortable and feel like that is their space to just be themselves.” Carolyn mentioned the power of immediate affirmation from students after an “awesome” class: “When they say, ‘That was a lot of fun,’ or, ‘I learned a lot,’ or, ‘That was really interesting,’ then that motivates me to try to find new ways to do things.” Although participants had high expectations for student learning, several also talked about wanting students to “enjoy” class. On one hand, they saw that enjoyment as a way to ensure that students’ “brains are open to learning and improving and growing, progressing” (Georgia, interview) but on the other they seemed to appreciate when students found pleasure in a learning experience that the teacher had designed and set in motion. Colleen likes when former students tell her: “When you did this, that made a big difference to me as a student.” Georgia also expressed feeling motivated by appreciation from former students:
When I run into a student the next year or in home room, they see me getting something and they’re, ‘Oh, are you doing that again? I loved that unit when we did that!’ That kind of stuff is like, ‘Okay, good.’

Notably, Colleen’s and Georgia’s comments both refer to hearing feedback from students after a course has ended, once again underscoring the significance of longitudinal relationships to candid feedback, an observation explored in the previous chapter.

Affirmation from colleagues and supervisors was a meaningful external motivator for participants, albeit not nearly to the same degree as it was from their students. Carolyn derives a measure of confidence from recognition: “If I feel like somebody is noticing what I’m doing and likes it then I want to work harder and do better.” The pleasure of knowing that a colleague has adapted or adopted one of her lessons or ideas was particularly motivating for Edith, who felt pleased at having been able to “add something meaningful” to her colleagues’ experience, particularly because she felt that her teaching practice had benefitted from being able to learn from others.

Participants’ comments about affirmation from supervisors were more mixed. Some took pride in having their work recognized, whereas others felt as though those acknowledgements were hollow or made less sincere or meaningful by the administrative hierarchy. Ava described her experience receiving praise at the end of the formal supervision process; she had also been recommended to receive a performance recognition payment. She said:

It felt nice. If there hadn’t been bonuses existing, I think I still would have felt touched at the end of it. What [my supervisors] said about my teaching was really great. A few thousand dollars is really nice, too, but the words they said about what I did and that they saw me and recognized the different things I try to do was really nice. It meant for me that what I had been trying to achieve was noticeable, and maybe if they noticed it, my students noticed it.
Notably, Ava contextualizes this affirmation in terms of her students’ experience as much as her supervisors’ impressions. Stephen scoffs at the praise he has heard from his supervisors, which he dismisses as “glitter.” Instead, he wants information of “value,” feedback that “sticks.” Angela agrees that praise can feel hollow if it does not arrive hand in hand with new or actionable information: “It’s sort of like the kid who gets As, and is like, ‘Okay, I got another A but what do I need to work on? I figured out how to play the game but what do I need to do?’”

This difference in impact of praise from students and colleagues versus supervisors may exist because of the difference in relationship quality explored in Chapter Four. Ava said that she feels most motivated by “good relationships with the people who pass through my door… the relationships I have with my colleagues and with the kids, and to keep trying to make something that is more meaningful for them and for me.” Supervisors, notably, do not make an appearance in this conception. On the whole, participants appreciated being recognized positively by their supervisors, but they did not describe feeling motivated by instructional feedback from those supervisors. In this regard, their experiences represented a departure from the literature, which suggests that good feedback is a key ingredient of teachers’ internal motivation (Finnegan, 2013; Gocke, 2010; NNCES, 1997).

**Family Provider.** A critical external motivator for teachers was their role as an economic provider for themselves or their families. The difference between this factor and other sources of extrinsic motivation lay in participants’ framing. Student learning, for example, was a positive extrinsic motivator, something that excited and inspired
teachers. Earning a living, by contrast, had negative associations for participants, who saw the supervision process as a potential threat to their employment.

Participants spoke ruefully of their own high stakes reality of needing ongoing employment. Angela said: “It’s a career, job stability. There’s a lot on the line.” Colleen explained, “If I were to lose my job we couldn’t afford our home, right? Who’s to say I could find another job?” Stephen captured the spirit of most participants when he said:

I’m motivated by need, just raw need... Need for a job, economic need, health insurance... If I had no pay and the school said, ‘Will you teach one class for free this year? We’re not going to give you anything else,’ and I didn’t need it, I’d teach a class for free, but I wouldn’t do four classes for free.

Inherently, the supervision process poses a threat to job stability, no matter how confident participants felt in their practice and in their relationship with their supervisors. Recalling a contentious conversation with a supervisor, Sam reflected: “It’s like, my age, and thinking about what happens if I don’t have this job, how many more jobs can you go to?” Angela said that a system of successful supervision requires “a clear understanding of what the purpose of the process is and... in what ways it’s tied to, things like pay, job security, employment.” Carolyn made an even more clear distinction: “As long as the [supervision] process isn’t tied to me having a job or not, it’s nice to have that input in order to get better.”

This comment reveals the challenge of contextualizing the process of teacher supervision as exclusively formative. Telfair’s Enhanced Performance Review process, for teachers with six or more years of experience at the school, is intended to ensure teaching proficiency and to provide opportunities for professional learning. One potential
outcome of the process, however, is that a teacher whose practice is found to be unsatisfactory may be placed on “assessment,” a period of heightened performance review. Unsuccessful work during assessment results in a probationary contract, which can lead to eventual termination. From 2012-16, 99% of participating teachers at Telfair successfully passed the school’s Enhanced Performance Review process (Telfair internal document). Despite the likelihood of a successful outcome and despite successful past performance, participants continued to worry that the process could result in their dismissal, interfering with the opportunity to engage successfully in conversations about professional learning. Their experiences seem to support the contention that formative and summative processes in teacher supervision should be kept entirely separate (Cetroni, Miller & Waylett, 2013; Popham, 2013; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998).

**Intrinsic Motivation**

**Supporting students’ learning.** The primary reason teachers cite for choosing the profession is the goal of helping students to learn; not surprisingly, teachers also indicate that they feel the greatest satisfaction when seeing students succeed (Frase, 1992; van Veen & Sleegers, 2006). All participants were motivated by the intrinsic reward of seeing the evidence of students’ learning. To some degree, this learning became visible in student mastery of a particularly tricky skill or concept, but participants most often described it in terms of habits of mind: moments when students demonstrated intellectual agency and independence. Many of their comments framed this habit of mind in terms of students’ lifelong learning.
Jason explained that he was less motivated by the version of the students in front of him as he was by the thought of the learners and thinkers they would be in the future. He said:

I’m excited for students, two years later, to have certain recollections about my classroom. That’s what motivates me to keep thinking about what it is that I’m doing with the students, what I’m asking the students to read and do with their time and how I’m relating to the students in the classroom. This is 24 years of experience and thinking that’s brought me to this.

Jason’s reference to the length of his own teaching experience as well as the future orientation of his thoughts about student learning aligns with participants’ comments about the significance of longitudinal relationships in both student assessment and teacher evaluation. Colleen made a similar point, locating her teaching in terms of life skills, not content mastery: “It’s important to develop all those parts of our brains no matter what we do with the rest of our lives... Their brains need to learn logic, their brains need to learn language, their brains need to learn these things.” Participants saw themselves as playing the long game, believing that their feedback to students would pay dividends in students’ post-secondary and adult lives.

Moments in the classroom when students demonstrated independent thinking were particularly motivating for participants because they were indicators of habits of mind oriented toward learning, not performance. Georgia said: “If they’re really going to keep learning this, they have to do it on their own.” Phillip echoed Georgia’s language: “Giving students the tools to arrive at that moment on their own... those are the coolest moments.” He went on to describe the excitement—and wryly, the subsequent disappointment—of one such moment:
You get the [student] who on most days seems to not care about anything other than hockey and her phone, come in after a short story reading assignment and without being prompted say, ‘Oh my gosh. I read this and I didn’t understand it so I read it again and then it just came to me.’... It’s like, yes! Then 5 minutes later, put your phone away.

Participants cited students’ intellectual risk-taking as another indicator of agency and independence, and thus a prime motivator for them. Phillip wants students to “challenge [his] authority in good and mature ways,” citing his hope that they learn to “disagree” with both Phillip and their peers. He believed that Telfair students can be tempted to simply “show what they know.” “At some point,” he said, “I want you to maybe walk up to the edge of that diving board and instead of doing the dive that you’ve known and practiced and can do asleep... try to tackle an idea that you haven’t fully formed.” They tried to strike a delicate balance between offering students the prescriptive feedback necessary for growth and the freedom to enact that feedback independently.

**Love of the discipline.** Balossi and Hernandez (2015) found that, according to heads of independent schools, successful independent school teachers demonstrate, among other qualities, “strong pedagogical knowledge and a depth of content expertise” (p. 25). That content expertise was evident among participants in this study, who described themselves as feeling motivated by a sense of excitement and wonder at their chosen academic discipline. Stephen described the “core thing of teaching” as “reading great literature, working with students.” Ava wants to teach her subject “in a way that inspires them and makes them like language and literature and poetry, learning in general.” Phillip sees “something mysterious and magical about literature.” Colleen believes that “Math is cool, math is beautiful.” Bradley said: “Enthusiasm for the subject matter is my overall plan.” Diane said:
I love science. I think everyone should think it’s as cool as I think it is and I do and the kids that ... You can’t help it. Even if they don’t think this is cool, they can’t help but know that I think it’s really cool... I mean you can really, by the end of the year, understand in a very molecular way how water goes up the tree... There’s no motor in the tree and exactly how all this water gets from the bottom to top of the 60 foot tree. *Think of the massive water.* That they can then understand on a molecular level and actually explain that to somebody in fair detail. That’s powerful... Enthusiasm is infectious and that’s really why I’m successful, is that I really love science.

The transcription of Diane’s description does not do justice to the excitement in her voice or her wild gesticulations as she described this phenomenon. Her passion was palpable, and it was easy to see how it might inflect and enhance her teaching practice.

**Professional learning.** Participants spoke at the greatest length about their motivation to continue learning and growing as teaching professionals. No participants framed this growth in terms of titular career advancement (for instance, becoming a department chair or division director). Instead, they described their deep satisfaction at continuing to learn about their discipline or about the craft of teaching. They most often contextualized this process in terms of their awareness and embrace of making mistakes, often in front of students, and the desire—and, for many, the need—to learn something “new” after many years in the classroom. Georgia captured the essence of participants’ mindsets: “There’s always room for improvement, always. If you’re not a lifelong learner as a teacher, I do think you’re in the wrong profession. You can call yourself an expert, but still have more to learn.”

**Growth mindset.** Throughout our conversations, participants confidently acknowledged their own expertise and experience as teachers. In reflecting on the process of giving and receiving feedback, they positioned themselves as true experts vis-à-vis their students and as hopeful skeptics when it came to their supervisors’ expertise.
This confidence, however, did not prevent them from acknowledging opportunities for growth, even as they recognized the discomfort that such acknowledgement might bring. After all, said Ava, “It’s not like you walk in your classroom and you’re automatically really good at everything.” Phillip said:

I’m not the expert in the room. Yeah, I’ve got more practice and have had more time immersed in this world but no, the second I think I’m an expert, I might as well find another job because I’m probably not growing anymore or learning anymore.

Jason believed that “the success of any educational model through the lens of a teacher depends, I think largely, on the degree to which any one individual can see themselves as a student in that model.” Directly and indirectly, participants referred to themselves as students engaging in a process of lifelong learning and professional growth.

