Public Montessori Teachers' Experiences with Teacher Evaluation and Professional Growth: A Pilot Study

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Research Questions

This pilot study has explored the following questions:

- What are the experiences of public Montessori educators in the U.S. with their teacher evaluation systems?

- How do these evaluation systems support or influence public Montessori educators' professional growth?
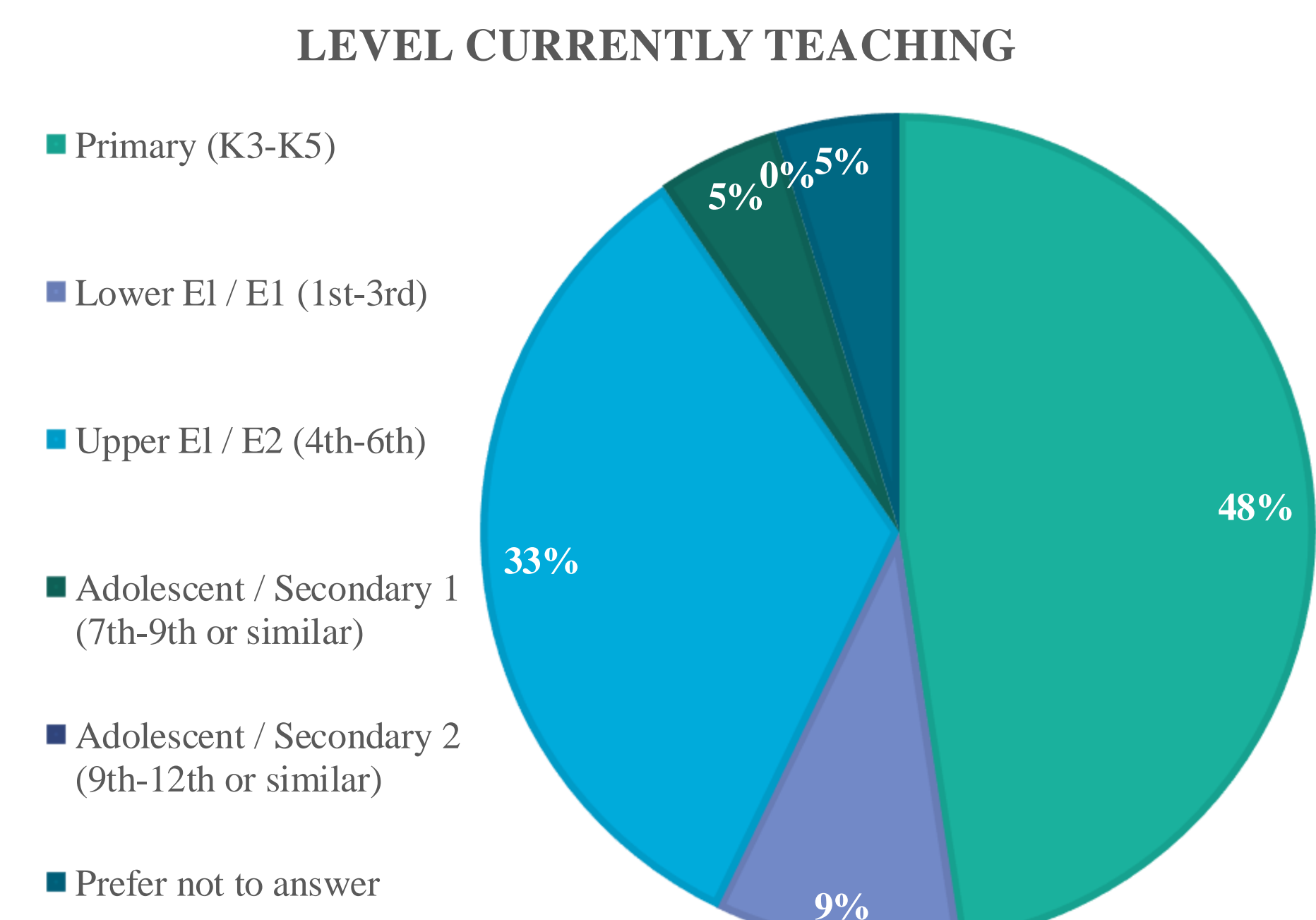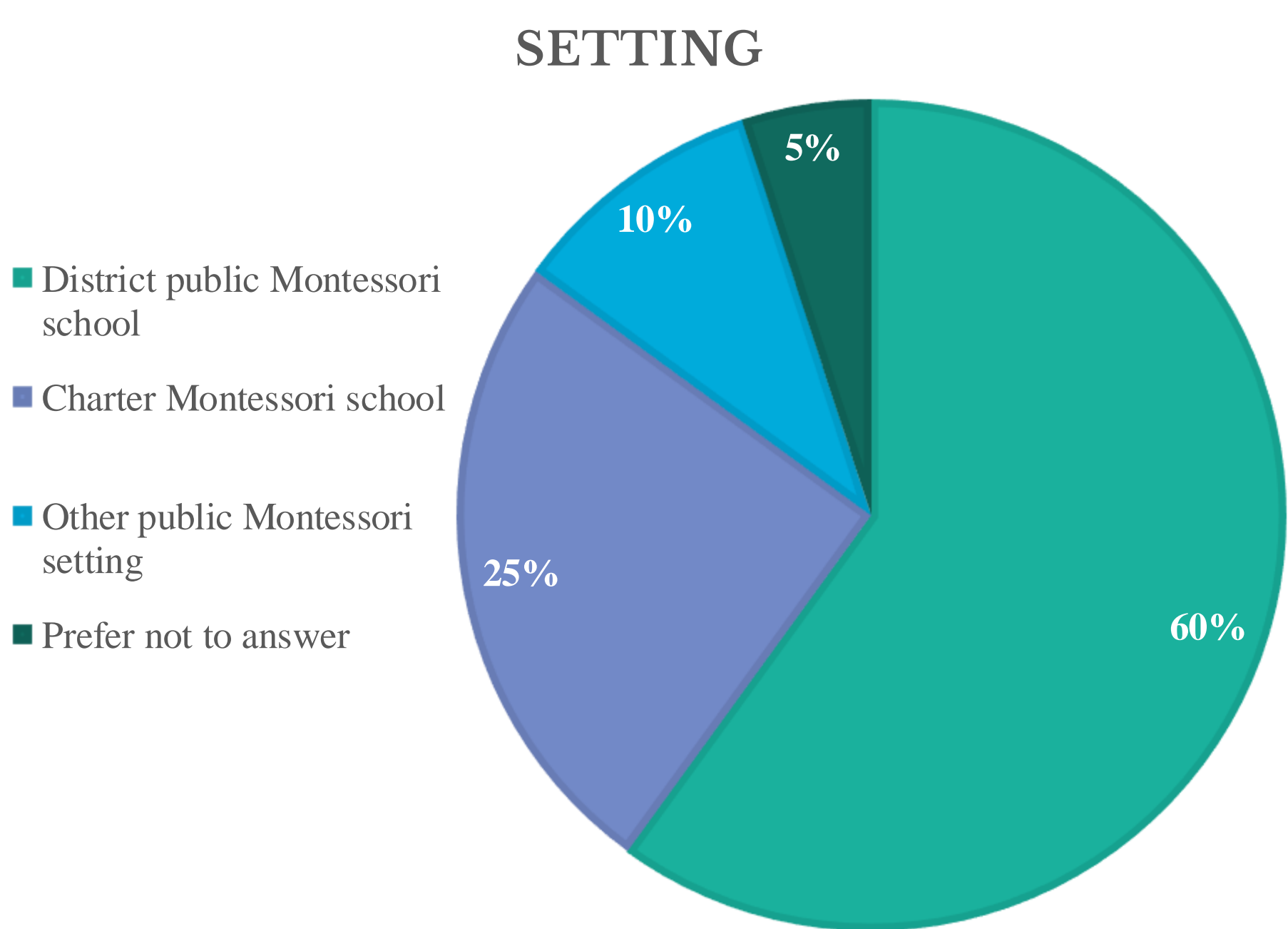

