

Assessing Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS): Fine Arts Educators' Views on the System's Effectiveness

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Abstract

Fine arts educator perspectives on the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) were examined through this action research study. As part of a larger action research project, the study presents findings from eight semi-structured interview questions focused on the system's effectiveness, particularly its validity and alignment with expected performance goals when used to assess fine arts educators. Results suggest that although T-TESS provides a widely accepted rubric that promotes accountability and allows educators to ensure they are employing best teaching practices, the tool's inability to capture the unique aspects of fine arts instruction makes it difficult for T-TESS to be used to provide fine arts educators with meaningful and applicable feedback. Participants noted that, while T-TESS may not have been originally designed with fine arts educators in mind, skilled evaluators can still use it to promote professional growth and accountability within this field. The authors conclude that offering evaluators opportunities to deepen their understanding of the fine arts, as well as enhancing communication between fine arts educators and their evaluators, would enable evaluators to deliver more relevant, meaningful feedback to fine arts teachers.

Keywords: teacher, evaluation, fine arts, T-TESS, educator, effectiveness

1. Introduction

Although the practice of evaluating teachers dates back to colonial America (Jewell, 2017), many states continue to revise and implement new evaluation systems aimed at promoting teachers' ongoing professional growth (Fresko & Levy-Feldman, 2023). In Texas, for instance, the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) was piloted during the 2014–2015 school year and, beginning in 2016–2017, all Texas schools were required to use T-TESS or an appropriately aligned model for teacher evaluations (Paufler, King, & Zhu, 2020; TEA, 2022a; TEA, 2022b). Despite its relatively recent adoption, the system remains imperfect, and fine arts educators frequently report experiencing disadvantages throughout the T-TESS evaluation process.

Fine arts teachers are often evaluated by administrators who have limited knowledge of the best practices associated with creative and highly subjective content areas such as the fine arts (Fresko & Levy-Feldman, 2023; Lin, 2013; Tutt, 2018). This is problematic given the widely recognized need for evaluators to possess a solid understanding of the content they are assessing (Tutt, 2018). Evaluators who are familiar with a given discipline can offer more relevant feedback and more effectively support a teacher's professional growth because their observations are grounded in an informed perspective (Eisner & Day, 2004). Traditional evaluation methods also lack the scope necessary to accurately capture the full extent of fine arts teachers' work, often leading evaluators to rely on personal judgment, which may unintentionally distort evaluation outcomes (Yang, 2023).

Research highlighting these shortcomings underscores the need to reexamine how public-school leaders understand the effects that evaluation systems like T-TESS have on fine arts educators (Gates, Hansen, & Tuttle, 2015; Lin, 2013; Potter, 2021; Tutt, 2018). Although several studies have explored administrator perspectives on T-TESS from a broad, system-level viewpoint (Krimbill, Goess, & Escobedo, 2019; Paufler et al., 2020), far less attention has been given to how the system is perceived by, and impacts, those working specifically within fine arts education. This gap in the literature signaled a clear opportunity for further investigation.

To address this gap, the present action research examined evaluator perceptions of the effectiveness and impact of T-TESS when used to assess fine arts educators. The study investigated the perceived strengths and limitations of T-TESS in this context, emphasizing how the system, in its current form, may be applied to deliver accurate and

meaningful evaluations of fine arts teachers.

It was anticipated that this study would aid in the establishment of more genuine fine arts instruction in the public-school sector (Potter, 2021) and reduce biases shown to fine arts teachers (Close & Amrein-Beardsley, 2018). The results of this study are anticipated to provide teachers in other school districts, evaluators, and arts advocates with new insights into the evaluation process. The researchers hoped these insights might inspire new initiatives to increase the effectiveness of public school teacher evaluations in the fine arts. Finally, this study has the potential to spark new dialogue around evaluation practices in the fine arts, which may serve to drive future educational practice forward in a positive manner.

2. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this action research was to establish an initial set of fine arts educator perspectives regarding the effectiveness of T-TESS in terms of how well the tool achieves validity and alignment with expected performance goals in the evaluation of fine arts educators. An emphasis was placed on understanding the degree to which performance evaluation rankings were perceived as fair and could be supported by underlying reasoning. The investigation centered on two research questions:

- How do public-school fine arts educators perceive the effectiveness of T-TESS in evaluating fine arts educators?
- How do public-school fine arts educators perceive the impact of T-TESS in evaluating fine arts educators?

