Under the Microscope: Principal Perceptions of the Mississippi Statewide Teachers Assessment Rubric (MSTAR), a Pilot-Year Study

Matthew Boggan and Penny Wallin

Abstract

The mandate that teachers are accountable for student performance has driven states to initiate new evaluation instruments for administrator use to assess teachers. This study examined leaders' perceptions of a first-time statewide accountability instrument used for teacher assessment in one southern state, with 230 K-12 principals anonymously responding. The survey was designed to cover the themes of Principal Training, Expectations, Time, Word Choice /Clarity of Directions, Equity, and Collaborative Support. It consisted of 20 statements with a 4 choice response scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The findings will provide feedback to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) for consideration in improving the evolving accountability process and add to the research on teacher evaluation systems. The results suggest that in every area some educators need more support and clarification in implementing this accountability instrument consistently and fairly.

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Introduction

Traditionally educational accountability has been the responsibility of local school boards and communities. Since No Child Left Behind in 2001, Race to the Top in 2012, and in 2015 the new Every Student Succeeds Act that replaces the No Child Left Behind Act, accountability responsibilities are increasingly designated to administrators and their teachers, as well as student individual and collective performances on assessments. By 2005, every state and the District of Columbia were implementing plans to track both processes and results in schools (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004). Common national and state standards based on best pedagogical practices and learning standards serve to guide accountability plans that hold teachers responsible for the performance of their students as a crucial component of improving teacher quality and raising student academic performance. According to Secretary of Education Duncan, "Student growth can and should be one of a number of measures in evaluating the performance of teachers… Better evaluation systems improve classroom instruction." *(*Huffington Post Blog, 2012*).* With teachers being held directly responsible for student achievement, efforts across the country have focused on improving accountability measures to support teachers in order to insure student success:

> It is clear that state education agencies are working hard to realign their organizations with the many new responsibilities that have been thrust upon them… Improving teacher quality has become the centerpiece of the Obama administration's education agenda and of the contemporary school reform movement. And this effort in turn, is dependent on the development of new teacher-evaluation systems with multiple measures of performance rooted in student achievement that can provide reliable data around levels of effectiveness and allow states to better support teaching and leading throughout the cycle of an educator's career from preparation to practice. (McGuinn, 2012, p. 57)

Literature Review

While the idea of a statewide documentation of educator performance is appropriate, the process of this type of accountability system in different states has caused debate of whether or not this type of system is effective. Bowie (2014) studied various teacher accountability systems in Maryland and made some mind boggling discoveries. Bowie found that in Carroll County Public Schools, Maryland, only 2% of teachers were rated as ineffective. Bowie found that 82% of teachers in Baltimore County were rated as highly effective, and Howard County rated all teachers as effective or highly effective. Kane, Taylor, Tyler, and Wooten (2011) found that the Race to the Top program by the Obama Administration proved a lack of agreement in how to best identify and measure effective teaching. According to Megan (2014), Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy requested a slowdown of the teacher evaluation program and recommended reducing the number of times administrators observe classroom teachers in action and streamlining more data into the teacher evaluation system. Marzano (2012) found that there are two big problems that come to the forefront when measuring teacher effectiveness: 1) evaluation systems do not adequately discriminate between effective and ineffective teaching and 2) teacher evaluations have not aided in developing a high skilled workforce. Marzano also surveyed teachers who shared that proper teacher development is the biggest issue in regards to teacher evaluation. Danielson (2001) found that there are inadequacies with current teacher evaluation systems. Danielson suggests a method that includes an administrator who takes notes or scripts during a teacher's lesson. At the end of the period, the administrator provides the teacher with a copy of the notes, and both teacher and administrator evaluate the administrator's observation. After analyzing the notes, the teacher and administrator meet to discuss the positives and negatives aspects of the lesson. Danielson (2001) also found that there are deficiencies of the

traditional evaluation systems such as outdated checklists, oversimplified evaluative comments that fail to provide guidance toward improvement, a lack of consistency among evaluators, and top-down communication that feels punitive to teachers.

