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Teacher Evaluation in Public Montessori Education: A Selected Literature Review

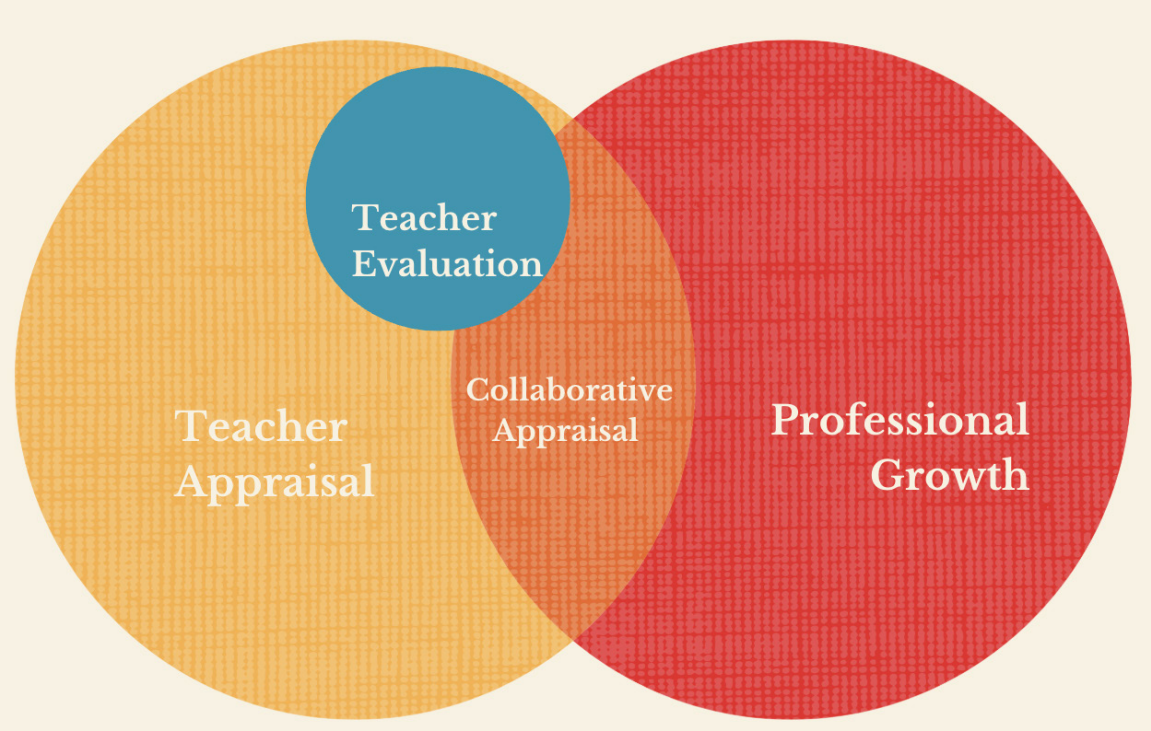
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Abstract: Public school districts in the United States are increasingly adopting the Montessori approach to boost student achievement, diversify student populations, and attract families. As the number of public Montessori schools in the United States grows (Fleming et al., 2024), so does the number of Montessori educators who are assessed in conventional teacher evaluation frameworks that may not fully align with Montessori pedagogy. In this article, I discuss research with relevance to teacher evaluation for public Montessori teachers in the United States. I used the lens of self-determination theory (SDT) to conduct a literature review of recent peer-reviewed studies, to explore insights related to public Montessori teacher appraisal. The bulk of the selected articles employed qualitative methods and SDT-adjacent frameworks. Based on research from general education settings, Montessori contexts, and emerging scholarship on public Montessori teacher evaluation, I suggest a twofold consideration: (1) that the general education field notes some concern with summative, compliance-oriented, and quantitative teacher evaluation systems, and (2) that these systems present an additional concern of pedagogical alignment in public Montessori settings. As a result, I suggest applying the SDT constructs of *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* to draw implications for future study and practice, including considerations for greater pedagogical alignment of Montessori teacher evaluation systems with Montessori practice.