3. Body of Research

A number of themes helped ground this study, including the benefits of teacher evaluations, notable issues with teacher evaluations, complications faced specifically by fine arts educators, and Elliot Eisner's theories of connoisseurship and criticism.

3.1 Benefits of Teacher Evaluations

Teacher evaluations generally aim to serve two functions: accountability and performance improvement. Evaluations can be used for summative purposes, allowing school leaders to demonstrate accountability through decisions made surrounding teachers' future employment and salary; teacher evaluations can also be formative in nature, leading to identification of areas of improvement for educators (Stronge & Tucker, 2023). When used for summative purposes, teacher evaluations can also provide stakeholders beyond the school building (such as state officials and parents) with a means to ensure teachers are being held to high standards and are performing to expectations (Jewell, 2017). In the formative sense, evaluations are typically intended to promote professionalism and continued growth among teachers, while simultaneously facilitating the increased learning and wellbeing of students (Fresko & Levy-Feldman, 2023). Indeed, efforts like Race to the Top were implemented with the thought that teachers were the single most important school-based factor in predicting student success, highlighting the need to ensure the continued professional growth of teachers (Gitomer & Marshall, 2023). Teacher evaluations may also be leveraged to allow educators to feel a greater sense of self-efficacy; as Garet et al. (2020) indicated, schools in which principals encouraged teachers to play a more active role in their own evaluations were shown to have more success with the overall implementation of an evaluation process.

3.2 Issues with Teacher Evaluations

Many factors complicate the landscape of teacher evaluation. For instance, the use of value-added measures (VAMs) has been widely contested, as numerous influences beyond a teacher's control can affect a student's performance on ostensibly objective indicators such as standardized assessments (Close & Amrein-Beardsley, 2018). Although some scholars contend that VAMs can reliably predict student achievement (Tutt, 2018), a substantial body of research demonstrates that these metrics frequently benefit teachers of higher-achieving students and that VAM scores in one subject area may inadvertently distort instructional quality in others (Gitomer & Marshall, 2023). Further compounding these concerns, VAM estimates have been shown to be inaccurate approximately 25% of the time, suggesting that one in four teachers may receive ratings that are significantly misaligned with their actual performance. Despite these limitations, many states continue to employ VAMs in various capacities (Gitomer & Marshall, 2023; Paufler, 2018). Notably, as recently as 2020, twelve states encouraged public schools to base termination decisions largely on VAM-related data (Geiger, Amrein-Beardsley, & Holloway, 2020).

Teacher evaluations are further undermined by scoring inconsistencies, evaluator biases, and strategic manipulation of the evaluation process (Close & Amrein-Beardsley, 2018). Gitomer and Marshall (2023) report that Black teachers are disproportionately likely to receive lower evaluation ratings than their White counterparts, and that teachers working with students who experience greater academic difficulties tend to receive lower observational scores. Moreover,

evaluators often inflate ratings for teachers with whom they have positive relationships or whom they wish to shield as a means of offsetting low test-based measures, preserving teacher morale, or avoiding challenging conversations about inadequate performance (Close & Amrein-Beardsley, 2018; Jones, Bergin, & Murphy, 2022).

A lack of transparency further undermines the integrity of teacher evaluation systems. Because substantial discretion in designing and implementing evaluation procedures is delegated to individual states (Paufler, 2018), and because districts such as Houston ISD spend significant resources—upward of \$680,000 annually—on student growth measures (Close & Amrein-Beardsley, 2018), many states remain hesitant to disclose detailed information about their evaluation models. This opacity, however, has detrimental consequences for educators. Teachers have reported receiving minimal, if any, guidance regarding how their scores are generated or how they might refine their instructional practices based on evaluation results (Geiger et al., 2020).

Finally, teacher evaluations are frequently compromised by issues related to the evaluators themselves. Principals often differ in their underlying purposes for conducting evaluations: some view the process primarily as a bureaucratic requirement, whereas others approach it as an opportunity to provide pedagogical support to their faculty. Moreover, insufficient training on evaluation protocols can hinder evaluators' ability to offer substantive, actionable feedback (Fresko & Levy-Feldman, 2023). Even when formal training is provided, its impact appears limited, with many evaluators drawing heavily on their own prior experiences to construct personal conceptions of effective teaching throughout the evaluation process Reid (2018).