The Cincinnati Public Schools' Teacher Evaluation System (TES) used data to connect specific teaching practices with student achievement outcomes which provided evidence of teaching practices that could be widely shared (Kane, et.al., 2011). Marshall (2012) reviewed the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) Project which focuses on unannounced visits, face-to-face conversations, and use of standardized tests scores to evaluate teacher effectiveness. Meyer, Brodersen, and Linick (2014) found that four states' evaluation systems did not include a professional development component and that states are failing to implement effective teacher support related to teacher evaluations. According to Costello-Dougherty (2009), the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) used in a New Orleans Charter School provides intensive professional development for teachers and detailed rubrics showing how teachers are evaluated. TAP has been also used at Lucia Mar Unified School District and the Los Angeles School District in California. Garrett (2011) found the LMUSD and LAUSD using TAP resulted in the teacher and evaluator sharing specific praises as well as suggestions for improvement. Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, and Rothstein (2012) found that value-added models that include data on class size, home/community support, individual student needs, and prior teachers can help in measuring teacher effectiveness. Garrett (2011) cautioned that the biggest challenge with value-added systems is getting teachers to trust the system.

While it is possible that all teachers in a school district could be rated on the high end of the evaluation scale, one may think that this is unlikely. Danielson (2011) found that one of the most common problems with traditional evaluation systems is the fact that there is inconsistency

among evaluators. Donaldson, G. and Donaldson M. (2012) found that there are five crucial steps that cultivate high-quality teaching and trust. These steps provide for including teachers in the designing of performance evaluation systems, protecting opportunities to learn and grow, honing principals' skills at observing and consulting with teachers, building time for teacher evaluation into a principal's workload, and making instructional improvement a district-wide priority. Hall (2013) found four ways to change the mindset of teacher evaluations in schools: 1) teacher mentoring and feedback. 2) meaningful and relevant supervisor communication, 3) non-threatening supervisor communication , and 4) shared vested growth mindset of the school on the part of the teacher and supervisor. Danielson (2001) suggested that school administrators must clearly define and model good or effective teaching, to be implemented in a collaborative culture (Newmann &Wehlage, 1995; DuFour, 2004).

Mississippi Statewide Teachers Assessment Rubric (M-STAR)

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) believes that effective teachers, who are supported by knowledgeable and invested principals, are essential components to ensuring that all students reach high standards of learning. The Mississippi Statewide Teachers Assessment Rubric (M-STAR) will be referred to throughout this paper and can be accessed at http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/docs/teacher-center/revised-m-star-rubric-june-2014.pdf?sfvrsn=2. M-STAR is:

> the evaluation process designed to improve the professional performance of all educators. MSTAR provides a system of performance assessments based on common standards to gauge teacher effectiveness, help track educational progress, identify areas of need, and improve performance throughout a teacher's career (MDE, 2016).

The instrument evaluates teachers on five domains: Planning, Assessment, Instruction, Learning Environment, and Professional Responsibilities. Each of the twenty standards found in the

domains is assessed through one or more evaluation methods, including Artifacts Review, Pre/Post Observation Conferences, Classroom Observation, and/or Student Survey. M-STAR is designed with the explicit goals:

> to provide formative assessment information about the performance of individual teachers to help highlight areas of strength and identify areas for growth; to serve as a guide for teachers as they reflect upon their own practices; to provide shared understanding regarding priorities, goals, and expectations of quality practice; and to serve as a tool to help structure principal instructional leadership and feedback (MDE, 2016).

During the 2013-14 school year, MDE initiated the pilot year for school districts to use M-STAR. The purpose of M-STAR is to bring about a higher and more consistent level of accountability for K-12 teachers. MDE provided a series of orientation sessions, both face-to-face and online, to administrators and teachers. As with any new evaluation system, feedback is essential to ensure that training, expectations, language, and scoring rubrics are clear, fair, and consistent with U. S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's statement that, "…because teacher evaluation systems are still a work in progress, it is vital that school leaders and administrators continue to solicit feedback, learn from their mistakes, and make improvements." (Huffington Post Blog, 2012). This study examines principal perceptions on the early use of M-STAR.