Since the 1970s, school districts in the United States have increasingly adopted Montessori programs (Fleming et al., 2024), often in hopes of boosting enrollment, raising test scores, and diversifying schools (Jor'dan, 2018). Recent figures estimate approximately 600 public Montessori programs currently exist across the United States (Lillard et al., 2025), and this number is increasing (Fleming et al., 2024). As the number of public Montessori teachers in the United States continues to grow, so does the number of teachers who are evaluated in mandated teacher evaluation systems. This may lead to pedagogical misalignment, as state-adopted teacher evaluation systems tend to prioritize instructional strategies of conventional education (The Danielson Group, 2022), whereas public Montessori teachers implement an alternative pedagogy based on

Figure 1.
Appraisal Model



Note. Collaborative appraisal is located at the nexus of teacher appraisal and professional growth.

developmental stages (Fleming et al., 2024). Commonly used teacher evaluation systems in the United States, such as the Danielson Framework for Teaching (The Danielson Group, 2022) and the Marzano Focused Teacher Evaluation Model (Marzano Evaluation Center, 2023), may not explicitly address core components of Montessori pedagogy, which include integrated subjects, multiage class compositions, and individualized or small-group instructional models (Gerker, 2023).

In response to this identified need for greater pedagogical alignment in public Montessori teacher evaluation (Robbins, 2025), I surveyed recent scholarship with relevance to teacher evaluation in public Montessori settings. Using the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (SDT), I pursued the following question: What insights from research can inform future research and practice in public Montessori teacher appraisal? I analyzed studies from three main strands of research: the broader educational field, Montessori settings, and emerging research in public Montessori education. Ultimately, I sought to explore potential directions for further study and practice to strengthen pedagogical alignment in public Montessori teacher evaluation.

Defining Constructs Through the Literature

For this review, I focused on five main constructs: *public Montessori education*, *teacher evaluation*, *professional growth*, *teacher appraisal*, and *collaborative appraisal*, as defined in research literature. In this review, *public Montessori education* refers to the system of district, magnet, and charter schools that receive public funding and implement the developmental Montessori approach (Smith et al., 2024). Second, *teacher evaluation* tends to refer to a specific type of formal feedback for teachers, with a quantitative, often summative rating given by an administrator, that may have high-accountability measures (Close et al., 2020; Flores & Derrington, 2018). Next, *professional growth* is generally defined as experiences with workplace learning, both within and outside of formal evaluation systems (Pata et al., 2025). In contrast to quantitative evaluation, *teacher appraisal* refers to a broad spectrum of teacher feedback tools, which may incorporate evaluation or may take on the form of more qualitative goal setting (Frenzel et al., 2020). Finally, *collaborative appraisal* refers to a feedback approach for teachers that involves growth-oriented dialogue about self-selected goals, as well as supports needed to achieve those goals (Hulme et al., 2024). In recent scholarship,

researchers have suggested collaborative appraisal measures, such as peer observation and co-reflection, may offer strong supports for teacher professional growth (Robbins, 2026; Even-Zahav et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2020; Visone et al., 2022).

Figure 1 represents a model of how constructs of teacher appraisal, teacher evaluation, professional growth, and collaborative appraisal overlap and diverge in relevant literature. As shown, collaborative appraisal is located at the nexus of teacher appraisal and professional growth, with teacher evaluation occupying a portion of teacher appraisal and partially overlapping with professional growth. As I discuss in this literature review, three strands of research provide evidence for recommendations related to teacher evaluation and appraisal: research in general education, the small collection of available research on professional growth for Montessori educators, and emerging research on teacher evaluation in public Montessori education. This emerging research in Montessori settings offers context as to why collaborative appraisal may offer particular pedagogical alignment for public Montessori educators (Robbins, 2026). However, further research is needed to more fully consider these implications.

Theoretical Framework

For this review, I applied the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (SDT), as developed by Ryan and Deci (2017). According to SDT, humans share three psychological needs which serve as motivating factors in the development of well-being: "autonomy" (p. 3), or choice and agency; "competence" (p. 3), or a sense of self-efficacy and ability; and "relatedness" (p. 3), or connection with others. SDT suggests, in organizations that offer more opportunities for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, employees seem to hold more intrinsic motivation to perform well. Thus, in settings with high levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, employees may reap a cycle of benefits, feeling intrinsically motivated to perform well, and in turn, experiencing well-being (Deci et al., 2017). Some researchers have likened the well-being associated with autonomy, competence, and relatedness to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow* (Tse et al., 2022).