3.3 Exacerbated Issues with Fine Arts Educator Evaluations

Fine arts educators frequently encounter evaluation challenges that extend beyond those experienced by teachers in more traditional academic disciplines. These challenges include concerns regarding evaluator preparedness, as well as the effects of heightened attention to standardized testing and core subject areas.

A central issue in the evaluation of fine arts teaching is the common reliance on evaluators who possess limited or no background in the arts. Such evaluators are nevertheless expected to assess the effectiveness of fine arts teachers, even though they may lack a clear understanding of what constitutes best practice within specific fine arts classrooms (Tutt, 2018). Because many fine arts domains cannot be readily assessed through quantifiable metrics, individuals without substantive arts expertise often struggle to evaluate teacher performance with consistency or accuracy (Lin, 2013; Tutt, 2018; Yang, 2023).

Temporal constraints further limit evaluators' capacity to conduct high-quality assessments of fine arts teachers. Evaluators themselves acknowledge that insufficient time often prevents them from carrying out evaluations with the level of care required, ultimately diminishing the perceived usefulness of the process (Jones et al., 2022).

In addition, evaluators frequently encounter difficulties in applying and justifying their judgments consistently. One study found that principals initially identified 19% of teachers as performing below proficiency, but this percentage decreased to only 6% when they were asked to provide more detailed and substantiated ratings (Jones et al., 2022). Taken together, these findings suggest that insufficient time and inadequate content-specific knowledge place evaluators at a significant disadvantage when tasked with assessing fine arts teacher performance.

High-stakes evaluation systems and the growing prominence of standardized testing—both within the fine arts and across other subject areas—also exert detrimental effects on the evaluation of fine arts educators. In some districts, evaluators and administrators expect to see evidence of writing or mathematics instruction in every classroom, including fine arts settings. Such expectations can compel fine arts teachers to incorporate writing or math tasks that disrupt the natural flow of artistic instruction, even when appropriate classroom infrastructure for such activities is lacking (for example, when students must write on the floor or on music stands rather than desks) (Gates et al., 2015).

Moreover, even in the absence of explicit directives from evaluators, some arts educators report feeling pressured to engage in “fake teaching” to align their instructional practices with what they believe evaluators expect, rather than providing authentic fine arts instruction (Potter, 2021). Compounding this issue, many fine arts teachers—aware of the marginal status of their subjects in some districts and the heightened emphasis placed on “core” academic areas—feel compelled to justify their instruction primarily in terms of its value for reinforcing other subjects. This dynamic not only shapes teacher behavior but may also inadvertently encourage evaluators and school leaders to view fine arts education as secondary or instrumental rather than as a discipline worthy of serious, independent consideration (Kimmelberg, Adelman, Thompkins, & Rabbi, 2019).

3.4 Eisner's Connoisseurship and Criticism

Of course, identifying the challenges inherent in evaluating arts educators is insufficient on its own; it is also necessary to consider alternative approaches that could enhance performance evaluation systems, such as those informed by Eisner's concepts of connoisseurship and criticism. An effective evaluation framework presupposes a substantive

understanding of the subject matter under review (Eisner & Day, 2004). Consequently, evaluators and educators must possess a comprehensive knowledge of the fine arts and their associated best practices in order to produce evaluations that more accurately reflect the quality of fine arts instruction (Anderson, 2023).

Eisner argued that meaningful criticism requires the evaluator to function as a connoisseur—an individual with a heightened understanding and appreciation of the phenomena being observed (Eisner, 2003). Although evaluation instruments outline specific criteria and best practices to promote consistency across evaluators (Steinberg & Kraft, 2017), the ways in which best practices manifest in fine arts classrooms often differ substantially from those in more traditional academic subjects such as mathematics or science. As a result, evaluators who lack connoisseurship in the arts may struggle to conduct thorough and accurate assessments of fine arts educators (Tutt, 2018).