Method

The researchers on this project gathered feedback with the following research question: How do practicing principals assess their initial experience with the mandated M-STAR, the statewide evaluation system of teachers, to bring accountability for K-12 teachers?

K-12 Principals in the state of Mississippi were the target for this study to provide feedback on the new statewide evaluation instrument. The survey, designed by the researchers with assistance from graduate students in Educational Leadership at Mississippi State University's

Meridian Campus, consisted of 20 statements about the instrument. Two hundred and thirty principals scored each statement with Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree to give perceptual feedback on this anonymous survey on the M-STAR instrument after their pilot year experiences.

Results

The survey addressed perceptions on key areas of M-STAR to include the categories of Principal Training, Time, Expectations, Word Choice /Clarity of Directions, Equity, and Collaborative Support. Survey statement responses were analyzed in Frequency Tables, depicted on bar graphs, followed by feedback summary according to the themes. While there were 230 participants who participated, some participants did not answer all of the questions. Because of this, each question will not have 230 participant responses. The survey numbers only reflect the exact number of responses for each question. However, each question has at least 227 participants.

Table 1.1 Statement 1: *I have been trained adequately in the MSTAR Instrument.*

Statement 1	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	39	17
Agree (A)	134	58
Disagree (D)	55	24
Strongly Disagree (SD)	2	1