Methods for the Literature Review

For this literature review, I consulted mainly peer-reviewed, empirical articles from academic journals, supplemented by a few government publications and published dissertations, from within the previous eight years. Using the funnel method for topical inquiry, I explored studies from general education contexts, moved gradually to research in Montessori settings, and then focused on emerging research in public Montessori education. Using SDT as the main lens for analysis, I gave special consideration to studies with SDT-adjacent frameworks, and intentionally sought credible, qualitative research. The criteria for credibility in this review drew from Stahl and King's (2020) description of "coherence" (p. 26), which emphasizes triangulation methods. As such, this review highlighted studies with multiple sources of evidence.

Research Studies

SDT Studies

Recently, several researchers have applied SDT to study workplace satisfaction and performance, mainly with quantitative methods (Nunes et al., 2024). Yet some recent, qualitative studies have used SDT to explore teacher professional growth and well-being within conventional educational settings (Cheon et al., 2020; Even-Zahav et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2020). As one example, Even-Zahav et al. examined autonomy, competence, and relatedness in teachers' responses to professional development and found that training initiatives were often misaligned with teachers' needs regarding professional well-being (2022). Similarly, Murphy et al. (2020) noted that teachers' experiences of "pedagogical well-being" (p. 533) were limited in cultures of high-stakes performativity.

Teacher Evaluation Policies

Other current research has examined the large-scale trends and effects of teacher evaluation systems, generally with quantitative methods. For example, Rubin et al. (2023) examined self-reported educator satisfaction ratings from the National Teacher and Principal Survey, in relation to teacher evaluation systems. The researchers found teachers whose evaluation ratings emphasized standardized testing scores reported lower job satisfaction and a higher intention to quit than did teachers whose evaluations did not emphasize that data. This study addressed a potentially critical relationship between high-stakes teacher evaluation and teacher well-being, but this relationship has not been fully explored.

Other recent research has tracked trends in the use of high-accountability measures in teacher evaluation systems, in relation to U.S. federal policy. Close et al. (2020) studied the prevalence of value-added models

(VAMs) that linked student growth on standardized tests to teacher performance within teacher evaluation. As Race to the Top federal grant program initiatives of the 2010s included incentives for teacher evaluation system overhaul, many states developed systems with a greater emphasis on VAMs and also faced more federal oversight of high-stakes metrics in teacher evaluation. However, with the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, individual states regained autonomy over teacher evaluation, and many states readapted their systems to allow districts greater flexibility in selecting evaluation systems. During the late 2010s, many new evaluation systems de-emphasized standardized testing data and offered alternative measures of teacher performance, such as formative administrator feedback (Close et al., 2020; Satrain & Morris, 2024). Though high-stakes VAMs have become less of the norm in recent years (Close et al., 2020), quantitative and summative measures are still prevalent among teacher evaluation models (e.g., The Danielson Group, 2022; Marzano Evaluation Center, 2023).

Recently, some researchers have expressed skepticism toward the validity of quantitative teacher evaluation measures. In a study of observational ratings from the Danielson Framework for Teaching, Garrett and Steinberg (2015) cautioned against high-impact applications of the framework, concluding that research on the effectiveness of the Danielson rubric remained incomplete. In a related study, Sartain and Morris (2024) observed teachers self-reported greater satisfaction with appraisal models that valued continuous growth over summative assessments. Based on these findings, Sartain and Morris surmised that teachers with higher satisfaction with their evaluation frameworks would likely feel more inclined to use feedback as a tool for growth. Finally, Reid (2020) identified substantial subjectivity and variability in administrators' interpretations of their state's evaluation models and expressed concern over the high-accountability application of these measures. More research is needed into the impacts of teacher evaluation policies on teacher performance and growth.

Teachers' Professional Growth

Some recent, qualitative studies have examined teachers' experiences with professional growth in conventional education settings, often with SDT-adjacent lenses. In one study, Taylor (2020) applied complexity theory to develop a model for teacher professional growth as continuous, adaptive, and recursive. In this model, Taylor conceptualized teacher professional growth as characterized by collaborative change and hindered by external accountability pressures and performativity. Conversely, Voelkel et al. (2024) found that principal-teacher interactions based on relationship-building, trust, collaboration, empowerment, and respectful feedback positively influenced teachers' sense of collective efficacy. Together, these researchers have offered that teachers' professional growth may flourish in contexts with greater teacher agency and collaboration.