Accordingly, it is reasonable to conclude that evaluators without extensive arts backgrounds would benefit from adopting the mindset of a connoisseur when assessing fine arts instruction. Eisner's framework supports this notion by positing that evaluators must cultivate an informed understanding and appreciation of the content area being assessed if they are to provide feedback that is both meaningful and accurate. Viewing an educator's performance from the standpoint of someone who has developed such informed appreciation—rather than relying heavily on value-added measures that may fail to capture the nuances of fine arts instruction—could lead to more transparent, intentional, and valid appraisals of fine arts teaching.

Thus, although T-TESS does not inherently require evaluators to possess fine arts connoisseurship, its effectiveness could be enhanced if evaluators were equipped with the requisite disciplinary knowledge to more reliably assess fine arts educators' performance. This recommendation aligns with broader calls for evaluation systems to recognize educators as experts within their content areas (Garet et al., 2020; Willey, 2019) and for evaluators to hold stronger subject-matter expertise in the disciplines they are tasked with assessing (Tutt, 2018).

4. Methodology and Design

This study employed a qualitative methodology, enabling the researchers to capture diverse perspectives and represent participants' experiences with accuracy and depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A central aim was not only to familiarize stakeholders with prevailing perceptions of T-TESS as it is applied in fine arts evaluations, but also to use these perceptions to illuminate potential avenues for improving the evaluation process for fine arts educators in Texas. Given this objective, an action research design was an appropriate choice, as action research emphasizes the examination and enhancement of existing practices within a specific professional context (Given, 2008).

Approval from the author-affiliated university's IRB was obtained prior to the start of this study (university IRB number IRB-FY24-25-127). This study utilized both questionnaires and semi-structured, open-ended interview protocols. The questionnaire, composed of five items, was designed to elicit participants' initial impressions of their experiences with T-TESS and was administered online through Qualtrics. Participants received access to the questionnaire via an emailed link, and the researchers sent follow-up reminders as needed to ensure completion. These initial impressions were then examined in greater depth during individual Zoom interviews. An informed consent letter preceded the five-item questionnaire; the informed consent was also reviewed at the start of each interview, and participants were given the chance to ask questions or stop the interview at any time. Once a participant's completed questionnaire was received, a one-on-one Zoom interview was scheduled. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length, and all were conducted within two weeks of the participant's questionnaire submission. Consistent with recommendations by Roberts (2020), probes and follow-up questions were incorporated as appropriate to deepen the discussion. All interviews were recorded using Zoom and subsequently transcribed in NVivo.

To enhance the study's credibility, the researchers implemented member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018) by returning each participant's interview transcript within three days of the interview. Participants were asked to review the transcript and verify that it accurately reflected their perspectives. The researchers also maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection to support ongoing self-reflection and to monitor potential researcher biases. All electronic materials—including interview recordings, transcripts, and questionnaire data—were securely stored on the lead researcher's password-protected computer.

Data were collected from ten fine arts educators employed in urban and suburban Texas school districts that use T-TESS. All participants met inclusion criteria requiring at least one year of experience in their current roles, fluency in English, strong attendance and professional standing, and prior experience with the T-TESS evaluation system. These criteria ensured the study remained focused on the fine arts educators directly affected by T-TESS. Table 1 presents demographic information for the participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Data

Participant	Gender	Age	Position Held	Grade Level	Years in Public Education
Teacher 1 (T1)	Male	52	Visual Arts Teacher	High	26
Teacher 2 (T2)	Female	72	Piano/Music Teacher	Theory High	51
Teacher 3 (T3)	Male	47	Piano/Music Teacher	Theory High	5
Teacher 4 (T4)	Male	52	Instrument Teacher	Repair High	10
Teacher 5 (T5)	Male	36	Theatre Teacher	High	10
Teacher 6 (T6)	Male	48	Choir Teacher	Junior high	11
Teacher 7 (T7)	Female	49	Dance Teacher	Elementary	22
Teacher 8 (T8)	Female	47	Dance Teacher	High	8
Teacher 9 (T9)	Female	32	Orchestra Teacher	Elementary	10
Teacher 10 (T10)	Male	31	Dance Teacher	High	4

5. Data Coding and Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted after all interviews had been transcribed and verified through member checking. The researchers followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. Following an initial period of familiarization and note-taking, coding commenced. NVivo was used to support inductive coding, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories (Willgens et al., 2016). The researchers employed description-focused coding, identifying and extracting relevant statements, interpreting each data segment carefully, and assigning clear labels to facilitate later retrieval.