Participants most often mentioned the discomfort of recognizing the need to grow as they contemplated the existential challenges of measuring their own practice against an ideal. Georgia said of the supervision process, “It’s hard if you think you are doing the best that you can do and you think you’re fantastic and then they say, ‘Eh, you’re all right.’ It’s just hard.” Colleen drew a specific parallel to the student experience:

You know, it’s, again, you know it’s like a high school student. It’s like, ‘Let me get past this and be done,’ right? But to actually own your education, right? To actually say, ‘I’m being educated here, I’m learning, I’m becoming better at my craft, and that requires a certain amount of reflection, a certain amount of feedback. It’s uncomfortable, it’s inconvenient, but in the end it’s good.’

Phillip spoke to the anxiety that can arise when teachers are learning with and from students: “Now I’m thinking in ways that I wasn’t a few seconds ago but it’s really good and healthy because they’re forcing me to ask the very same questions and to think about why we’re doing what we’re doing… It can be uncomfortable.” Angela also referenced
the benefit and discomfort of having to participate in “intellectual conversations that are sometimes beyond me,” which she embraces as evidence of student growth and learning.

Many participants described embracing this discomfort and transforming it into a learning opportunity for students. Angela described naming for students both her strengths and her areas for growth: “I have a bigger vocabulary but then there are places when I’m fumbling around with how to make [a software program] work… It’s not a sign of weakness that I don’t know everything.” Georgia also described mitigating content-based anxiety by naming it for students: “I actually say… ‘I don’t know every word in [another language] and you don’t know every word in English, so we’re even,’” even as she acknowledged her own desire “in the moment of class... to be an expert.” Of his own volition, Bradley audited a colleague’s course in another discipline for a semester and embraced the opportunity to “expose” his own learning: “kids saw me out of my element making mistakes and acting as one of them.” Participants were honest about the vulnerability required to make mistakes in front of students or to admit an occasional lack of factual knowledge, but they also framed those hiccups not only as teachable moments for students, but as valuable opportunities to grow their own knowledge. Their commitment to ongoing professional learning allowed them to contextualize these moments as motivating, not demoralizing.

**Newness.** Participants spoke at length and with conviction about the importance of encountering “new” ideas as experts in their discipline or classroom practitioners. These experienced teachers described the enervation that can arise from teaching the same discipline, encountering the same student challenges, and navigating the same institutional frustrations year in and year out. The bulwark against this boredom is the
faculty culture at Telfair, which they described as one in which teachers are “constantly trying to do new things and learning new kinds of things” (Bradley, interview). Carolyn affirmed: “We don’t want to just sit and tread water and do the same thing over and over again.” Participants described learning the most from their own reflective practice and from conversations with or observations of colleagues.

By and large, participants described faculty culture at Telfair as one marked by ongoing learning and growth. Bradley said:

We go to the bar, we talk teaching. It’s not just griping. It’s like, ‘What’s a cool idea that works, and tell me more about your cool idea that works and how we’re going to take that back to my classroom.’ We do that all the time. It might be innate, it might be learned. It might be just the nature of the people who are drawn to the career, or the good ones.

Sam described his motivation to grow as one that takes place in the presence of colleagues: “My focus is on getting better and learning new things... It’s about sitting down with some colleagues and figuring out, ‘Okay, how do I improve myself?’” By the same token, some of Bradley’s best learning takes place as part of his own reflective process:

I’m fascinated by the times where I’ve had three or four classes that have the same lesson that are repeated over a week or whatever. Period one gets a certain lesson. Period two gets a slightly different lesson. Period three gets a different one. Which one is better? It’s not always that the last one is the best. It’s led me on times to go back the next day or next week and re-teach something... It’s just an urge to make it effective and useful and enjoyable.

Whether alone or with colleagues, participants embraced the opportunity to learn and grow, independent of an official structure or system designed to support that growth.

According to participants, such growth is essential for veteran teachers, who face the threat of boredom from the cyclical nature of teaching life. Ava said: “It’s boring to
teach the same thing… If you teach it in a slightly different way or do something new with it, it doesn’t feel old. The kids know if you’re bored with something... Who wants to do that? It’s miserable.” Carolyn reflected: “12 years of teaching? You sort of get to this point where you think, ‘Well, what next?’” Georgia warned: “If you teach the exact same thing year after year after year, you’re going to miss things because you think you’ve already said it, because you said it the same for the last ten years or whatever.” These comments are not surprising. While individual student needs or institutional initiatives might change, teachers are often assigned the same courses on the same daily schedule in the same classrooms with the same number of students year after year.

Experienced teachers at Telfair have long mastered the basics of classroom management and the nuances of institutional culture, so evolving pedagogy or assessment practices is an essential mechanism for staying vital in the role. Whether developing curriculum or tinkering with pedagogy, “it’s never done.” (Georgia, interview).

While some cited conversations with supervisors as helpful sources of new thinking about teaching and learning, these comments were a distinct minority. The newness they sought came most often from peers, not administrators. Angela added an interesting twist: “In some ways I don’t even want my evaluators to know I’m doing that because that takes some of the fun away from it in some way.” She explained that her best, most meaningful learning takes place of her own volition, outside of formal reporting mechanisms or supervisory relationships.

That said, some participants did indicate that they felt as though they had experienced meaningful learning in conversations with their supervisors. Georgia said, “I feel like my department chair and I don’t have very many of the same conversations. We
may come back to parts of things, but… each time we have a conversation, it’s different. It’s a progression.” According to Ava: “Having conversations with evaluators, with my department chair, or with other people who may have other resources for me is really helpful.” Stephen countered these perspectives by expressing his unhappiness with his supervisory experience, saying:

If I were learning more... if I had more respect for the people who are my leaders... I would be more motivated. If I were learning things that are outside, but related to my discipline, I would be more motivated. I don’t think that motivation has to all be economic. I think that new perspective and knowledge is value too. It’s a reward.

Notably, these comments do not reference supervisory “feedback” in response to class observations, but rather the role that supervisors can play in introducing new materials and new perspectives into ongoing dialogue with teachers.

**Obstacles to Motivation**

While describing and demonstrating strong intrinsic motivation to continue their professional learning, participants described institutional conditions that impede or diminish that learning, particularly time constraints and any system designed to rank or incentivize standards of performance.

**Time.** Because participants relished opportunities to connect with colleagues or to explore self-identified areas of professional interest, they articulated major frustration with the lack of institutional time reserved for those pursuits or with what they perceived to be insubstantial institutional initiatives that supplanted time that they might otherwise use for collaboration or exploration. Their comments echoed Lipsky’s (1980) finding about the struggle of street-level bureaucrats to control the pace of their work, which leads to feelings of overwhelm, ineffectiveness, and alienation.
Participants talked about the necessity of having dedicated time for professional learning. Sam shared his frustration with orientation weeks that were “packed full of lectures but no time to actually sit down” and operationalize the ideas at hand. Without “setting aside that time to actually improve,” those experiences ultimately felt hollow and insubstantial. Edith inveighed against “amorphous visioning conversations,” wanting her administrators to “reconceive our meeting time so that it’s focused on collaborative problem solving around specific questions: how much time do we take to grade? how do we handle gender imbalance in the classroom?” These perceptions speak to the connection between time and autonomy, a central component of both independent school culture (Bullard, 1992) and intrinsic motivation (Firestone, 2014). The loss of control of their time can alienate and de-motivate teachers.

Several participants addressed the challenge of balancing the school’s conception of “newness” with their own ongoing interests. Carolyn said:

What can you do that’s new and fresh and different and challenging, but not just like you’re doing it for a year and then you’re going to pop to a new thing? What’s permanent ... as permanent as it should be way to supplement what you do, complement what you’re doing.

Participants spoke to Telfair’s spate of PK-12 and divisional initiatives in recent years around an array of topics, including student workload and wellness, mindfulness, stereotype threat, and global education. Generally, their comments reflected appreciation for the opportunity to consider different approaches to their work, in addition to a degree of perplexity and frustration at the evolving menu of the school’s explorations. They also identified some anxiety about expectations for implementing these initiatives in their practice. Edith said: “I’m glad to have new ways of thinking. But what exactly am I
being asked to do? Am I now evaluated on my global competence? What does that look like? How are we operationalizing this stuff?” If they are being required to give up time that they could use for their own lesson planning or collaboration with colleagues, participants would have preferred professional development work that came with a clear set of expectations about implementation and evaluation.

Ranking. Since this study was envisioned, significant structural changes have taken place with Telfair’s teacher supervision process, most notably the dismantling of a tiered performance recognition payment system for teachers that had cast a long and lugubrious shadow over the institutional conversation about feedback and motivation. The original purpose of the system was to recognize faculty excellence by paying “distinguished” teachers an annual bonus (Tier 1, $2000; Tier 2, $3000; Tier 3, $4000) unconstrained by the salary scale. Teachers had the ability to opt-in for performance recognition. The supervision process was identical for those who opted-in for recognition as for those who did not; the sole difference was the prospect of monetary recognition at the end.

Overall, the impact of the program was deleterious. Most teachers did not want to receive a tiered ranking, and they asserted that they had not entered the profession for the money. According to Lortie (2002): “teachers are not supposed to consider money, prestige, and security as major inducements” (p. 30). That said, the same teachers did not want to forgo the chance for additional compensation, even as they rued the relatively small sum they took home after taxes. This divergence in the intention and impact of the plan—which was meant to provide recognition for excellent work, not to create motivation for excellent work—may explain some of the system’s negative impact.
Activities framed by extrinsic motivation tend to be experienced as controlled and prescriptive, precipitating feelings of powerlessness (Eyal & Roth, 2011).

Because of the school’s decision to sunset the performance recognition program, I did not ask specifically about participants’ experiences with it. Several, however, raised the subject in their reflections on motivation and professional growth. Participants’ comments about Telfair’s system of faculty performance recognition represented divergent perspectives about extrinsic rewards. Faculty who had experience in higher education or the private sector tended to see the system more favorably than those who had spent the majority of their professional lives in independent schools.

Sam, who has extensive post-secondary experience as a teacher and an administrator, believed that most objections to performance recognition stemmed from personal insecurity. He made a distinction between the question of ongoing employment (“Do I have a job?”) and performance payment: “It doesn’t make any sense to me as to why a person would be upset over like, rank two or three. It’s like, ‘Hey, you did well.’ You got some extra cash coming. I don’t know why people would weep.” Jerry, who worked in the private sector for a decade before becoming a teacher, said,

I don’t understand why teachers get bent out of shape by merit pay... Intuitively, it makes no sense to do it otherwise. You should be assessed on the quality of your work. I don’t know what other criteria you could be assessed on. If you’re using strictly seniority, well, I’m sorry, that’s bullshit. What happens if people burn out? What do you do? You keep rewarding them for that?

He specifically cited his commercial world experience as the reason for his sanguinity: “You’ve always got to keep trying to do better. That’s how you stay employed. That’s how you get the bonus. That’s how you get better as a person and how you stay good at your job.”
By contrast, participants who did not have significant experience outside of independent school cited the “stress” of being ranked as an obstacle to their ongoing professional learning. Even teachers who perceived themselves to be highly effective—and who had previously received high rankings in the performance recognition system—described the anxiety of receiving a tiered performance designation. Georgia mused: “Knowing that someone’s going to rank me... just adds undue stress. That doesn’t help the situation.” Despite feeling like a “confident” and “competent” teacher, Ava described the unpleasant pressure of participating in the performance recognition process: “I was kind of surprised how much more stress there was. It was definitely carrying something extra last year.” Ultimately, both teachers received the highest performance designation. The simple prospect of being ranked, however, had magnified the anxiety of these otherwise distinguished practitioners. According to Diane, the origin of this stress was the vulnerability of receiving less than the highest rating: “Unless you have this ego thing that you build around yourself that’s self protective, it’s either that or I have to believe that I’m not as good as I think I am if I have to believe your evaluation of me.” Feedback by itself was not inherently threatening to participants’ self-confidence, but a rating was. These perceptions aligned with participants’ frustration with the existence of grades for students, discussed earlier in this chapter. They also underscore that for career teachers in an independent school context, the argument for external motivators like bonus compensation falls flat (Fryer et al, 2012; Hanushek, 2009).