Introduction

There is a need for research into the experiences of professional growth for K-12 public Montessori teachers in the U.S., with "professional growth" for teachers generally defined as experiences with workplace learning, both within and outside of formal evaluation systems. Research has shown that professional growth impacts teacher retention and performance (Murphy et al., 2020). However, teacher evaluation systems may not always authentically foster this professional growth (Visone, 2022; Tanner et al., 2021), if we define "authentic" as meaningful, relevant, and aligned with personal experience. In addition, teacher evaluation systems may not always align with theories of adult development that could support this professional growth (Benson et al., 2018).

This research aimed to examine the needs of public Montessori teachers, relating to professional growth and teacher evaluation systems. The researcher sought to explore the value of Montessori teacher appraisal tools and the extent of alignment of teacher evaluation systems with Montessori values – and how we can facilitate professional growth in a holistic, collaborative, and growth-oriented way. This pilot study has assessed the aptness of the researcher's dissertation interview questions and has offered valuable input into phenomenological research design.
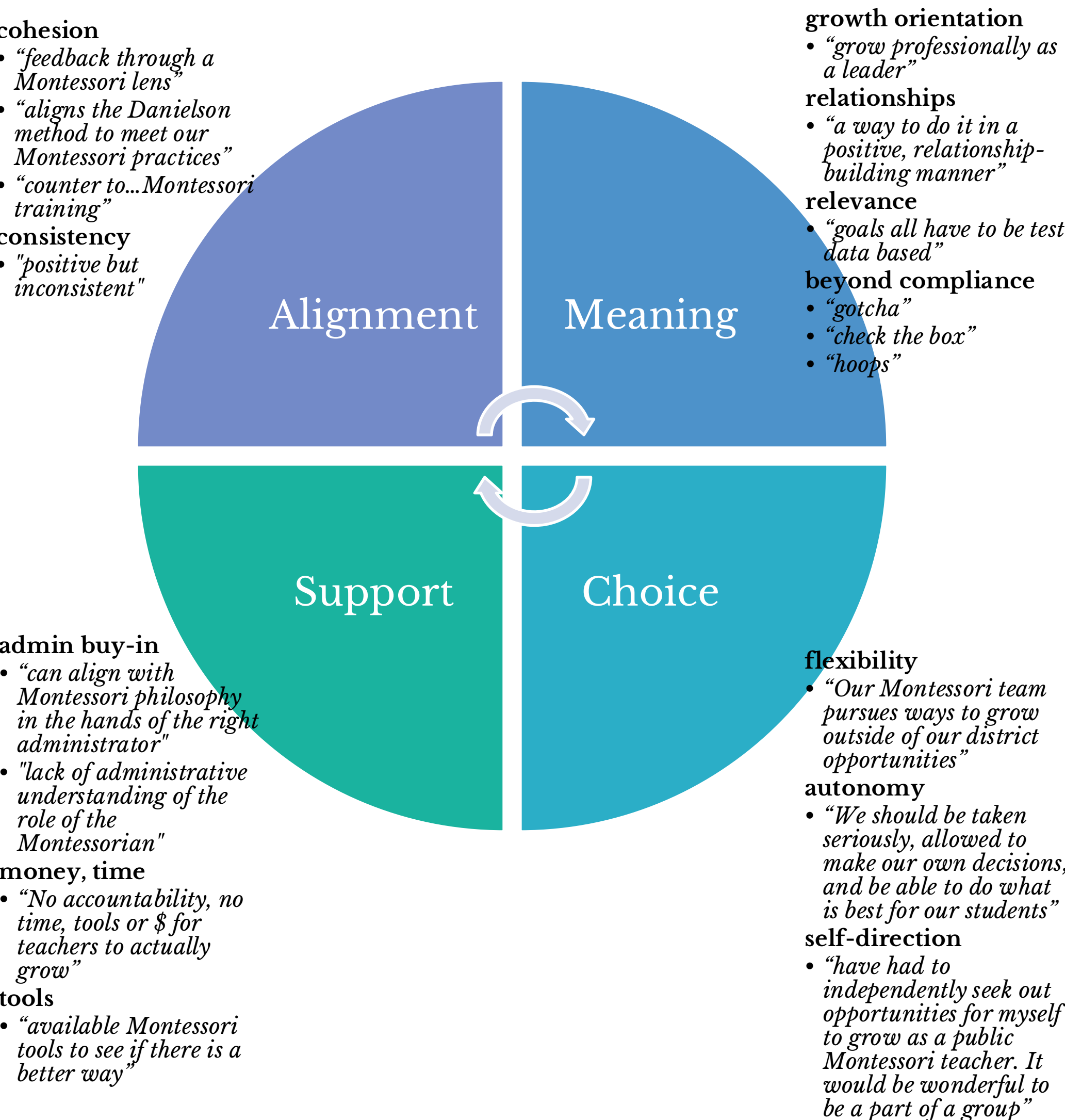
Research Methods

As a pilot study for dissertation research, the researcher conducted a qualitative survey in Qualtrics of public Montessori teachers in the U.S. Constructive Developmental Theory provided a major framework for this work. Participants were currently working as Montessori teachers in public schools in the U.S., serving Primary through Adolescent levels, grades K3-12. For this pilot study, the data reached a saturation point with 19 participants from district and charter public schools. The researcher conducted inductive data analysis through coding and identification of themes.