Coded data were subsequently organized into clusters of related content, enabling the researchers to identify overarching themes within each cluster (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Demystifying Research Methodologies, n.d.). This approach was expected to yield a nuanced and accurate representation of the dataset. A visual thematic map was also developed to support the consolidation and refinement of emerging themes for the broader action research. Themes were then reviewed to ensure that the interpretations represented a comprehensive and faithful account of the data. Finally, a narrative was constructed to analyze each theme and present the findings. Throughout both data collection and analysis, participants were assigned alphanumeric identifiers, and these identifiers were used in all documentation to maintain participant anonymity.

6. Results

Although this study is situated within a broader action research project, the findings presented here are based solely on participant responses to eight semi-structured interview questions, which constitute just one segment of the larger semi-structured interview guide and overall investigation.

This study analyzed the perceptions of public-school fine arts educators concerning the perceived impact and effectiveness of T-TESS in terms of validity (which was operationally defined as the extent to which performance evaluation rankings were perceived as fair and were supported by underlying reasoning) and alignment with expected performance goals. Analysis and coding of the data revealed three themes related to the effectiveness of T-TESS, and three themes related to the impact of T-TESS. These themes are outlined in Table 2 and are explored in detail in the following sections.

Table 2. Themes Pertaining to the Research Questions

Research Question	Themes
RQ1. How do public-school fine arts educators perceive the effectiveness of T-TESS in evaluating fine arts educators?	1. T-TESS is effective in helping teachers ensure they are utilizing best practices in their teaching. 2. T-TESS does not provide an accurate or fair assessment of a fine art educator's teaching. 3. T-TESS does not provide adequate feedback for fine arts educators.
RQ2. How do public-school fine arts educators perceive the impact of T-TESS in evaluating fine arts educators?	4. T-TESS has little impact on the teaching practices one employs. 5. T-TESS is a source of frustration for some fine arts educators. 6. T-TESS can help facilitate growth and accountability.

6.1 Self-Check for Best Practices

Seven of the ten teachers who participated in this study noted the clear design of T-TESS allows them to ensure they are incorporating teaching strategies needed to meet desired performance goals. Teacher 7 noted, "I did often refer back to the rubric to make sure that I was demonstrating effective teaching strategies according to T-TESS standards." Similarly, Teacher 10 stated,

There is a side of it where I can see how I am almost evaluating myself and it's forcing me to think about my teaching... The ultimate goal is to make sure... that I am feeling confident in what I'm doing.

Teacher 3 indicated T-TESS can help newer teachers gain a sense of clarity and confidence in their teaching. They said, "I actually had [the rubric] posted on my wall, and I did have it near my desk and I would refer to it every once in a while." Of T-TESS, Teacher 5 remarked, "It's a good check-in point to make sure that I'm still incorporating everything that I'm supposed to do that was set by the requirements of the beginning of the school year." Several teachers explained that, in addition to using T-TESS to hold themselves personally accountable, the T-TESS rubrics allow them to ensure they are also complying with evaluator expectations. Teacher 9 noted, "Sometimes I will look at the rubric to align SLO goals, DOLs, success criteria, and learning objectives, but this is only for personal use so I can ensure I am 'checking all the boxes' that administration would want to see." Teacher 5 stated, "T-TESS lets me prepare and helps me kind of get in the mindset of an [evaluator]. What are they looking for? What do I not want to get in trouble for?"

6.2 Inaccurate Assessment Tool

All ten fine arts educators felt T-TESS is not an effective tool when it comes to providing a fair performance evaluation, largely due to either T-TESS not being crafted with the fine arts in mind, or due to evaluators not having a strong grasp on the fine arts. Teacher 2 said,

People throughout the district have been getting dinged on their observations because the administrator doesn't know what to expect... It's just not an accurate judge of your teaching abilities. I know it's not. The teacher knows when they're coming in for the most part. They're on their best behavior and... the kids know that a teacher is being evaluated also and they act differently as well.