Summary

Participants cited far fewer parallels between their motivation and that of their students than they did when reflecting on the feedback they receive from supervisors and
the feedback they give to students. Participants in this study characterized their students as motivated largely by external factors: grades, college admission, and parent expectations. They described themselves as being intrinsically motivated by the love of their discipline, excitement at student learning, and opportunities for their own learning. Their roles as providers for their families constituted a singular, but critical, external motivator. Obstacles to that motivation include time constraints and any systems of extrinsic ranking or reward. These findings align with research about teacher motivation that external threats or incentives undermine teachers’ intrinsic motivation (Firestone, 2014; Kraft & Papay, 2016).

The findings do not fully align with research that indicates that effective feedback enhances teachers’ intrinsic motivation for professional learning (Finnegan, 2013; Kraft & Papay, 2016; Gokce, 2010; NNCES, 1997). Participants did appreciate hearing praise from students, colleagues, and supervisors. They did not, however, make any indication between supervisory feedback and their own motivation for professional learning. This finding may not be surprising given the high achieving culture and context for both students and faculty at Telfair. Based on participants’ comments, teachers at Telfair already perceive themselves as being intrinsically motivated. Many were drawn to the school in large part because of its regional reputation for academic and educational excellence. Moreover, the school’s approach to curriculum and instruction allows for a high degree of the autonomy necessary to fostering intrinsic motivation (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Firestone, 2014). Consequently, participants already see themselves as thriving and self-sufficient in an environment with high expectations, making supervisory feedback feel superfluous to their existing motivation for professional learning.
Given the lack of a clear parallel between feedback and motivation, exploring participants’ professional identities as teachers and their many different relationships with the school and its agents may help to illuminate participants’ experience with the supervision process. Chapter Six explores this subject more fully.
CHAPTER SIX

“No one else gets in the club”: Teacher Identities and Supervision

This chapter reflects a strand of participant commentary that I had not anticipated when embarking on this study. Although the interview questions I posed to participants asked expressly about teacher supervision and professional motivation, their responses frequently included reflections on their professional identity at Telfair and the intersection of that identity with their lives beyond the school.

Just as participants’ practices and preferences for giving and receiving feedback exist in relation to their beliefs about professional motivation, so too does that motivation exist in relation to their perceptions of their identities as teachers. Because teaching is such an immersive act, that professional identity is also highly personal (Buchanan, 2015; Hargreaves, 2001; Nias, 1996; Zembylas, 2003).

To explore this area more fully, I invited participants to join focus groups, which functioned both as member checks for my initial findings and as opportunities for further discussion about teachers’ identities. In both interviews and focus groups, participants discussed their professional identities as teachers, which were defined primarily by efforts to establish the legitimacy of their professional expertise and to manage the emotional threats of classroom teaching. They also addressed the intersection of their teacher identities with those of their supervisors, particularly in terms of their longevity, expertise, and perceived self-confidence. Finally, they located themselves in relation to the institution as a whole, expressing a combination of pride of affiliation with ambivalence about the school’s legacy of privilege and exclusivity. Ultimately, participants’ comments about their professional identities provide a more helpful lens for
understanding their attitudes towards the supervision process than did the exploration of their professional motivation. This topic also helps to illuminate the deep differences they see between their identities and students’ identities when it comes to receiving feedback.

Data from this chapter were derived from interviews and focus groups, as well as internal school documents. All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from interviews conducted between June 13 and November 23, 2016, or from focus groups conducted on February 15, 2017. See Appendix A for information specific to each participant.

**Teachers’ Identities**

Teachers’ investment in their work effaces any distinction between the personal and the professional, making professional conflict or threat feel deeply personal (Buchanan, 2015; Hargreaves, 2001; Nias, 1996; Zembylas, 2003). Multiple participants spoke poignantly to the degree to which their professional lives and personal identities are intertwined, in terms of the way they and others perceive them to be “born teachers,” their desire to establish professional legitimacy, and the need to manage the emotional threats that arise in the classroom and beyond.

**Being a Teacher**

Lortie (2002) described the ways in which people who choose to be teachers often cite “early and affective decisions” (p. 42) to teach, often related to influential teachers or to family members who teach. Angela said, “I was born to be a teacher… I’ll teach a lesson and I’ll go to lunch and I’ll be thinking about what happened. It’s a constant reel, what happened and how is it going to be better.” After rejecting some more fanciful professional choices while a child, Edith “decided without ever consciously deciding” to
become a teacher when she was in sixth grade. Colleen recalled: “I wanted to be a teacher in second grade,” in large part because of a particularly admirable and influential teacher. These three anecdotes illuminate the ways in which the profession of teaching is, for some practitioners, deeply interwoven with personal self-concept and identity. Bradley underscored this phenomenon when he said: “People have this weird teacher solidarity, nobody else gets in the club.”

Another finding in Lortie’s (2002) exploration of teacher identity was the recognition of teachers’ fundamentally teacherly qualities by friends and family. This theory of symbolic interaction—the way in which personal identity is influenced by others’ reactions—was very much at play for at least two study participants. Somewhat ruefully, Georgia recounted a lunchtime exchange with her young son:

‘Mom. Just don’t be a teacher today.’
‘Just be your mom? I don’t know how to do that, honey.’

She added that she could think of “five more stories about myself” that would illustrate the same point. In a similar vein, Jason said:

One of the things that helps me understand what that skill set is in my life outside of Telfair, when I’m in certain circumstances and friends comment on the way I handle a situation and they say, ‘You are so much a teacher. What you just did there, the way you orchestrated that, the way you said ‘Okay, we’re going to be like this’ or the way you just simply engaged that stranger who sat down next to you, and you had that person for 20 minutes.

The other participants in the focus group reacted affirmingly to these stories.

Given this theoretical and anecdotal context, it is not surprising that participants experience a deep intersection between their personal and professional identities, heightening the emotional experience of the latter. The deep integration of personal and professional identity for teachers helps to illuminate their feelings of vulnerability when it
comes to the supervision process. No matter how experienced or confident they may be or feel, many teachers are in a position where it is difficult to separate feedback on their work in the classroom from feedback on them as a person.

In reflecting on their identities as teachers, participants discussed two central challenges: the desire to establish legitimacy as disciplinary and pedagogical experts, and the need to manage emotional threats to relationships and to their self-confidence.

Establishing Legitimacy

Throughout our conversations, many participants referred to themselves as professionals, both as members of the teaching profession and as members of the Telfair community. They often underscored their status as “experts” in the classroom, particularly in terms of years spent teaching, and often located themselves in opposition to parents or administrators whose critiques might threaten that identity. Indeed, Hargreaves (2001) found in a phenomenological study of secondary school teachers that questioning teachers’ expertise was the strongest source of their negative emotion.

Mehta (2013) explored the status of teaching as a “semi-proffesion,” in which it can be challenging for practitioners to make the case for public recognition and respect. He identified three core characteristics of a profession: “monopoly over knowledge,” “social trustee status,” and “ability to set standards for practice” (p. 123). In turn, he chronicled the way in which those characteristics are under assault, particularly in public school teaching, resulting, in part, in decreased respect for professional authority (Mehta, 2013). Gurl (2016) described the way in which teaching has become “deskilled” (p. 22) in the public eye, which underscores the importance of administrators and evaluation systems that acknowledge the complexity of effective teaching (Danielson, 2016).
Although no participants in this study described feeling a direct diminishment of respect paid to them by students, administrators, or parents, several felt the need to establish their legitimacy as disciplinary or pedagogical experts, particularly in the context of a school with high expectations for the quantitative success of its students.

In a focus group, Colleen described the difficulty of claiming legitimacy as a teacher because of the challenge she feels in determining what teaching actually is. She described teaching as “a craft… an art form,” as “a unique skill set” and finally “the ability to actually do what we do successfully.” Jason agreed, saying “the skill set of teaching is one that’s acquired and it is nebulous because it’s relatively complex and can’t necessarily be boiled down to disciplinary or content knowledge.” Colleen concluded, “Teaching is an art so you want people to appreciate your art. Most of the people who will appreciate your art aren’t going to sit in your classroom”; instead, they are colleagues who are busy practicing their own art in separate spaces. Similarly, she believed that much of successful teaching lies in the management of “space, people, and content,” a skill-set that is difficult to quantify and to observe:

You’re managing all that for short periods of time hour after hour after hour, day after day after day and keeping track of all the peripherals. The meetings, the parents, the papers to grade, but your main job is managing that space, those people, that knowledge and creating something out of it.

Participants were proud of their skill set while recognizing the difficulty of representing those skills to a diverse and rotating series of audiences. Interestingly, the Danielson Framework was created to address this very challenge: the need for a common language about what constitutes good teaching (Danielson Group, 2013). The highly autonomous
inclinations of independent school teachers, however, may leave them feeling affronted by the attempt to codify or prescribe what they believe to be an ineffable practice.

At least half of participants referred to their tenure in the classroom as an indication of their professional credibility. Jason, in reference to his reflections on having learned to prioritize student experience over simple content mastery, cited his “24 years of experience and thinking” as evidence for his conclusion. Bradley, reflecting on difficult conversations with students and parents, recalled telling them, “I’m a professional teacher, frankly [with]... a Master’s degree and 19 years of experience.” Recalling similar conversations, Angela described saying to students: “I have these diplomas [B.A., M.A.] on my wall. I’m a professional. I respect your opinion but I also need you to know that I’ve done this for a long time. I know what I’m talking about and here’s why.” In an independent school like Telfair, where teaching credentials are not required and have not typically held much professional currency, real-time classroom experience and graduate degrees help to establish professional legitimacy. Papay and Kraft (2016) argued that longer classroom experience does correlate positively with increased teacher effectiveness, shattering what they call the myth of “the performance plateau” for experienced teachers (p. 36). Participants’ beliefs certainly resonate with this finding.

Several participants described feeling the need to make the case for their expertise in conversation with parents. Describing Telfair’s annual back-to-school night, when parents follow their children’s schedules and meet their teachers, Diane said: “This is the only time I tried out my [advanced] degree... It’s mostly to get the parents’ attention so that when I say your kid doesn’t know this, he really doesn’t know this.” Angela spoke
to the seemingly “subjective” nature of grading in the humanities and the need to “shift to the professional”—in reference to her degree and the length of her experience—when dealing with parents who might question a student’s grade. In one focus group, participants strongly agreed that demonstrating a passion for their discipline was one of the most effective ways to establish legitimacy with parents, many of whom are credentialed professionals in their own disciplines and might be unfazed by a teacher’s advanced degree or length of classroom experience.

No participants made reference to a need to establish professional legitimacy with their supervisors; this aspect of their identity was not threatened by the supervision process. This phenomenon may speak to the affinity that teachers and administrators share based on both having classroom experience. The fact that virtually all independent school administrators have also been teachers may help teachers to trust the ability of their supervisors to understand the existential complexities of teaching.