Professional Growth and Teacher Evaluation

A small collection of qualitative research has explored the interplay between teachers' professional growth and teacher evaluation in conventional settings (Pallas, 2023; Visone et al., 2022). Pallas suggested that teachers' resistance to the performance labels in their evaluation system seemed to undermine their motivation to improve. Likewise, Visone observed that teachers reported feeling less inclined to collaborate with colleagues when evaluated with highly individualistic goals. In other recent studies, Tanner et al. (2021) argued that the quantitative measures of high-stakes evaluations limited the "possibilities for emergent, improvisational teaching" (p. 1876), and Benson et al. (2020) proposed that Black educators' negative experiences with teacher evaluation might contribute to their sense of not belonging in the system. In these studies, participants often suggested that summative teacher evaluation models had an insignificant or even negative impact on their professional growth.

Not all recent findings from qualitative research on teacher evaluation and professional growth have been pessimistic. Following a yearlong ethnography, Lane (2020) suggested that teacher evaluation offered limited—but not negligible—potential for teacher learning and professional growth. Lane proposed that teacher evaluation could potentially have a positive impact on teacher performance when combined with in-house supports, like coaching, training, and mentorship. Still, contemporary, qualitative research on the intersection of teacher evaluation and professional growth remains incomplete.

Need and Availability in the Teaching Profession

Other recent research has examined factors for teacher shortages and turnover in the United States. Drawing from a large-scale survey, Taie and Lewis (2023) noted that 60% of surveyed teachers who had left the profession reported that they found more autonomy in their new field. In other studies, resigning teachers

cited high accountability measures and a lack of agency (Sutcher et al., 2019), depersonalization (Madigan & Kim, 2021), perceived lack of control (Marx et al., 2023), and perceived lack of support (Chambers Mack et al., 2019) as key factors in their decisions to quit. In contrast, Zhang et al. (2024) found that teachers' meaningful work seemed to have a moderating effect on external "hindrance stressors" (p. 2) and teacher turnover, and Shuls and Flores (2020) found districts promoting higher levels of teacher voice and agency experienced greater teacher retention. Collectively, these findings suggest teacher autonomy in general education settings may correspond with greater teacher satisfaction and retention.

Implications for Public Montessori Education

As a whole, researchers suggested that compliance-oriented teacher evaluation systems were insufficient in producing meaningful educator professional growth (Pallas, 2023; Taie and Lewis, 2023; Visone et al., 2022). As noted, the referenced studies did not address teacher evaluation and professional growth in Montessori settings, and they did not explicitly explore Montessori teachers' reception to teacher evaluation. Collectively, however, this research from general education suggests a broad mistrust of quantitative, summative, and high-stakes teacher evaluation among teachers as a whole. In addition, emerging research suggests Montessori teachers may experience evaluation similarly to teachers in conventional settings (Robbins, 2026). The recent findings also suggest autonomy, competence, and relatedness represent salient needs for public Montessori educators' professional growth (Robbins, 2026). As research gaps remain regarding teacher evaluation in public Montessori settings, relevant and emerging research from Montessori settings is discussed in the following sections.

Professional Growth for Montessori Teachers

Limited research has explored professional growth for Montessori teachers, most often within private settings. Damore and Rieckhoff (2021) interviewed Montessori school leaders on a Montessori coaching tool and suggested that collaborative feedback sessions could offer potential for Montessori teachers' professional growth. Likewise, Postlewaite et al. (2024) found that Montessori educators seemed to hold unique needs regarding professional development, and Saylor et al. (2018) proposed that teacher-centered mentorship and reflective practices could strengthen Montessori professional development. These studies added value to the conversation of Montessori teacher appraisal and professional growth, but they focused mainly on private settings. To date, most available research on Montessori professional growth has been conducted outside of public schools.

Montessori Teacher Identity

Relatively few studies have examined Montessori teacher identity, without a direct focus on teacher evaluation. Gerker (2023) explored how public Montessori teachers' identities might shape their reactions to educational policy. Similarly, Archer (2024) examined Montessori teacher formation as a pathway of resistance to conventional educational policies, and Christensen (2019) explored literature addressing Montessori teacher identity and antibias, antiracist practices. The studies explored Montessori teacher identity as fuel for social change, but they did not concentrate on intersections of public Montessori teacher identity with teacher evaluation.