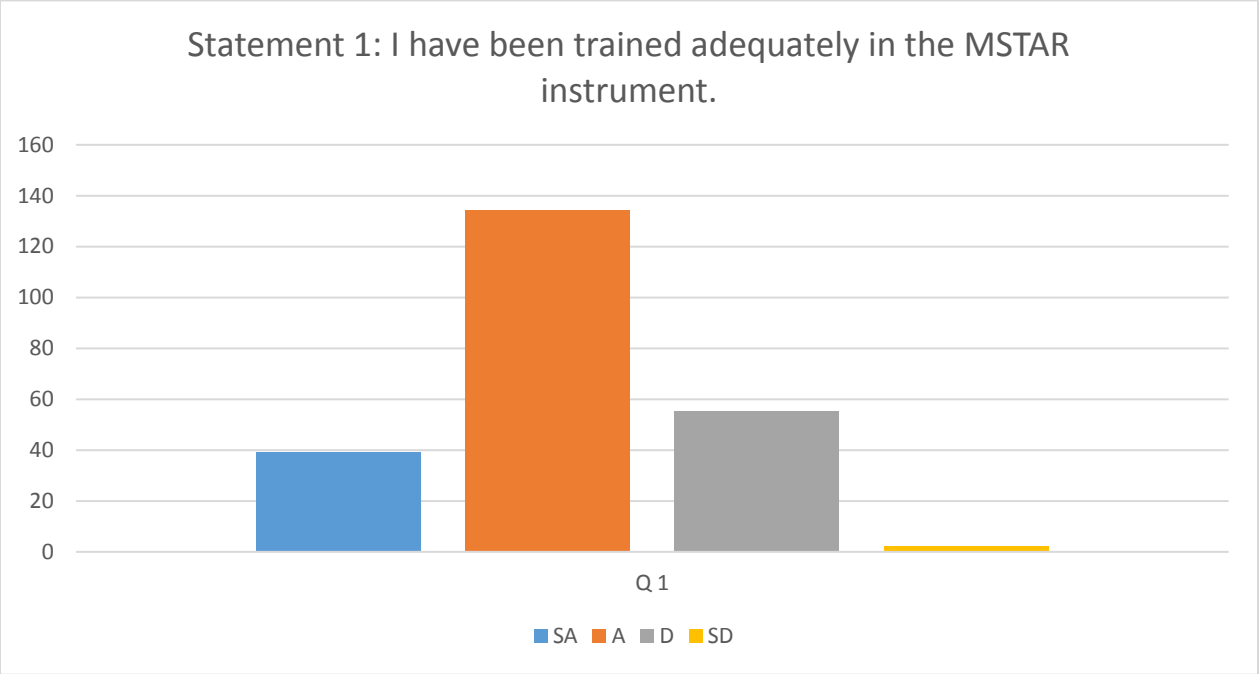


Figure 1.1. Analysis: Seventy-five percent of administrators trained with MSTAR felt the preparation offered by the State Department of Education for leaders was sufficient, with twenty-five percent disagreeing.

Table 1.2. Statement 2: ***The number of walk-in observations (5) and formal observations (2) with the MSTAR instrument is appropriate.***

Statement 2	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	9	4
Agree (A)	92	40
Disagree (SD)	85	37
Strongly Disagree (SD)	44	19

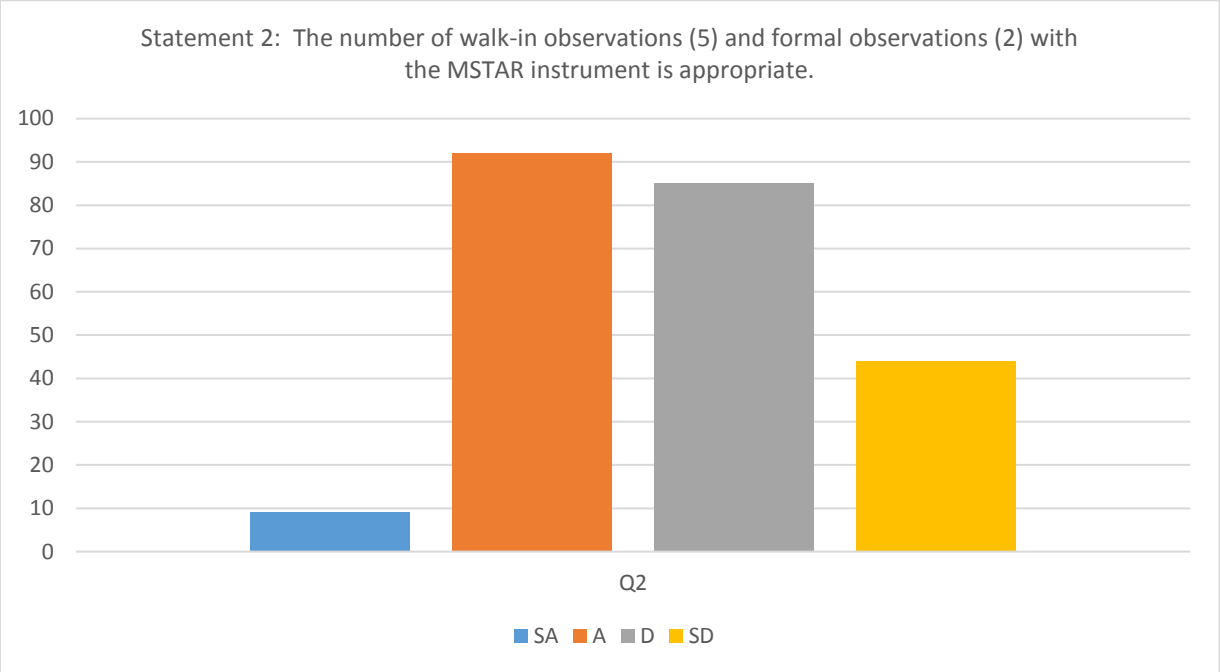


Figure 1.2. Analysis: Fifty-six percent of the administrators surveyed thought the 7 classroom visits were excessive, while forty-four percent believed that 7 visits were appropriate.