Teacher 1 reiterated, "The kids know that a teacher is being evaluated also and they act differently as well. Whether they like you or not." Teacher 4 stated, "I think they're trying to en masse just say 'this is what the teacher needs to be,' but doesn't always take into consideration what the subject matter is." Teacher 8 noted the specificity of words used in the T-TESS rubric: "There were times when I can't do 'all,' but I can do 'many'... I don't know that arts people are getting full credit on the T-TESS in general... because the arts are so subjective." Teacher 5 said,

Theater only has one page of state standards compared to some of the other subjects that have 25 to 30 [pages]. So for an AP or principal to hold my state standards to the same as another teacher—it's just unreasonable and not really going to help.

Teacher 6 shared that evaluators "don't know what it looks like—formative assessment. If all the kids sing 'Happy birthday,' you're formally assessing every single kid. You notice if the notes they're singing are wrong, whereas [evaluators] don't recognize if that's what you're doing." Teacher 9 commented

I think [T-TESS] impacts fine arts teachers in a negative way because we are seen through the same exact scope as core content teachers. There are a lot of differences in how fine arts teachers plan and teach compared to core teachers... Most fine arts teachers have to basically develop their own curriculum and their own lesson plans... We are teaching students physical skills, mental skills, SEL skills all at once. That doesn't happen in

say, a math class. We have to adjust, scaffold, reteach, rehearse and practice those skills not only with individual students but sometimes (in the case of all fine arts except for visual arts) with entire groups. Our students' learning just happens in a different way and at a different pace than in a math classroom.

6.3 Inadequate Feedback

Six of the teachers who participated in this study disclosed T-TESS does not facilitate the provision of meaningful feedback for fine arts educators. Teacher 4 noted, "T-TESS at [my previous school] was a joke. I did not get any kind of feedback or guidance or anything like that, so those were really tough years." Teacher 7 stated

I would have somebody walk in my classroom and spend like five minutes and walk out, and follow-up interviews with the administrators were five or ten minutes long, and sometimes they didn't even talk about what they saw in my classroom.

Teacher 8 commented, "nobody's teaching you how to teach dance," when asked if they received helpful feedback from their yearly evaluations. Teacher 5 remarked, "I've had a few evaluators in different places that've only come in for a few minutes and then were able to give me a full evaluation. And I didn't think that was very helpful." Teacher 6 recalled an evaluator said, "I'm starting you out low [on the rubric] so that we can finish high. The purpose of this is to show growth," in lieu of giving evaluative feedback. Teacher 10 said,

As far as them doing feedback back to you—I don't think it helps me because sometimes you're going to see something written down that you're going to be like, 'okay, that had nothing to do with what you should've been looking at.'

6.4 Impact on Teaching Practices

All ten of the teacher participants felt the T-TESS rubric and associated documents have little to no impact on their teaching practices or lesson plans. Teacher 8 noted that fine arts educators "refer to T-TESS because we know it, but I think that our work goes far beyond the like the scale of what T-TESS is." When asked if T-TESS informed their lesson planning, Teacher 10 stated, "I think the appropriate answer is yeah, you should read that [but] it's never been my teaching philosophy to be honest." Teacher 1 noted trying to utilize T-TESS to inform their instructional practices was "like I was working backwards." Teacher 4 also noted, "I don't use the T-TESS to guide my lesson plans or anything like that," while Teacher 9 said, "I would not say it influences my lesson planning or how I teach, as I use the years of content experience I have to create and teach my lessons." Teacher 7 remarked, "Never at the high school level did I ever use any of the information that was given to me to prepare a lesson to be frank with you."

6.5 A Source of Frustration

Each of the fine arts educators whom participated in this study relayed that T-TESS has caused them personal frustration. As Teacher 2 recounted,

I can remember early on having been evaluated during a rehearsal and thinking 'that was stellar. That was perfect.' And then on the observations, then the administrator saw it in a totally different way. And I was thinking, talk about perfect start to finish. I had an opener. I had a closer. I did that perfectly and it wasn't what they saw. They were looking for things that you would not in the arts.

Teacher 3 expressed their frustration with an evaluator who deducted points from an observation because the evaluator was expecting to see practices typically associated with core classes in Teacher 3's Piano class:

I had this idiot for an administrator who, really, I don't think she ever taught. She's not there anymore, but she dinged me on some things I did not do—think, pair share, that type of thing. And that pissed me off, especially since she came up with no background of my class.