Managing Emotional Threats

Teacher identity cannot be developed or understood without acknowledging the role of emotion (Hargreaves, 1998; Zembylas, 2003). Emotions allow teachers to develop their professional identity by interpreting and responding to experience (Zembylas, 2003). All participants in this study spoke to fact that the “human” and “emotional” aspect of teaching presents challenges to maintaining professional self-confidence and, in turn, to giving and receiving feedback. They also referenced the occasional struggle to feel fully confident in their practice vis à vis self-imposed comparisons with peers.
Managing relationships. Osborn (1996) asserted that “effective teaching and learning is necessarily affective, that is involves human interaction, and that the quality of teacher-pupil relationships is vitally important to the learning process” (p. 455).

Although all participants in this study had taught for at least 11 years, they described in both individual conversations and focus groups the need to manage the emotional volatility of teaching. While Hargreaves (1998) contended that teaching is “charged with positive emotion,” participants often characterized their experiences in terms of managing the emotional threats that arose in their relationships with students and parents. While they spoke positively about the motivating influence of students’ learning and their own ongoing professional learning (emotions described more fully in Chapter Five) their descriptions of the quotidian emotions of teaching were less rosy, focusing on largely on the feelings of vulnerability that arise from having a deep investment in relationships with students and parents.

In one focus group, Daniel elicited vigorous affirmation when he described the “roller coaster of emotions” that teachers feel, saying:

Some of us are much more emotionally prone to tuning into and responding to or reacting to the perception of an evaluator or of students. If you haven’t been a teacher, you just don’t know how important the emotional aspect of the job is.

Georgia spoke for many participants in saying: “Teaching is so emotional. It’s all about feeling.” In a focus group, she elaborated on the complexities of managing those feelings across different constituencies in the school:

Teachers need to be present for their students. They need to be present for their administrators. They need to be present for their parents… We have to negotiate constantly, everything, all these conversations and what students want and what parents what and what administrators want are all coming at you from different areas.
For participants, these multiple audiences, combined with the deeply personal and relational act of teaching, magnify their feelings of personal and professional vulnerability.

In focus groups and interviews, participants expressed strong agreement about the importance of maintaining positive relationships with students because of the emotional toll that occurs when those relationships go wrong. Daniel said, “We’ve all talked about this, if 15 students are having a great experience and one is...complaining about everything, that’s where your focus goes. Oh my goodness, I’m not pleasing everybody. This one kid is really angry at me.” The rest of the participants in the group nodded knowingly at his assessment. In an earlier conversation, while recalling a particularly challenging disciplinary situation involving a student’s academic dishonesty, Daniel faulted himself for “taking [the student’s] actions personally” as a result of all of the time he had devoted to giving the student feedback on a plagiarized essay. He described his reaction as “a big mistake.” Professionally, Daniel takes pride in giving students meaningful feedback on their writing, and he had invested hours in reading and commenting on this student’s paper. When the student so flagrantly violated academic expectations, he also violated the terms of the human relationship that Daniel had been trying to build.

In a focus group, Daniel made a similar comment about the importance of having positive relationships with parents, saying, “one bad parent can just ruin your whole life, and it’s just hard to maintain any kind of perspective when that’s the situation.” Colleen said, “The times where I’ve felt the worst as a teacher are the times that I realized I really
let down a parent… I failed because someone trusted me with something… and I got caught up in other stuff and neglected that child.” Colleen framed this reflection in terms of her own experience as a parent, sending her child to school every day and trusting her daughter’s teachers to act in her best interest. These comments are in keeping with Hargreaves’s (2001) assessment that negative emotions are most likely to exist for teachers when they feel as though their “purposes are being threatened or have been lost” (p. 1067). When parents question teachers’ competence, expertise, or commitment to working in the best interests of their children, teachers feel their identities imperiled (Hargreaves, 2001).

In a similar vein, participants referred to the experience of reading student surveys, which form a part of Telfair’s teacher evaluation system, and “obsessing about the one that was negative” instead of acknowledging the vast preponderance of praise (Edith, interview). Carolyn described reading surveys full of affirmation from students but returning continuously to the critical words from a single respondent:

I’ll click on those surveys over and over again. I don’t even look at the ones that are positive. I’m just going to those same [negative] lines continuously. You’ll say, okay that’s the honest student. Everybody else is just being too nice or just likes you as a person so they’re not going to say anything negative. That’s the honest student.

Reflecting on the paradoxical nature of surveys to offer hoped-for affirmation while triggering obsession with negative outlier comments, Daniel said simply, “It’s a trap.” These responses did not align with participants’ perceptions of students’ experiences receiving critique, largely because participants saw themselves as having the capacity to offer feedback in a constructive way, whereas with students and parents they were often the recipients of feedback offered in anger or frustration.
Given the validating power of supervisors’ praise, described in Chapter Four, these comments may point to the important role that a supervisor can play in contextualizing critique and seeking to mitigate its impact on teachers’ emotions. That role, however, requires a high level of trust from teachers, who would have to believe that they would not be penalized for sharing these experiences with their supervisors.

**Managing threats to self-confidence.** Participants described threats to their professional confidence coming from a number of sources, including the stature of their discipline in the school, the reputation of the students who enroll in their classes, and the accomplishments of their colleagues. They often drew distinctions between their experience and that of their students, citing the higher expectations for them than for adolescents.

Ava felt frustrated by the fact that she believes her discipline to be “a second tier subject” that results in both her and her grades “being treated really differently” than those of disciplines with higher prestige. She described students and parents challenging grades in her courses less frequently than they do her colleagues’ grades. While she appreciated the benefits of this dynamic, particularly the freedom of having less contentious parent conferences, she said: “I have ebbs and flows in my confidence and in my sense of self as a teacher” as a result. Sam described feeling a similar degree of insecurity based on the enrollment patterns in his class: “I worry that I am… picking up a certain genre of students… one year it seemed like I had all these JV hockey boys and it’s like I’m thinking, ‘Oh man, maybe I need to change things a little bit’” to mitigate negative perceptions of “the people above me.” Notably, both Ava and Sam felt threats to their confidence based on factors beyond their control. They did not cite their own
teaching performance or their relationships with students as the source, but pointed instead to their beliefs about larger perceptions that exist in the community, whether among students, parents, or administrators.

Some participants have had their professional confidence shaken by the accomplishments or reputation of their colleagues. Phillip talked about “managing expectations” for himself in relation to his peers. As a teacher at Telfair, he said:

You see around you so much talent and such intellect and deep knowledge of subject matter and passion for teaching, when you share a wall with [talented colleagues] and these people who are revered and rightfully so. Then it comes to your own evaluation, and it’s probably partly my personality, it’s just that feeling of you just want to be good enough.

Colleen talked about similar process of managing expectations during the supervision process:

I was aiming for middle of the road. I feel like I’m a middle of the road kind of person and didn’t expect to be said otherwise. That was nice. You know, I haven’t taught PhD Physics in India. We hire all these people, we’re like, ‘Shit! How did I get hired?’ I think everybody in the year I was hired kind of felt the same way. It’s like, ‘Holy shit! I’m being hired! Glad we’re still here!’

In a focus group, Jason elicited appreciative nods when he said, “If we’re honest with each other, we’re never, none of us—even though there is this incredible pressure—going to have it all” when it comes to teaching experience and expertise.

Participants disagreed about the degree of similarity between the impact of feedback on students’ and teachers’ confidence. Grace emphasized the greater emotional impact of supervision on teachers, who are “expected to be the best, and to be doing everything right.” She explained:

As a teacher, your stakes are higher. For a student, we feel like, ‘Well, this is our job to give them feedback.’ We don’t expect them to be perfect and to be at their
end person. We want them to grow and change and we want to help them to get there.

She did not believe that teachers, at least at Telfair, feel the similar freedom to grow and change as students. By contrast, Diane thought that feedback is always going to be “tied up” in “people’s egos and personas,” for both students and teachers. She continued: “You have this ego thing that you build around yourself… that’s self protective, because either that or I have to believe that I’m not as good as I think I am if I have to believe your evaluation of me.”

Perhaps because teaching is such a paradoxically public and private act—accessible every day to students but functionally hidden from colleagues and administrators—participants expressed clear desire for feedback while acknowledging the deeply personal impact that critique can have. It was in reflecting on their own experiences receiving critical feedback that most participants drew a clear line between their experience and that of students. Colleen most fully captured the conflicted feelings expressed by most participants when she described the conflict between a professional desire to learn and the personal impact of critique: “I like feedback. I’m really good at receiving constructive criticism, I think, until I go home I have nightmares about it, and then deny I had nightmares because I’m really good at denial, and I label it optimism.”

Georgia also spoke to this tension: “We’re adults, we’re mature, we should be able to have tough conversations and then be able to do our job, but we’re also human beings and emotional beings, so [getting feedback] is hard.” Ava, an experienced and successful teacher, cited the reality of feeling “nervous” every time a colleague or supervisor entered her classroom. Despite the fact that these teachers are experienced classroom
practitioners, many continue to feel degrees of insecurity and self-doubt about their practice and a desire to hear praise and affirmation of their work. A supervision process that is framed explicitly in terms of professional growth—that is, a process that is built on the belief that every teacher *should* continue to evolve and to innovate throughout her career—may help to address these threats to self-confidence by making growth itself, not a rating of “distinguished” practice, the coin of the realm.

**Relationships with Administrators**

In *Schoolteacher*, his seminal exploration of teacher identity, Lortie (2002) found that public school teachers generally accept the “superordinate” (p. 199) presence of a principal within the structure of a school, provided that the principal leverages her role to improve the working conditions and qualitative experience of teachers in a building. More recent research has found that principals play a significant role in developing and sustaining the trusting, cooperative, and dialogic relationships that improve teacher satisfaction and retention (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002; Louis et al., 2010; Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010). Worth exploring, then, are teachers’ perceptions of administrators’ identities relative to their supervisory roles. Complicating the question is the fact that the vast majority of current research has taken place in public schools. At Telfair, teachers’ experience of “administrators” includes not only division directors (the equivalent of a public school principal), but also assistant directors and PK-12 department chairs; each of these groups participates in the supervision process.

Throughout our interviews, participants speculated about the intentions and motivations of their supervisors. Most references to specific administrators were positive. Only three participants spoke to having had negative relationships or
interactions with their supervisors. That said, participants often spoke about “administrators” in general as having a collective identity that seemed inscrutable or inaccessible to them, despite the affinity they might feel as a result of administrators’ current or former teaching experience. In their comments about administrators, participants most often referenced concerns about longevity, legitimacy, lack of self-confidence, and role ambiguity.

**Longevity**

Although most participants spoke in positive, if not precisely glowing, terms about their administrators, they tended to express skepticism about the longevity of their relationship with any given supervisor. Stephen captured the tone of most of his colleagues’ responses when he talked about the tendency of administrators to “come and go” at the school, leaving teachers to not only navigate changing relationships with new supervisors, but also assess their own professional trajectory by comparison. Stephen recalled sitting on search committees for administrators:

People who are coming and going, they refer to their [professional] growth, and do it in the interview as you’re sitting there. Then the person is going to be your [department] chair. He’s like, ‘Well, I just want to grow in my job’ [by becoming an administrator] which is saying [to the teachers] y’all aren’t growing in your jobs.

The implication for Stephen is that anyone who stays in the classroom for the duration of their career is not learning, is not motivated, is not stretching themselves professionally. This perception might be magnified at a school like Telfair, which has multiple campuses and, hence, a complex administrative structure where lengthy job titles and acronyms are par for the course.
Participants’ questions about their supervisors’ longevity are rooted in Telfair’s reality. Counting division directors, assistant directors, and department chairs, there are a total of 14 administrative positions with supervisory responsibility for faculty. Since 2010, 29 different people have occupied those roles (some of them serving in multiple roles during the course of several years). Many of these transitions have signaled the opportunity for professional growth, as administrators have moved on to positions of increased responsibility at Telfair or elsewhere. The cumulative effect on participants in this study, however, is wearying.