Need and Availability for Montessori Educators

Some emerging research has examined recruitment, retention, and attrition among Montessori educators, mainly with quantitative methods. In one recent study, Benson et al. (2024) found that teachers' autonomy seemed to have a mitigating effect on burnout rates among public teachers, in both conventional and Montessori settings. This particular study represents a bridge between two strands of research: that on teacher evaluation in conventional settings, and that on professional growth among Montessori teachers. However, more research is warranted regarding the need and availability of public Montessori teachers, particularly with in-depth analysis qualitative methods afford.

Teacher Evaluation and Professional Growth in Public Montessori Education

Some emerging research has specifically addressed teacher evaluation in public Montessori education, but further scholarship is needed. In a recent study, I examined public Montessori educators' perceptions of teacher evaluation and professional growth within a relatively small case study (Robbins, 2026). The findings suggested that, although summative and standardized teacher evaluation systems presented some limitations for educators as a whole, the systems held particular gaps relating to Montessori practice. More research is needed in this field across a broader population to explore

the relationship of criteria such as teaching level, years of experience, and school type on public Montessori educators' reception to teacher evaluation.

Synthesis

Collectively, the three strands of research—studies on teacher evaluation in the broad educational landscape, studies from the Montessori field, and emerging research on public Montessori teacher evaluation—provide layers of evidence for this inquiry. None of the strands independently suffice to establish a model for public Montessori teacher appraisal. Taken together, however, the strands offer possible directions for further research and preliminary recommendations for practice.

First, general education research suggests broad patterns of reception related to teacher evaluation. Both qualitative (e.g., Pallas, 2023) and quantitative studies (e.g., Sartain & Morris, 2024) have suggested teachers may respond to dialogic and formative appraisal measures as supportive of their professional growth and pedagogical well-being. Conversely, studies have also shown that high-stakes and high-accountability teacher evaluation measures may not have a desirably significant impact on teachers' performance (Rubin et al., 2023). This pattern emerged in studies across educational settings that were not Montessori-specific. However, findings suggest resistance and skepticism toward compliance-oriented, summative teacher evaluation systems among the general teaching population may limit these systems' potential impact on professional growth (Taie and Lewis, 2023; Visone et al., 2022).

Second, Montessori-specific research provides context for considering professional growth needs for Montessori educators. Recent qualitative studies from within Montessori settings have suggested Montessori educators particularly favor qualitative appraisal measures, like reflective coaching and mentorship (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021). Qualitative appraisal measures may connect to Montessori teachers' specialized needs for professional development (Postlewaite et al., 2024) and strong sense of Montessori teacher identity (Gerker, 2023). Overall, this strand of Montessori research suggests Montessori teachers may particularly value qualitative appraisal measures that align with Montessori practice (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021).

Finally, emerging research in public Montessori education offers preliminary insight into how public Montessori educators respond to teacher evaluation. This emerging research has offered that granting agency to public Montessori teachers to help shape school policies and procedures, like appraisal processes, may benefit Montessori pedagogical well-being (Benson et al., 2024; Robbins, 2026). As noted, in a recent case study, teachers and administrators both expressed a desire to revise traditional teacher evaluation models for Montessori education, with not only qualitative measures, but also collaborative appraisal measures (Robbins, 2026). In this study, participants observed components of collaborative appraisal—including peer observation, co-reflection, and mutual feedback opportunities—could begin to bring evaluation frameworks into better alignment with Montessori pedagogical principles. Participants suggested these types of collaborative appraisal could reflect Montessori education's emphasis on both authentic assessment and noncompetitive learning, as characterized by autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Taken together, these three strands of research offer a twofold consideration: first, that the broad field of education notes some concern with summative, compliance-oriented, and quantitative teacher evaluation systems (Pallas, 2023), and second, that these systems present an additional concern of pedagogical alignment in public Montessori settings (Robbins, 2026). Moreover, the collection of research suggests autonomy, competence, and relatedness may represent particularly salient components of collaborative appraisal for public Montessori teachers. Specifically, the research suggests collaborative appraisal with an emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness may offer potential for aligning appraisal with Montessori pedagogy. The collective findings warrant consideration for preliminary recommendations for research and practice.