Teacher 6 stated T-TESS can feel like "a dog and pony show," while Teacher 4 noted, "I find it to be tiresome because some of it is set up where it's not logical. It doesn't pertain to all the different genres and the different arts classes that that are offered." Teacher 7 was bothered by the redundancy within the goal-setting aspect of T-TESS: "I could've spent so much more time focusing on my teaching goals if I wasn't having to answer the same questions in three different ways." Two teachers also expressed frustration with evaluators who seemed to make up scores without going through all the steps of T-TESS. Teacher 4 stated, "I was pretty much told specifically 'don't worry about it, you know, just don't worry about it. Put something in, I'll approve it, and we'll just go on with life.'"

6.6 Facilitating Growth and Accountability

Though participating teachers expressed frustration with T-TESS, they also noted that T-TESS does have the potential to facilitate growth and accountability among fine arts educators. Teacher 2 said, "T-TESS could provide possibly a more fair evaluation if it was used in the right hands." Teacher 5 stated, "I think if used effectively and correctly...I

think it could be really helpful for the teacher.” Teacher 7 noted, “I feel like the evaluation process helps us become lifelong learners, which is what, to my understanding and my belief, is the desire of every administrator.” Teacher 2 discussed how one particular evaluator who possessed a background in the fine arts affected their perception of T-TESS, saying, “I have grown tremendously as a teacher and I think it's through a lot of [my evaluator's] guidance and her ability to help me with that.” Teacher 10 noted T-TESS provides an opportunity for a fine arts teacher to advocate on behalf of their content area and reflect on their teaching practices:

It gives you an opportunity to just continue to spread that awareness and help [evaluators] understand what you're doing... when you're able to put it into words... it helps you think ‘oh, you know I said this, but I didn't even talk about that.’ So it makes me think about my teaching.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

This study adds to the current research on how evaluative systems can best support the professional growth of fine arts educators (Garet et al., 2020; Willey, 2019) by examining the views of fine arts teachers who are evaluated through T-TESS. This action research provides an initial set of insights into T-TESS' effectiveness and influence. These insights may prove helpful in identifying trends or guiding needed revisions to future educator evaluation practices. By focusing on a singular state and its recommended teacher evaluation system, this study is unique in its ability to provide insight into the evaluative conditions faced by the nearly 27,000 fine arts educators employed by Texas public school districts (TEA, 2024). The authors anticipate it would be beneficial to compare this study's findings with later reflections on the use of T-TESS in evaluating fine arts educators as evaluation contexts continue to shift. Still, this study contributes to practice by advocating for equity in teacher evaluations and highlighting the need for systems supporting the professional growth of fine arts educators. The findings offer pathways for the design and implementation of more authentic and effective evaluation tools by offering practice-based solutions and emphasizing evaluator connoisseurship.

After acknowledging the necessity of having a teacher evaluation system in place (as Teacher 4 stated, “If it's not T-TESS, it's going to be something else), eight fine arts educators relayed that the design of T-TESS allowed them to easily and effectively ensure they were utilizing best practices in their teaching, which in turn guaranteed they were meeting administrative expectations. The ten teachers universally agreed that T-TESS is not effective when it comes to providing fair or accurate assessments of fine arts educators; seven teachers highlighted the evaluation tool's inability to provide adequate feedback for fine arts educators. When asked how T-TESS impacts the work of fine arts educators, the participants noted that T-TESS has little impact on the manner in which they teach. While all ten evaluators relayed that the evaluation process as a whole can be a source of frustration, eight teachers noted T-TESS can be a positive tool in aiding growth and accountability. Seven fine arts teachers noted that the specific evaluator with whom they were completing the T-TESS cycle played a part in determining whether the evaluation process would truly yield actionable and meaningful feedback.

The eight teachers' experiences and perceptions supported Eisner's theories of educational connoisseurship and criticism. Participants said the evaluation process was more beneficial when they had evaluators who were connoisseurs of the arts, as this background allowed evaluators to view the educators' work from an informed perspective and provide meaningful feedback (Nordin and Wahlström, 2019).