Georgia addressed the difficulty of working with a new supervisor: “You don’t really know what kind of educational philosophy they’re bringing with them and how open they are to folks doing things that aren’t in line with that or aren’t exactly how they would envision them.” Ava agreed: “It’s like, ‘Wait a minute. I hardly know you and you’re evaluating me?’” Georgia said that navigating a relationship with a new administrator left her feeling “uncertain” and “insecure,” while Ava said that it made her “anxious.” Teachers expect their student rosters to “turn over” at the end of a semester or a school year; such is the structure of the profession. Given, however, participants’ comments about the significance of adult relationships to a productive supervision process, explored in Chapter Four, it appears that opportunities exist at Telfair to address more intentionally the impact of administrative turnover on the supervisory process.

**Administrators’ Legitimacy**

In the context of this administrative turnover, it is not surprising that participants expressed skepticism about the degree to which they should invest in supervisory relationships and about their supervisors’ ulterior motives or influences. Stephen, for
instance, recalled a supervisor whose bristly feedback only made sense if “he was trying to be the badass new guy” and distinguish himself as a hard-nosed administrator with high expectations. Jason believed that sometimes a supervisor brings “a mandate or is set upon a certain outcome, wherever that comes from, from higher up or from that own administrator’s internal compass.” Participants often located their immediate supervisors as bit players in a larger institutional system and who feel anxious about the exact nature of their relationship with colleagues.

Reflecting on the relationship between supervisor and teacher, Jason drew an extended metaphor:

An actor might not agree with a critic who reviewed his or her play. The actor might have a different idea of what the critic saw. How do you reconcile that? The actor might be more inclined to trust the director. What is the equivalent of the director in the teacher equation? A director is kind of co-collaborator with the actor whose authority is accepted and understood, whereas the critic who’s writing for a newspaper, there’s not that same relationship. Who is the administrator? The critic or somebody much closer to the actor’s experience, such as the director or fellow actor? I would say unfortunately sometimes the administrator’s more often cast as that critic. The one who doesn’t really understand or doesn’t really get it or misses the point.

Jason’s comment is notable in its resonance with an extended metaphor that Lortie (2002) used throughout *Schoolteacher*. Assessing teachers’ obligations to manage tasks in the classroom, Lortie wrote:

unlike the director of a play, the teachers has little ‘artistic control’ over the enterprise. Teachers cannot select or reject scripts… Nor is the classroom a stage over which the teacher can legitimately exert full authority… In addition to having fewer resources, the teacher has less control over the situation than those directing theatrical productions. (p. 166)
In both of these conceptions, the teacher is “cast” as the actor: responsible for delivering someone else’s script and vision, as well as for connecting with an audience with myriad needs, interests, and motivations, over whose composition she has no control.

This recognition of the structural and relational challenges to teachers’ autonomy may help to explain why several participants, in focus group conversations, described the importance of working with administrators who are currently teaching. Georgia said that “the line of administration is blurred a little when they are teachers because you’re a teacher-administrator” who can identify with the classroom experience. Carolyn mentioned that both of her supervisors are currently teaching, and one has returned to the classroom after several years away: “The process feels different because he feels like he’s more in it with me,” able to affirm her observations about divisional culture and the impact of schedule changes. As Bradley said, “Most of our administrators used to be teachers, too, so I think they do understand, at least partially.” In fact, all of Telfair’s supervising academic administrators have been full-time classroom teachers at Telfair or elsewhere, and more than half continue to teach in addition to their administrative roles. Notable, then, in Bradley’s statement is the phrase “used to be teachers.” An administrator who continues to teach is no longer “a teacher,” but someone who “used to be a teacher.” In light of this assessment, it would be interesting to learn from Telfair’s administrators whether they see themselves as teachers, and to what degree that self-perception inflects their approach to the work of teacher supervision.

Participants identified several obstacles that arise from administrators’ positionality, regardless of their current teaching assignment (or lack thereof). Daniel posited that administrators are “sitting up on the third floor… and they have no idea
what’s going on in the classroom… I think there is this sense that we’re on the front lines and the generals are back in London. They have no idea what’s happening on the front lines.” His image of the “third floor” evokes Hargreaves’s assessment of the impact of physical distance in the emotional geography of teaching (2001). While Hargreaves’s research focused on the physical, organizational, and cultural distance between teachers and parents, the same principles seem at play in Daniel’s description of Telfair administrators: infrequent and impersonal (i.e., not face-to-face) communication inhibits the development of partnership and emotional understanding (Hargreaves, 2001). Phillip countered: “I wonder, could the reverse be true for those on the third floor… ‘They don’t see all of the variables at play and what we’re trying to do.’” Daniel agreed:

Then the parallel then, that I might make between that relationship, administrator to teacher, is the teacher saying to a student, ‘What? You didn’t do your history homework?…’ The student is saying, ‘You just don’t get it. I mean, I got all these other things going on in my life, and quite frankly doing my history homework is not at the top of the list. You just need to take account of all these other things.’ There’s this, I think in both situations, there might be a sense on both sides of the equation that the other person doesn’t appreciate the whole picture.

Just as participants may sometimes feel unseen, and thus unappreciated, by administrators, so too can they imagine the ways in which they themselves do not fully “see” or comprehend the complex demands of a student’s life outside of their classroom relationship.

Carolyn injected an additional complication when she described a professional development experience with her department: “Our supervisor came and was just enjoying the workshop as well. Somebody mentioned, ‘Oh, I think I would enjoy this more if [the supervisor weren’t] here.’” To borrow Daniel’s metaphor, this administrator left London to join the front lines, only to be perceived as adulterating the faculty
experience—a frustrating paradox for a supervisor who wants to demonstrate empathy and engagement by minimizing the physical and professional distance between administrators and faculty (Hargreaves, 2001).

Jason captured many participants’ feelings of ambiguity and frustration around administrators’ place in the institutional hierarchy and the degree to which their position alone confers authority and influence. He said:

I think there’s still a little bit of resistance with this idea of what does this third party, if it’s an administrator, an associate head of school, department head, division director or whomever, simply by merit of their position, are they granted the authority to control one-half of the dialog? How can I trust this person? How can I trust their perceptions of me? How can I know that I’m safe as I engage in this dialog? That’s an extremely difficult and loaded situation.

Angela made a telling comment when describing her relationship with a supervisor who is known for asking helpful, reflective questions after a class observation. She said that those questions “can give the person being evaluated a little agency back, or a sense of agency back.” That final qualification of “or a sense of agency back” (emphasis added) indicates that even in the context of a supervisory relationship that seems supportive and trusting, a teacher may still feel like a subordinate, not an equal partner. This distinction between supervisor and teacher was blurrier for other participants, who characterized the hierarchy of the supervision process as being one characterized largely by peer relationships. Jason said:

Between student and teacher… the teacher ultimately is in charge, is an adult, and does have authority over the student... To some degree the administrator, or the evaluator, has similar authority but not entirely. That is a distinction because I think the teacher evaluation is more peer to peer than the teacher student relationship.
Some participants thought of their supervisors as colleagues and some others considered them managers, whereas all participants felt that a very clear line of demarcation in institutional authority and expertise existed between teachers and students.

Stephen further complicated the role of hierarchy in the supervision process by acknowledging the extent to which most supervisors of teachers are middle-managers, bound themselves by institutional structures over which they might have minimal control: “the person who is in that position is also sort of in between two sources of power of some kind. That can influence their ability, I think probably, to do a good job.” In a passing comment about professional growth, Edith referenced “chairs, and then directors, and then whatever is above that, who knows?”

An additional complicating factor in participants’ experience of hierarchy arose from situations, real or hypothetical, when the supervisor is younger or less experienced than the teacher. Given the degree to which teachers located their expertise in terms of years of experience in the classroom, that trend is not particularly surprising. Again, participants had very different perspectives on the impact of a supervisor’s age on their credibility. For Stephen, “The assessor who’s only assessed one person isn’t really going to be very good. This is a no brainer. Part of the reason I’m probably more blunt on essays now is because I’ve read so many. I’ve read thousands of essays.” Without the credibility of accumulated experience, the supervisory process feels hollow. Phillip agreed, speaking hypothetically:

I can imagine a teacher who has been doing this 15-20 years and it’s like, they’re the expert in the room. Then you get whomever on the other end of the evaluation process who maybe doesn’t have … those same credentials or that same career history or longevity and so who are they to give feedback to the expert in the room?
Stephen made a similar point: “A teacher has seen so much compared to what a student has seen, that it’s a huge, huge difference, and to have an assessor that knows that much more than assessee, I don’t even know how that could exist. It can’t.” For Stephen, this phenomenon has become increasingly frustrating as he has accrued more experience in the classroom, making it harder for him to find anyone in the institution he can look up to and learn from.

Administrators’ Self-Confidence

Just as participants reflected at length about the ways in which their own self-confidence waxes and wanes based on student and supervisory feedback, two participants—Jason and Stephen—were keenly aware of their supervisors’ self-confidence, or lack thereof, and its role in the supervision process. While the majority of reflections on this topic came from the two of them, the depth and emotion of their commentary was noteworthy.

Jason took pride in referring to his classroom as a community, one in which he had taken care to build thoughtful, reciprocal relationships with students. He expressed disdain at supervisors who might be inclined to observe the class without engaging with it: “Don’t think you’re going to sit behind your little computer and type your little notes. You’re going to be interacting with my students because you’re going to benefit and they’re going to benefit, so deal with it.” The diminutives of “little computer” and “little notes” speak to a stereotype of an administrator as a petty bureaucrat, recording the actions of the classroom without adding value to the experience for students or the teacher. They also paint a picture of a supervisor who is shielding herself with the
accoutrements of bureaucracy rather than risking the personal exposure that comes from participating in student learning. Asked to talk about the ways he thinks of the administrative role in teacher supervision, Jason offered one initial interpretation: “Administrators, in order to earn their job titles and earn their keep, they must evaluate their teachers. They have to make work for themselves and that’s what the administration has to do.” In this conception, supervision is both performative and protectionist: a process enacted for the benefit of the supervisor, not the teacher. This “us versus them” culture is magnified, according to Jason, “by what all too often gets in the way and that is agendas or defensiveness” on the part of the supervisor. Stephen used similar language: “It’s important in my communications and my assessment of [students] that I’m not defending my position as the teacher. The assessment that I receive, I want it to be real, and not about the person who’s assessing me.” Stephen’s experience with supervision, however, has been characterized largely by interactions with supervisors whom he perceives as defensive. He describes working with supervisors who are “seeking approval, needing approval” or “looking for [him] to help prop them up” in their relationships with other teachers or administrators. Consequently, he explained:

I just have the irritation of spending time on somebody, and helping somebody, and responding to them, and giving guidance. Then that person walks off, and banks more money, and makes decisions that affect my department and my job. I just lose, basically.

Stephen’s frustration exemplifies the challenge of supporting experienced teachers who have no interest in taking on traditional administrative roles but who continue to seek opportunities for professional growth and renewal.

While Jason’s and Stephen’s assessments of supervisors’ lack of confidence were
the most extreme, their observations offered context for passing comments from other participants. Georgia notably described a productive experience with a supervisor who “doesn’t feel threatened.” Angela referred to the frustration she felt at getting feedback that she perceives to be “hair-cutting,” that is, overly gentle or flattering observations instead of meaningful critique. Edith said that she sometimes can’t tell if her supervisors are “working for teachers or working for the administration because sometimes they seem like they’re apologizing for doing their jobs.” It may be noteworthy that the strongest condemnations of unconfident supervisors came from men, while women’s comments were more tempered. It is unclear whether this difference arises from gender or from the accumulation of individual experiences. Regardless of gender, participants clearly preferred to work with supervisors who have the professional confidence to offer warranted, constructive feedback without needing validation or absolution from the faculty they supervise.