Constructive Developmental Theory (Kegan & Lahey, 2010)

Self-Determination Theory (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017)

SETTING

- District public Montessori school — 60%
- Charter Montessori school — 25%
- Other public Montessori setting — 10%
- Prefer not to answer — 5%

LEVEL CURRENTLY TEACHING

- Primary (K3-K5) — 48%
- Lower El / E1 (1st-3rd) — 9%
- Upper El / E2 (4th-6th) — 33%
- Adolescent / Secondary 1 (7th-9th or similar) — 5%
- Adolescent / Secondary 2 (9th-12th or similar) — 0%
- Prefer not to answer — 5%

Findings

Identified Categories: 4
Themes: 13

Needs of the Public Montessorian

cohesion
- "feedback through a Montessori lens"
- "aligns the Danielson method to meet our Montessori practices"
- "counter to...Montessori training"

consistency
- "positive but inconsistent"

growth orientation
- "grow professionally as a leader"

relationships
- "a way to do it in a positive, relationship-building manner"

relevance
- "goals all have to be test data based"

beyond compliance
- "gotcha"
- "check the box"
- "hoops"

admin buy-in
- "can align with Montessori philosophy in the hands of the right administrator"
- "lack of administrative understanding of the role of the Montessorian"

money, time
- "No accountability, no time, tools or $ for teachers to actually grow"

tools
- "available Montessori tools to see if there is a better way"

flexibility
- "Our Montessori team pursues ways to grow outside of our district opportunities"

autonomy
- "We should be taken seriously, allowed to make our own decisions, and be able to do what is best for our students"

self-direction
- "have had to independently seek out opportunities for myself to grow as a public Montessori teacher. It would be wonderful to be a part of a group"

Validity

This pilot study will be expanded into a full phenomenological study on public Montessori educators' experiences with professional growth. The researcher discussed findings with faculty advisors.

Limitations

- **Researcher Bias**
  - The researcher is a public Montessori administrator, responsible for supervising and evaluating educators
  - The researcher is a former public (and private) Montessori teacher who has experienced various teacher evaluation frameworks

- **Small Sample Size**
  - As a pilot study, this survey drew from a relatively small sample size (19)
  - To protect privacy, this survey did not request identifying demographic information, except for current educational setting and level currently teaching

Discussion

Teachers described a wide range of experiences relating to their teacher evaluation and opportunities for professional growth. These needs corresponded to categories of **alignment, meaning, choice, and support**. Regardless of the quality of these experiences, teachers' comments reflected salient needs among these four categories. The researcher will further examine public Montessori educators' experiences with professional growth in an upcoming phenomenological study with semi-structured, in-depth interviews.
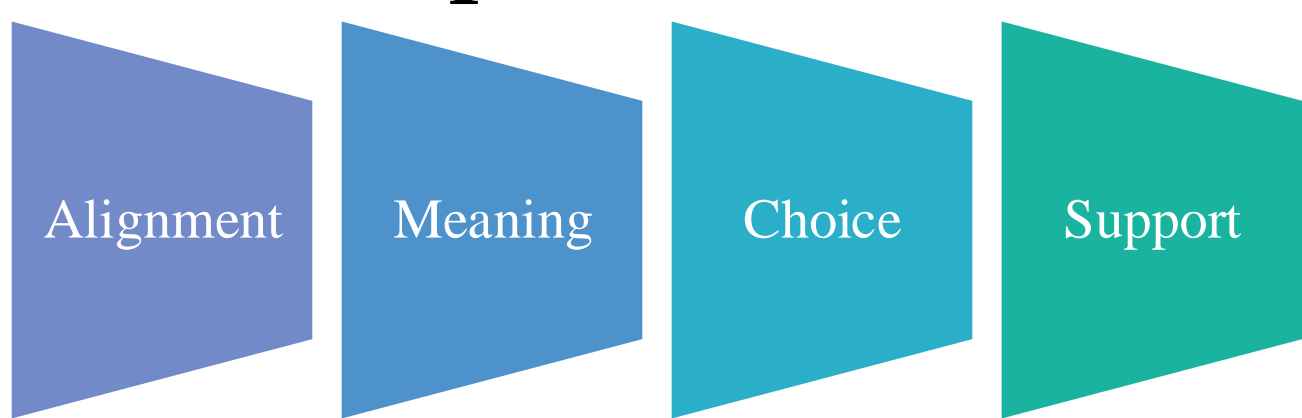
Selected References

Full references available upon request.

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Next Steps

The researcher plans to conduct a phenomenological study through semi-structured interviews with public Montessori educators in the fall of 2025. To participate, please contact Caroline Robbins: caroline.robbins@my.uwrf.edu

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