The outcomes of this action research support Tutt's (2018) recommendation that different avenues must be explored to ensure fine arts educators' skills are measured more accurately and that the evaluation of fine arts educators is able to take place in a more productive and meaningful manner. This study also echoes the notion that evaluators of fine arts educators may inflate evaluation ratings of teachers they want to maintain positive relationships with (Close & Amrein-Beardsley, 2018; Jones et al., 2022). For example, Teacher 6 said, “my first evaluation I ever got was by the principal. I'd already been to her house five times, you know, because of [my wife], so I got a glowing one.”

While fine arts educators recognized the importance of having an evaluation system like T-TESS in place to promote teacher accountability and professional development, participants described T-TESS as largely ineffective for use in the assessment of fine arts educators. However, seven educators indicated T-TESS can be used in a productive manner when employed by evaluators with a background in the fine arts, as this allows the evaluators to approach the evaluation process with an arts-minded lens. This notion aligns with Lin's (2013) suggestion that evaluators of fine arts educators need to increase their knowledge of the fine arts content areas they are expected to evaluate.

Participation in this study was limited to fine arts educators working for the school districts that use T-TESS, and while multiple emails were used to reach out to potential participants, with word of mouth and social media used to maximize the participant pool, ultimately, the small sample size of ten fine arts educators must be addressed when considering the findings. The inclusion criteria could have affected the researchers' ability to achieve data saturation and, by extension, the transferability of the study, if an insufficient number of participants were recruited. This study cannot provide

evidence relating to the perceptions of fine arts educators working for districts that do not implement T-TESS, as these parties fall outside the participant pool. Additionally, given the nature of action research, certain defining features of this study may have prevented findings from being transferable to settings that do not closely mirror those of this study, especially if a teacher's individual circumstances do not closely align with those experienced by the small sample size.

Despite the small sample size, the findings indicate it may be advantageous to provide evaluators with opportunities to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the fine arts. Such experiences could include attending professional performances and demonstrations, such as art gallery exhibitions, instrumental and choral concerts, art museums, dance performances, musicals, and theatrical productions. Evaluators may also benefit from participating in trainings and conferences that focus on both the fine arts and the evaluation of educators within these disciplines, including events hosted by organizations such as the Texas Dance Educators Association (TDEA), Texas Art Education Association (TAEA), Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA), Texas Fine Arts Administrators (TFAA), and the Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA). Additionally, the development and implementation of specialized training modules aimed at navigating fine arts educator evaluations, alongside the incorporation of insights from fine arts experts, could enhance the effectiveness and validity of T-TESS for evaluating fine arts teachers.

Additionally, it would be advantageous to create district- and state-level training modules aimed at establishing open lines of communication and mutual understanding between fine arts educators and evaluators. Teachers emphasized the importance of proactively engaging with evaluators to explain the distinctive aspects of fine arts instruction, which often differ significantly from core subjects. However, this practice of self-advocacy was generally characterized as a learned strategy that fine arts educators adopted after gaining experience with the T-TESS evaluation system, rather than as an instinctive approach employed during their first year of teaching. Though TEA recommended all educators and evaluators engage in a pre-conference to talk through a teacher's upcoming observation (TEA, 2022b), the pre-conference is not mandatory and does not provide structured guidance tailored to the needs of fine arts educators. It would be beneficial for both fine arts educators and evaluators to access district- and state-level training modules that address the unique teaching and evaluative considerations for fine arts classrooms. These modules should provide questions and collaborative activities to promote open dialogue between evaluator and fine arts educator. Unlike the current recommended pre-conference, these training modules should be compulsory, with the fine arts educator and evaluator completing the training concurrently to ensure mutual learning and alignment throughout the evaluation process.

This study represents one component of a broader action research initiative aimed at enhancing the use of T-TESS in the evaluation of fine arts educators. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to explore ways of improving fine arts teacher evaluations across a variety of evaluation systems, not solely T-TESS. It is critical to examine how other teacher evaluation frameworks are perceived by fine arts educators and evaluators, as well as how practices that emphasize enhanced connoisseurship might be implemented more broadly across diverse contexts. By centering the perspectives of educators who are evaluated through T-TESS, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to promote equity in fine arts teacher evaluations and establishes a foundation for future research in this area.

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Author contributions

Dr. Brianna Miller was responsible for study design, as well as the initial draft of the manuscript and revisions. Dr. Michael Shriner provided guidance throughout the research process and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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