Administrators’ Intentions

In reflecting on their relationships with their supervisors, most participants mentioned the frustration of not fully knowing what the expectations of the supervisory process might be. They described spending as much time speculating about what their supervisors were hoping to see or achieve as they did reflecting on their practice, a point of anxiety and irritation. Jason described times where he “didn’t necessarily agree with the focus that the administrator or department head was taking and felt like we’re having the wrong conversation or we’re looking at the wrong set of evidence.” Thinking about the concluding annual conversation, Georgia wondered: “Are you going to be blindsided or not? Did they see something you had no idea? You just don’t know.” Colleen threw
up her hands, saying: “What does an administrator want to see? I don’t know. All I can
do is just be transparent and if you don’t like what you see, then fine, but don’t string me
along.” Like Jason, Carolyn referred to supervisors who took notes on the computer
during their classroom observations. She recalled thinking, “‘Why are they taking these
notes?’ It can be tricky when you don’t know the intention of the notes and what the end
goal is for all that.” Zembylas (2003) found that teachers’ identity is “linked to the
recognition by others, therefore, if teachers are denied recognition, this may cause them
to internalize a demeaning image of themselves” (p. 223). Notably, many participants’
comments include diction related to vision or visibility: “focus,” “transparent,” “see” and
“blindsided.” It is possible that at the root of these expressions of anxiety is the fear of
not being accurately “seen” by supervisors, especially given the challenge of accurately
observing and measuring the skills behind the “art and craft” of teaching (Hargreaves,
1998; Mehta, 2013).

These comments are notable given the fact that Telfair’s system of teacher
evaluation is grounded in the Danielson Framework for Teaching, which is intended to
offer a shared language for assessing teachers’ classroom performance. The simple
presence of this rubric, however, does not obviate some participants’ belief that their
administrators may have ulterior motives in the supervision process. According to Jason,
“There can be the kind of talk that can arise out of a faculty, administrative culture, where
we don’t have that trust. We don’t have that transparency or we don’t have a co-
constructed vocabulary and common understanding.” These comments speak to the
need for Telfair to clarify and amplify the goal of its teacher supervision process, and for
supervisors to ensure that faculty have a continuous sense of their performance
throughout the process.

**Relationships with Institution**

In reflecting on their relationship with the institution, participants’ feelings were mixed. They felt frustrated at the perceived socioeconomic status difference between school employees, particularly teachers, and parents and students. They also felt connected to their colleagues and “lucky” to work at the school. Beyond Telfair, participants described a mesosystem in which they continually navigated the intersections between their personal and professional lives. In describing the complexity of identifying themselves as teachers at Telfair in interactions with members of the larger metropolitan community, they identified a set of diametrically opposed feelings: on one hand, they felt ambivalence, frustration, and occasional embarrassment at being associated with a school that is often seen as privileged and exclusive; on the other, they described feeling proud of the school and of their affiliation with it.

Focus group participants all appeared to affirm a positive sense of faculty identity within the school writ large. Perhaps leveraging his perspective as a veteran faculty member, Daniel said: “Students come and go. They spend their four years here and then they’re gone. Administrators come and go, and who stays? It’s the faculty. In that sense, I see that faculty as really being, embodying the institution.” Both focus groups affirmed the experience of having a collective faculty identity. Colleen explained:

It’s just like you know, how Aspen trees they grow underground and they’re connected?... You can be in a forest with other trees but somehow they’re all still connected in some secret way. That’s how it feels. You’re still a wonderful beautiful forest with a diverse flora and yet you’re a system. Right? You’re one living organism.

Participants did not see this identity as exclusive to one department or to faculty alone.
Instead, they positioned this interconnection as a series of relationships available to any number of faculty. Whether the institution necessarily appreciated or recognized this collective identity was less relevant to participants than the fact of its existence. This identity, while positive and affirming for the faculty who feel it, may create an insuperable barrier when it comes to the supervision process. Whereas faculty can give students feedback on their work because they are experts in that discipline, the existence of a collective identity among faculty, combined with their questions about supervisors’ evaluative legitimacy, may render them persistently skeptical of the feedback they receive along the way.

In the focus groups, multiple participants spoke specifically to their perceptions of status differences between themselves and Telfair families, and their comments received affirming nods from the members of the group. Jason described the occasional feeling of being “in the service of the one percent.” He continued, “I’m a service employee for the upper class but I don’t live in the upper class neighborhood. I live on the other side of the tracks and I’ve got my life and they don’t know anything about my life.” Ava agreed: “I feel like there are a lot of things about this community right now that really frustrate me and they have to do with privilege and respect.” Both of these comments were met with nods of recognition from other participants.

Research literature is largely silent on the experience of middle-income teachers working with upper-income students. Popular media has covered the challenge of affordable housing for public school teachers living in high-income areas, including California’s Silicon Valley and Boston’s suburbs (Mongeau, 2015; Westervelt, 2016). Telfair benefits from its location in a Midwestern metropolis with many housing options
for faculty within and beyond the city. Adjusted for cost of living, Telfair’s faculty salaries also land, on average, in the 90th percentile of independent schools across the country. The question of socioeconomic difference, then, tends to be largely existential. Edith said, “I won’t ever blame the kids, but when I see them driving to school in Range Rovers and Audis or whatever, I’m aware that in a very real way they are paying my salary.” The explicitly transactional nature of paying tuition—at any level—at independent schools has the potential to exacerbate teachers’ feelings of vulnerability vis-à-vis both students and parents. Because teachers are “working for” students and their parents in an independent school context (an overly simplistic but culturally persistent explanation), the supervisory process may feel more perilous, since teachers may feel that tuition-paying families have greater leverage with administration when it comes to offering covert opinions about faculty performance.

When participants described interactions with friends or strangers, they often expressed chagrin at being associated with a privileged, exclusive school. That is, within Telfair, they felt othered because of their lower socioeconomic status, but beyond Telfair, they had the experience of being associated with the very institutional privilege that frustrated and excluded them. Both Carolyn and Georgia, who participated in separate groups, described obfuscating their relationship with the school. Georgia said: “I always feel prepared to defend myself when somebody says, ‘Where do you work?’... I used to say in [the city].” Carolyn described using the identical obfuscatory tactic. Ava talked about explaining her affiliation with an independent school to skeptical friends by saying, “I don’t have a credential”—an excuse for not teaching at a public school. Daniel underscored these anecdotes: “Our external identity is sort of saddled with whatever the
external perception of the institution is.” When that perception of privilege is out of sync with the way teachers see themselves, their professional identity can feel dissonant with their personal values.

Notably, participants also described wanting to come to Telfair’s defense, disabusing friends and neighbors of misperceptions about the institution’s values and identity. They said that these gestures of institutional loyalty had become easier the longer they had spent at the school and the more deeply they had invested in the community, including by enrolling their own children. Phillip described being at neighborhood parties and hearing the judgment in the phrase, “Oh, you teach at Telfair.” The focus group laughed at this, and he explained, “It’s interesting to see how, especially the longer I’ve been here, the more willing I am to kind of step up and be like, ‘Not quite. You’re wrong. Here’s why.’” Colleen described a similar evolution:

I used to be embarrassed when people would ask me where I taught… I would say, ‘At Telfair, but Telfair is becoming more of a…’ and sort of combat the stereotype. I don’t feel like that anymore though because I bought into what I was saying to everybody. I teach some… incredible students and many of them are not from the one percent. It’s an institution that is much bigger than that… It breaks the stereotype.

She continued: “I feel much better about the institution as a whole than I used to and see myself as having a small role in that. I can do small.” Georgia also described herself as having “signed on” to Telfair and feeling “prepared to defend it” in ways that she had not felt previously, because “what we are teaching and how we are teaching it is very important.” Their comments were made in the context of Telfair’s contemporary commitments to equity and inclusion, both in terms of ongoing public efforts to recruit and retain students of color (a metric that Colleen mentioned specifically) and a
longstanding commitment to awarding $6.1 million in financial assistance, which is currently available to 21% of Telfair families, with a plan to increase that number to 24% by the end of the school’s current comprehensive campaign (Telfair internal document).

Participants in both focus groups identified ways in which working at Telfair allowed them to feel proud, not only of the school’s values of equity and inclusion, but also their own professional evolution. Georgia said, “I feel like I have learned so much and I felt so supported in my own growth.” Jason echoed: “I’ve been able to make a life and a career out of my work here and I’ve been afforded numerous opportunities... to grow and develop professionally and personally. I have the best professional circumstances of any high school teacher in the country.” In both focus groups, participants acknowledged the challenges they would face in public schools, from high class sizes to infringement on their curricular autonomy. Even given their ambivalence about what they saw as the school’s legacy of privilege and their frustrations with its administration and supervisory bureaucracy, they felt, on the whole, affirmed by their professional affiliation with Telfair.

Summary

The uniqueness of teachers’ professional identity complicates the effort to draw specific comparisons between the experience of teacher supervision and student assessment. “Irretrievably” emotional in nature, teaching confounds the distinction between personal and professional identities in large part because of the depth and complexity of emotion required to do the job effectively (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1056; Nias, 1996; Zembylas, 2003). To a degree, the experiences of teachers in independent schools reflect those of their public school counterparts, particularly in their self-concept.
as teachers, their relationships with supervisors, and their efforts to manage the emotions of the role. Independent schools, however, introduce different variables into the question of teacher identity, particularly in terms of teachers’ perceptions of class differences between themselves and their students.

Telfair teachers described feeling more capable of managing community conversations about the school’s privileged identity when they themselves felt invested in its mission and vision around equity and inclusion. This theme aligns with Balossi and Hernandez’s (2015) finding that the most successful independent school teachers are able to experience and articulate a “fit” with school culture, which they define as alignment with school mission and values. Telfair faculty might feel more deeply invested in a supervision system that took into account those values more explicitly—for example, one that asks for ongoing engagement with interculturally competent curriculum design and instruction. Such an adaptation would more explicitly tie the school’s mission and the student experience into the supervision process.

Ultimately, however, participants’ reflections on their intertwining personal and professional identities indicated that a school may have the most to learn about evolving a system of teacher supervision not from an examination of teachers’ assessment practices with students, but instead from gaining a fuller understanding of the ways in which teachers think about themselves as professionals, and the way they think about their relationships with administrators and with the institution as a whole.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusions and Implications

When I first envisioned this project in April 2015, I wondered whether an independent school might be able to build a better mousetrap of teacher supervision by studying the ways in which teachers assess their students. Recognizing that no teacher sets out to harm students by giving them feedback, I thought that developing a supervision process rooted in teachers’ treatment of students might have better outcomes for teachers, in terms of both professional practice and personal experience. As an administrator with feelings of considerable ambivalence about being an administrator, I brought to the study a bias that the teacher-student relationship is inherently stronger than and superior to the administrator-teacher relationship. The latter, I reasoned, would likely improve if it could only look more like the former.

Since that initial vision, my understanding of the supervision process has changed significantly, based largely on growing understanding of the research base and on my conversations with participants. Instead of looking to teachers’ relationships with students to inspire a better system, I recognized the power of looking to the experiences of teachers themselves to understand ways to evolve the system. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) argue that the voices of teachers have too long been absent in the knowledge base of teaching and learning. Indeed, in my 18 years of experience in independent schools, no one had ever sat down with me to ask expressly about my lived experience as a teacher or administrator, nor had I ever sat down with a colleague to ask about theirs. Ultimately, I found greater richness and complexity in participants’ descriptions of their
professional experiences and identities than I did in my assessment of their assessment-based interactions with students, such as syllabi and graded assignments.