Table 1. 3. ***Statement 3: If the number of MSTAR observations were reduced to two walk-in observations and two formal observations this would give enough information for formative and summative teacher assessments.***

Statement 3	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	54	23
Agree (A)	89	38
Disagree (D)	72	31
Strongly Disagree (SD)	14	8

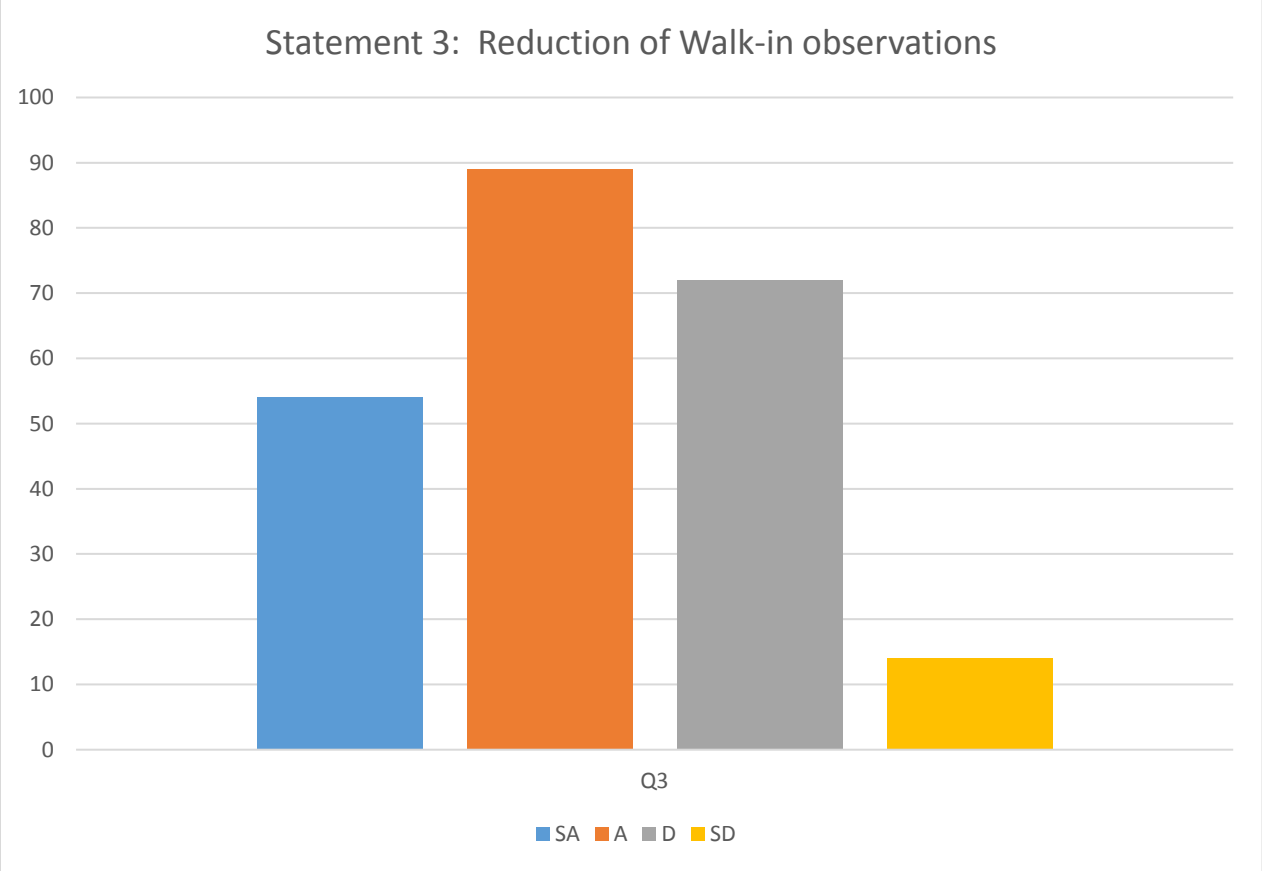


Figure 1.3. Analysis: The suggestion to reduce the number of observations to 4 was embraced by 61% of the administrators, but 39% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 1.4. Statement 4: The time frame for observations is fair.