Recommendations

Based on the salient themes from the three identified strands of research, I propose further research into the effectiveness of teacher evaluation in public Montessori settings. Specifically, future research could include analyses of modifications to teacher evaluation systems toward greater alignment with Montessori pedagogy, case studies of schools piloting adaptations to teacher evaluation, and in-depth examinations of different factors in relation to teachers' reception to evaluation. In addition, though the issue of public Montessori teacher evaluation warrants further exploration, this literature review leads to preliminary recommendations for practice. The salient findings from this literature review can be interpreted as a starting point to purposefully design teacher appraisal models to balance accountability

with alignment to Montessori pedagogy. Notably, recurring themes from collective research center around autonomy, competence, and relatedness as potential areas of focus for Montessori teacher appraisal.

First, throughout the reviewed studies, autonomy and choice appear as potentially beneficial components of teacher appraisal processes. In the collective studies in this review, researchers linked teacher agency with teacher well-being in broad educational settings (Shuls & Flores, 2020). In addition, emerging Montessori research has suggested that public Montessori teachers may especially value autonomy in selecting goals and strategies for professional growth in their teacher evaluations (Robbins, 2026). If Montessori teachers particularly value autonomy, this pattern may mirror Montessori pedagogy, which privileges choice (Lillard et al., 2025) and intrinsic motivation over external rewards and punishments (Denervaud et al., 2019).

Second, the collective research highlights potential of qualitative growth measures for development of teacher competence, including in public Montessori settings. Because public education requires certain quantitative accountability metrics, it appears that moderating quantitative measures with qualitative, formative, and growth-oriented feedback conversations may contribute to meaningful teacher professional growth (Lane, 2020). Qualitative growth measures seem to offer potential within the field of education in general; however, emerging research also suggests Montessori educators may place particular value on measures of continuous growth (Robbins, 2026). Again, if Montessori educators tend to prefer qualitative appraisal, this may reflect Montessori pedagogy for its emphasis on holistic assessment (Fleming et al., 2024), intrinsic motivation, and process-orientation among learners (del Agua et al., 2026).

Finally, the research as a whole offers that appraisal models for public Montessori teachers may benefit from collaborative measures to support relatedness. In various studies from both within and outside of Montessori education, collaborative measures, such as peer observation, co-reflection, and dialogic feedback, emerged as potentially beneficial components of teacher evaluation (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021; Lane, 2020). This need for relatedness is not unique to Montessori educators; however, a growing collection of research on Montessori teacher identity suggests some educators may choose the Montessori pedagogical approach for reasons related to aspiration for relationality in their work (Gerker, 2023). Emerging research suggests networks of support, including mentoring and coaching relationships, shared goal setting, and reflective dialogue, may help address the needs for relatedness among public Montessori educators (Robbins, 2026).

As shown, a growing body of research exists relating to teacher evaluation in public Montessori education, combining studies from the broad educational landscape, studies in Montessori settings, and emerging research on public Montessori teacher evaluation. More research is needed into how teacher evaluation systems in the United States can be adapted to best serve professional growth of public Montessori educators. Some emerging research has begun to address this gap.

Overall, literature from this review suggests that considering the SDT constructs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness may offer particular potential for more pedagogically aligned teacher evaluation in public Montessori settings. Specifically, autonomy (through choice in the appraisal process), competence (through emphasis on continuous growth), and relatedness (through collaborative appraisal practices) warrant consideration as particularly beneficial components of Montessori teacher appraisal, because of their alignment with Montessori pedagogy. However, the preliminary suggestions regarding autonomy, competence, and relatedness should be understood as guidance for further research—rather than solid characteristics—unique to Montessori teachers.

As noted, limitations of standardized teacher evaluation are not unique to Montessori education, but they present unique concerns within Montessori settings. This literature review, therefore, warrants a twofold consideration. First, the limitations of summative, compliance-oriented, and heavily quantitative teacher evaluation seem to span the broader education field (Marx et al., 2023). Second, public Montessori educators appear to experience an additional limitation: that of a lack of pedagogical alignment (Robbins, 2026). As noted, commonly used evaluation frameworks may not explicitly address core practices of Montessori education (e.g., The Danielson Group, 2022).

From the synthesis of the findings, I propose new questions for future research, including the following: How might teacher evaluation systems be intentionally designed to foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness for public Montessori educators in the United States? How might collaborative appraisal measures create better pedagogical alignment for public Montessori education? These questions have not yet been fully examined in scholarship. Further research is needed to

develop comprehensive models for teacher appraisal in public Montessori schools.

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