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to do justice to elements of that original vision while honoring the themes and threads that emerged from the comments of participants in this study. Chapter Four most clearly reflects that vision in its exploration of the intersection between participants’ feedback to students and their preferences for supervisory feedback. The strong consonance there indicates that schools can, indeed, enhance the mechanics of the supervisory process by delivering feedback in a way that resonates with teachers’ practices of assessing students. Moreover, further exploration of the relationships between teachers and students may shed additional light on teachers’ preferred ways of navigating relationships with school administrators.

Participants’ descriptions of their professional motivation differed significantly from their perceptions of their students’ motivation, and it was in the process of unpacking those differences that I recognized the need to understand more fully the role that emotions and identity play in teachers’ professional learning and their experience of teacher supervision. Chapters Five and Six reflect a deeper exploration of these topics, largely independent of the student experience. Understanding the ways in which participants navigate their emotions and identities became essential to understanding their professional motivations and, in turn, their experience of the teacher supervision process.

Summary of Findings

At the beginning of this study, I posed three research questions that provided an initial framework for my data collection and analysis. As that process unfurled, these questions shifted away from a focused interrogation of the connection between teacher
motivation and teacher supervision to a broader exploration of teacher’s perceptions of supervision based on their relationships with students, supervisors, and the institution itself. Revisiting here the most current iteration of these questions provides a helpful heuristic for capturing the themes that emerged from my conversations with participants.

**What forces shape and mediate independent school teachers’ perceptions of the supervision process?**

Throughout the study, I came to realize the degree to which participants’ experiences of the supervision process were influenced by their own identities as teachers, as well as by their relationships with supervisors and, to some degree, with the institution as a whole.

In keeping with research on teachers’ relationships with supervisors (Hinchey, 2010; Range, 2013; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998), trust emerged as an essential component of successful supervisory relationships between teachers and administrators. According to participants, the ability to trust a supervisor helps to mitigate the vulnerability inherent in the process of giving and receiving feedback, the threats to teachers’ self-confidence, and teachers’ questions about the expertise and intentions of their supervising administrators.

Participants’ professional self-confidence was a significant factor in their perceptions of the supervision process. Participants described the complex relationship between a genuine desire to improve their practice and the feeling of emotional exposure elicited by hearing critique of that practice, even when constructively delivered. While this tension played out most often in the teacher supervision process, participants did not cite the process itself as the source of their vulnerability. Instead, they located that
feeling in the inherent challenges of admitting a supervisor into the relatively private space of their classrooms. They also described a school culture that valued risk-taking (and the concomitant possibility of failure) for students, but had not explicitly articulated similar permission for teachers to take risks and “fail” when it came to their professional practice.

Additional threats to teachers’ self-confidence arose from their perceptions of the stature of the discipline in the school, the reputation of the students who enroll in their classes, and the professional credentials and accomplishments of their colleagues. Notably, all of these factors speak to phenomena outside of teachers’ direct control, as well as to a fundamental anxiety about their own institutional relevance. An essential component of motivation is the perception of having control over one’s professional environment (Alder, 2007). Even if it is intended to support teachers’ ongoing growth and learning, a supervision process functionally opens a teacher’s practice to external scrutiny, magnifying the lack of agency and confidence that some teachers may feel. It comes as no surprise, then, that participants valued a truly dialogic supervisory process, in which they could see themselves as active and empowered participants in a discussion about their practice.

Another major influence on participants’ perceptions of the supervision process is their relationship with their administrators. While most participants described having generally positive relationships with their supervisors, they did express skepticism about their supervisors’ expertise as evaluators, as well as their capacity to invest fully in the supervisory process given the sometimes frenetic pace of their administrative roles. That pace also means that it can be difficult to cultivate the quotidian familiarity and visibility
required to form trust-based relationships (Murname & Cohen, 1986; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998). Compounding that challenge is the institutional tenure of many Telfair administrators, which is often much shorter than that of their faculty counterparts and, consequently, can make it difficult for teachers to want to invest in meaningful relationships with them.

Participants’ perceptions of the institution were also largely positive, albeit less directly connected to their experience of the supervision process. While some participants described ambivalence at working for a school with a tradition of serving children of privilege, they affirmed and embraced the school’s commitments to equity and inclusion and saw themselves supporting those aims through their teaching.

Although participants in this study did not describe an express relationship between their intrinsic motivation and the school’s mission, Balossi and Hernandez (2015) found that teachers who feel alignment with the school’s mission and values—which, at Telfair, include an express commitment to equity and inclusion—are most likely to be successful. This theme offers a valuable insight into possible evolutions to the supervisory process, which may feel more authentic and engaging to Telfair teachers if it includes more specific exploration of this aspect of the school’s mission and core values.

**What do independent school teachers describe as the intersections between student assessment and teacher supervision?**

Throughout the study, I remained conscious of the risk of patronizing participants by suggesting too close a parallel between teachers/students and supervisors/teachers. I worried that emphasizing this parallel might imply that I believed school administrators to have greater competence or a more highly evolved professional identity than teachers.
Consequently, I framed my descriptions of the study in terms of the opportunity for schools to learn from teachers’ expertise in giving feedback as a way to build better systems of teacher supervision.

Generally, participants seemed intrigued by the idea, and none expressed concern about feeling diminished because of the parallel that I suggested to student experience. Indeed, participants identified many similarities between student assessment and teacher supervision, albeit more so in their perceptions of effective feedback than in their perceptions of motivation. Colleen captured the essence of many of her colleagues’ comments when she described the interconnection of assessment and supervision:

The way you express love to your significant other, is typically the way you want to have it expressed to you… Here’s how I love my students, and that’s how I want to be loved. Here’s how I assess my students and that’s how I want to be assessed.

Colleen’s comment emphasizes the importance of relationships to both student assessment and teacher motivation. Both students and teachers are in vulnerable positions relative to the institutional hierarchy: students because they are earning grades from their teachers, and teachers because their jobs are contingent on supervisors’ assessments of their performance.

This research question contained two sub-questions about feedback and motivation, concepts that are deeply entwined. Research indicates that teachers are most likely to engage fully with the supervision process if they believe that the process complements their intrinsic motivation to grow professionally (Finnegan, 2013; Frase & Streshley, 1994). This complementarity is based on teachers’ perceptions of the quality of the feedback they receive (Finnegan, 2013).
**What do teachers name as the qualities and conditions necessary for effective feedback in both student assessment and teacher evaluation?** There was a high degree of consonance between the qualities that participants cited as useful in their work with students and those that they cited as useful in the teacher supervision process. Structurally, they spoke to the importance of transparent and simple systems of feedback, as well as to the need for a “Goldilocks” quantity of feedback—not too much, not too little—within a reasonable time frame. The qualities of effective feedback included candor, specificity, and a willingness to ask questions. From a relational standpoint, effective feedback requires reciprocity, respect, and expertise.

**What forces do teachers describe as motivating them and their students?** Compared to their comments about feedback, many more differences existed between participants’ descriptions of their own motivations and those of their students. Overall, participants saw students as largely extrinsically motivated, driven primarily by the pursuit of grades, the desire to please their parents, and their aspiration for college admissions. By contrast, participants described their motivation as arising from both extrinsic and intrinsic sources. Extrinsically, they were motivated by hearing praise of their work, and fulfilling their duties as providers for their families. Intrinsically, they cited a love of their discipline, investment in students’ learning, and an ongoing commitment to professional learning—particularly, for these mid-career teachers, the pursuit of new professional ideas, practices, and perspectives. The obstacles to this motivation came in the form of time constraints, whether within the supervision process or in the context of their professional obligations writ large, and any institutional effort to rank or codify their work in the classroom. In a departure from research connecting
feedback with intrinsic motivation, participants did not indicate that feedback from the supervision process supported their motivation for professional learning and growth.

The third research question—What are the implications of independent school teachers’ experiences of supervision for the practice of supervision?—will be addressed in the next section.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

Referencing public education in the United States, Danielson (2016) described experts’ agreement that less than six percent of teachers are practicing below standard. Given this context, she argued: “a reasonable policy would be one that aims to strengthen… educators’ practice,” which can be accomplished by “a focus on professional development, replacing the emphasis on ratings with one on learning.”

Telfair, where 99% of faculty successfully pass the school’s evaluation process, is particularly ripe for this reframing. In the context of this study, I wonder how Telfair—and independent schools like it—may be able to reframe the purpose and process of teacher supervision to privilege this ongoing learning, something that participants in this study identified as being central to their intrinsic motivation as teaching professionals. As part of that evolution, how can independent schools hold the space for reflection and dialogue about what it means to be a teacher? And how can independent schools leverage a more meaningful process of learning-focused teacher supervision to deepen teachers’ investment in their school communities?
How can we reframe teacher supervision as an opportunity for professional learning?

From its mission statement to its admissions material, Telfair espouses an express commitment to “academic excellence.” Indeed, the name of its current comprehensive campaign is “Excellence, Accelerated.” The school often receives over 100 applications for teaching or administrative positions. Its students regularly matriculate to some of the most selective colleges and universities in the United States.

All participants in this study described feeling motivated by opportunities for ongoing professional learning, and many referred to the importance of remaining a lifelong student. They described the importance of “newness” to their practice—new texts, new techniques, new ways of thinking about teaching and learning—as a way to hold at bay the potential for their work to come to feel stagnant or repetitive. Within this culture of high achievement for teachers, Telfair has the opportunity to create a system of teacher evaluation that does more than ensure proficiency in the classroom. The school does not need to “create” motivation for its teachers; that motivation already exists. Instead, Telfair—and the many independent schools like it—can reframe the teacher supervision process as one that turns the flywheel of internal motivation by identifying opportunities for ongoing professional learning within and beyond the classroom. That is, in addition to providing supervisors with a window into a teacher’s practice and creating the opportunity for teachers to hear candid, prescriptive feedback about that practice, the supervision process could also become a kind of “stay interview”: an opportunity to build trust and to identify opportunities to deepen teachers’ engagement with the school.
This commitment to supporting professional learning could also be leveraged as a powerful faculty recruitment tool. Teachers of color cite professional development opportunities as one of the most compelling qualities of an independent school (Brosnan, n.d.). Given Telfair’s commitment to expanding the racial and ethnic diversity of its faculty and administrators, a well-developed professional learning program could be an asset for the school’s hiring and retention efforts.

**How can we hold the space for reflection and dialogue about what it means to be a teacher?**

During the course of one focus group conversation, participants referenced their personal journeys with mental health, the elementary school origins of their desire to teach, and deep-seated fears about long-term job security in their academic discipline. On the way out, Jason said, “I feel inspired,” eliciting affirming nods from other participants. Lortie (2002) exhorts schools to “reduce the mutual isolation of teachers and the resulting loss of valuable knowledge” by bringing teachers together to share not only professional practice, but also personal experience (p. xi). Telfair’s current system of teacher supervision leans heavily on the model of clinical supervision championed by Goldhammer (1969) and Hunter (1980). Reflective supervision holds the space for teachers not only to explore and evolve their classroom practice, but also to develop their understanding of the moral and ethical dilemmas of teaching, as well as their own beliefs and values (Chamberlain, 2000). Autobiographical reflection can help teachers manage feelings of vulnerability by allowing teachers to engage intentionally with one another and to explore their experiences and influences from multiple perspectives (Lortie, 2002; Zembylas, 2003).
As we think about expanding opportunities for professional learning, independent schools may want to consider creating time and space for this kind of first-person, narrative reflection. Might this meaning-making help to mitigate teachers’ feelings of vulnerability by allowing them the agency of narrating their own experiences within and beyond the classroom? While mindfulness practice, health coaching, and other wellness initiatives are increasingly common resources for teachers, the opportunity to reflect intentionally on their own stories may allow them “to regain the social recognition of their professional self and restore the conditions that ensure their good job performance” (Zembylas, 2003, p. 231).