Statement 4	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	15	7
Agree (A)	154	67
Disagree (D)	48	21
Strongly Disagree (SD)	12	5

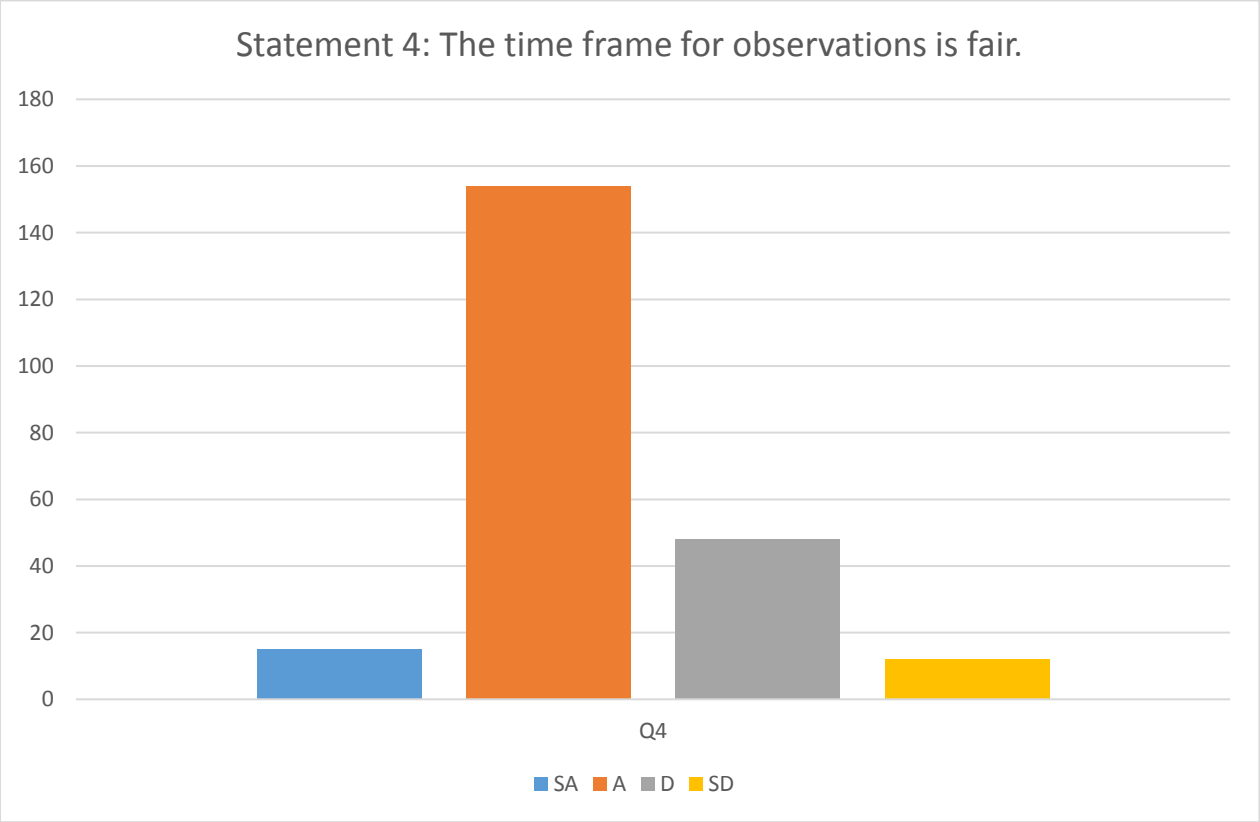


Figure 1.4. Analysis: Seventy-four percent believed that the time frame for observations are fair, with twenty-six percent disagreeing.

Table 1.5. Statement 5: The instrument allows sufficient time for the administrator to assess.