**How can we frame the supervision process as a way to support teachers’ long-term investment in the school?**

During our focus group conversations, participants shared about the evolution of their feelings of affiliation with Telfair. Earlier in their tenure at the school, they had felt a greater degree of chagrin at being associated with its history of privilege and elitism. The longer they stayed, the more they felt capable and desirous of wanting to defend the school by talking about its commitments to equity and inclusion, particularly in its visible commitment to GLBTQIA+ support and advocacy, its expansion of tuition assistance, and its commitment to recruiting and retaining students and employees of color. Two participants talked about the way in which enrolling their own young children at Telfair allowed them to see these commitments first-hand and amplified their desire to “talk up” the school in conversation with friends, neighbors, and community members. This alignment between personal and institutional goals and values is a hallmark of intrinsic motivation (Thoonen et al., 2011).
In their qualitative study of independent school teacher quality, Balossi and Hernandez (2015) cite “fit” with school culture as a marker of teacher success. They define “fit” as “teachers’ philosophical alignment with the school’s mission, vision, religious affiliation, or other cultural foundations” (p. 31). Within the context of this study, the longer that participants remained at Telfair—and the more embedded their own families became in the school community because of their children’s enrollment—the more deeply they felt invested in the school’s mission and vision. Lortie underscores this point, writing: “Teacher rewards are, in general, aligned with school objectives—their core psychic rewards come from feeling that their teacher efforts are successful” (p. x).

Increasingly, schools are weighing the perk of employee tuition remission against its financial costs. Since 2010, 200 independent schools have eliminated employee tuition remission, with 887 out of 1564 schools offering remission for the 2016-17 school year (NAIS, 2017). Telfair awards approximately $760k annually in tuition remission for employees—approximately 11% of its financial assistance budget. As benefits like this one become more difficult to sustain, independent schools might do well to consider the possibilities afforded by their supervision programs to enhance professional learning and, in turn, deepen teachers’ long-term commitment to the institution.

**How can we address the dearth of research on independent schools?**

A key challenge in developing a research-based conceptual framework for this study was the absence of peer-reviewed and published research on independent schools. Gulla and Jorgenson (2014) noted the absence of such research in the sector, which they attribute to a variety of factors unique to independent school culture:
There is a fundamentally sacred (though nonsectarian) partnership between parents and schools and, try as we might, not all parents want for their children what the schools want for their students. Teachers rarely agree universally about what is most important, and neither do trustees. In this context, the pursuit of quantifying outcomes tends to ascribe value to those measures that we believe can narrow and distort a school’s or board’s priorities and impair the effectiveness of its staff. (p. 34)

While independent schools may have begun to embrace rigorous systems of teacher evaluation more fully as a result of the topic’s prominence in the national discourse around public school education, by and large they remain loath to engage in research-based quantification of teaching practices.

Notably, however, the findings in this study about feedback practices and preferences, professional motivation, and professional identity align with existing research conducted in other institutional contexts, including public schools. While each school’s culture is deeply unique, shaped not only by its particular history but also by the identities and practices of its constituents (Deal & Peterson, 2016), this study points to a high degree of generalizability from research findings about feedback, motivation, and teacher identity in public schools. While it remains important for independent schools to engage in the rigorous research practices that will help to evolve their practices and demonstrate the distinguishing value of their programs to prospective and current parents, research about public schools may provide a useful starting point for the independent sector.

**Ongoing Questions and Future Research**

The findings in this study raise a number of questions and opportunities for future research. While the data provide insights into the research questions, they contain
noteworthy lacunae and point to a number of additional areas for further research around the professional learning of independent school teachers.

The highly particular culture and history at Telfair around the teacher supervision process—most notably, the school’s history of tiered performance recognition—may color these findings in a way that keep them from being fully generalizable. Given that independent schools are much more likely to have systems of teacher supervision and evaluation that are younger and less well-developed than those of public schools, it would be worthwhile for the sector to explore future research opportunities across multiple sites that address the intersections among teacher supervision, student assessment, motivation, and feedback.

Similarly, the demographics of participants in this study are limited. All participants were Upper School teachers, all had taught for at least eleven years, and 13 of 15 had taught at Telfair for at least six years. Thus, these findings may not be representative of Telfair teachers writ large. The feedback preferences of newer teachers differ from those of veteran teachers (Hinchey, 2010; Range, 2013; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998), which may result in greater dissonance than is reflected in this study between their practices of student assessment and their preferences for supervisory feedback. This limitation could be explored more fully with future research. Moreover, the differences around student assessment in elementary and middle independent school contexts, where the transactional stakes are lower than in upper school, might influence teachers’ perceptions and preferences for assessment and supervision in a way not reflected by this study.
The participants in this study also represent a particularly successful group of teachers. Nine participants were eligible for performance recognition payments. Although I did not specifically ask those participants to reveal their final tier assignment, five of them mentioned, whether explicitly or elliptically, that they had received the highest designation: Tier 3. Two others indicated that they had received Tier 2. From 2012-2015, 31% of eligible teachers at Telfair received Tier 3 recognition; at minimum, the rate for study participants was 55%. Consequently, these findings may not reflect the experiences of teachers who are struggling in their practice, regardless of years of experience. Recognizing that overly complex systems of supervision risk frustrating and demotivating teachers (Finnegan, 2013; Schumacher, 2010; Snow-Gerono, 2008), an ideal system of teacher supervision will serve both struggling and successful teachers—and everyone in-between.

This study is limited to the perception and experience of the teachers who participated. As independent schools seek to evolve their systems of teacher supervision, they would do well to investigate students’ and administrators’ experience giving and receiving feedback. The perceptions of administrators may be particularly salient because it is they who are required to embody and enact the systems of teacher supervision in their schools. The success of a given policy relies on the willingness of “street-level bureaucrats” to enact it (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016; Lipsky, 1980). Thus, administrators’ perceptions of the purpose and efficacy of a supervision and evaluation system are as relevant to its success as teachers’ attitudes. Given that so many participant comments were colored by their perceptions of administrators’ motivations, competence, and confidence, exploration of administrators’ self-perceptions, as well as their
assessments of relationships with faculty, would be a particularly rich source of corollary data.

Concluding Thoughts

When I envisioned this study, I hoped that its findings might point the way to a better mousetrap of teacher supervision in independent schools. That desire sprang from my own experiences navigating a supervision process at Telfair that had at times felt fraught with suspicion, derision, and mistrust. My hypothesis about the potential connection of teacher supervision to the process of assessing students arose from my belief that Telfair’s teachers are, by and large, empathetic and adroit classroom practitioners, whose expertise in giving feedback could elevate the work of their supervisors. The prospect of returning to Telfair at the completion of the study with a clear plan for evolution and improvement was tantalizing.

The reality of my findings, of course, was much messier. It was exciting to see the consonance between participants’ feedback to students and their preferences for receiving feedback from their supervisors. Those parallels point to an opportunity for Telfair to clarify a set of best practices for feedback, at least certainly as they apply to Upper School students, teachers, and supervisors.

Understanding the qualities and conditions for feedback, however, stops well short of acknowledging the nuance and complexity of teacher’s professional motivations and identities. Time and again, conversations about systems, structures, and practices gave way to conversations about relationships. Relationships lie at the heart of this study: relationships between and among students, teachers, administrators, and, in a way, the institution itself. These players and their interrelationships are continually informing
and influencing each other, creating and recreating the culture at Telfair. Teaching and learning are highly personal, highly vulnerable acts that require the trust of all participants in order to be successful. In the end, I may be able to suggest modest evolutions to Telfair’s current system of supervision and evaluation. What is most powerful for me as a person and as a professional, however, is the call to continue deepening the relationships I have with my colleagues and with our students, recognizing that it is the humanity of our school that has the capacity to make our work and our community truly excellent.
APPENDIX A: Participant Interview Dates

Angela
- Interview 06/22/16
- Interview 07/13/16

Ava
- Interview 06/21/16
- Focus group 02/15/17

Bradley
- Interview 07/02/16

Bill
- Interview 07/01/16

Carolyn
- Interview 07/05/16
- Focus group 02/15/17

Colleen
- Interview 07/11/16
- Focus group 02/15/17

Daniel
- Interview 06/13/17
- Focus group 02/15/17

Diane
- Interview 07/12/16
- Focus group 02/15/17

Edith
- Interview 07/31/16
- Member check 02/13/17

Georgia
- Interview 07/08/16
- Interview 07/12/16
- Focus Group 02/15/17

Jason
- Interview 07/06/16
- Focus group 02/15/17

Jerry
- Interview 06/13/16
- Interview 06/15/16
- Member check

Phillip
- Interview 07/14/16
- Focus group 02/15/17

Sam
- Interview 06/21/16

Stephen
- Interview 11/23/17
APPENDIX B: Individual Interview Protocols

Interview 1

What are the ways in which you think about assessment of student work?

From your perspective, what are the essential ingredients for a successful system of assessing students?

What are the barriers to a successful system for assessing students?

How would you describe the difference between assigning grades and giving feedback?

In what ways has your approach to assessing student work changed during your teaching career? Why have those changes taken place?

In your opinion, what qualities make feedback most useful for students?

Would you describe two or three times when you and a student disagreed significantly about a grade you assigned or feedback you gave?

Would you describe two or three times when you saw your feedback help a student grow in her skills in your class?

In your opinion, what are the factors that motivate students’ academic performance at Telfair?

Interview 2

What are the ways in which you think about the teacher evaluation process?

From your perspective, what are the essential ingredients to an effective teacher evaluation process?

From your perspective, what are the barriers to a successful teacher evaluation process?
How would you describe the difference between coaching teachers and evaluating teachers?

Currently, what kind of teaching feedback is most useful to you?

Thinking back to your most recent year of formal evaluation, would you describe the experience of it?

Please describe two or three times when feedback from an evaluator helped you to reflect on or to improve some aspect of your teaching practice.

Please describe two or three times when feedback from an evaluator felt harmful or counterproductive.

What factors motivate you in evolving or reflecting on your practice?

What are the similarities and differences between evaluating teachers and assessing students? Please share two or three examples.

What do you think should be the main purposes of teacher evaluation?

Based on your experience assessing students, what advice would you give for improving the current teacher evaluation system at Telfair?
APPENDIX C: Focus Group and Member Check Protocols

What experiences confer legitimacy on you as an expert in your discipline?

As a faculty member how do you establish legitimacy with students, colleagues, parents and administrators?

One participant said, “Most teachers are people pleasers.” In what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Some participants talked about feeling threats to their confidence based on the stature of their discipline in the school, the reputation of the students who enroll in their classes, and the accomplishments of their colleagues. Do these feelings resonate with you? Why? If they don’t, why not?

Several participants talked about the need to feel praise or affirmation in order to maintain confidence in their practice. Does this resonate with you?

One participant said, “There’s a “weird teacher solidarity, [where] nobody else gets in the club.”

What does it mean to you to identify as a teacher at Telfair?

What differentiates teachers from administrators?

How would you describe the relationship between teachers and institution at Telfair?
References


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