Statement 5	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	11	5
Agree (A)	139	61
Disagree (D)	65	29
Strongly Disagree (SD)	12	5

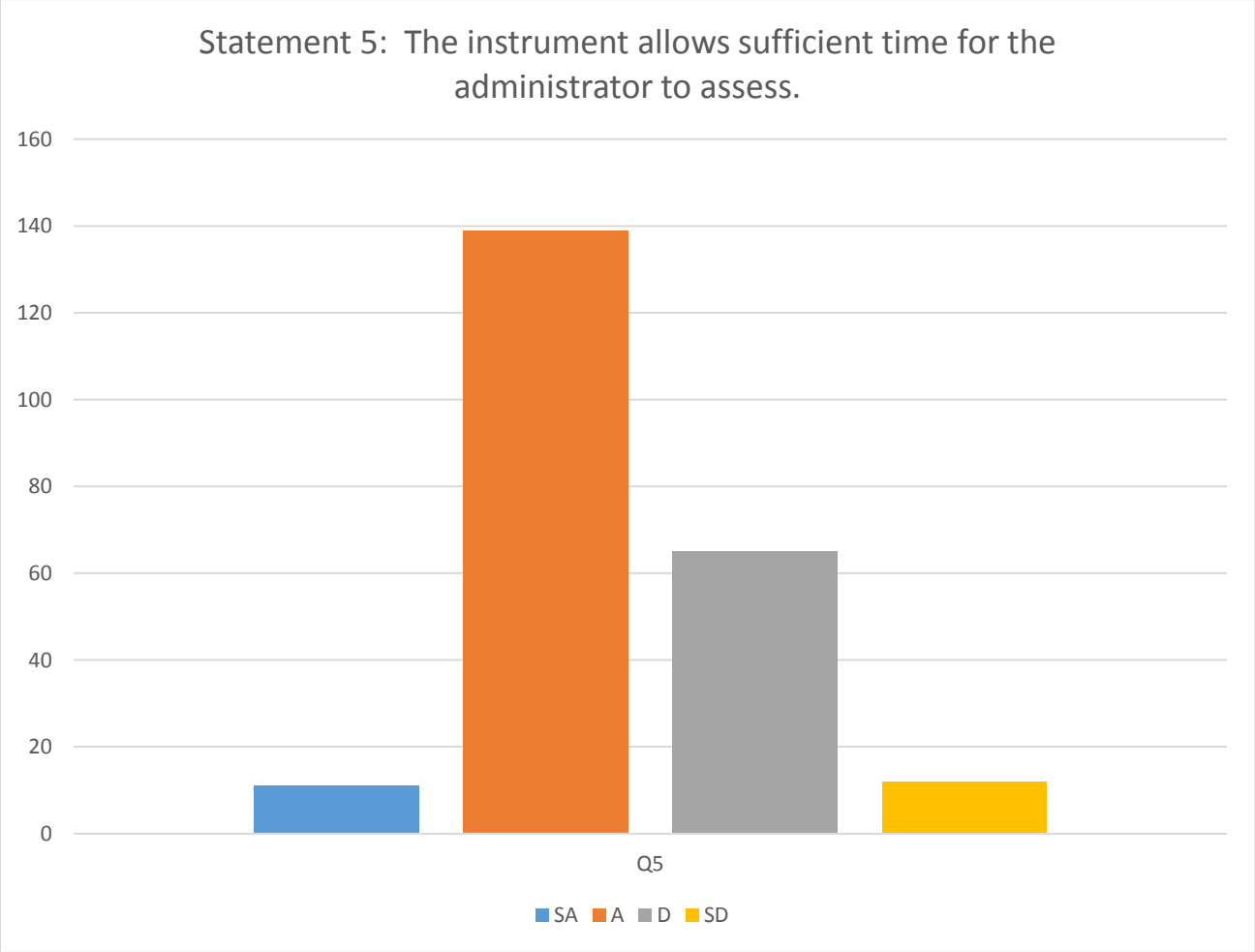


Figure 1.5. Analysis: Sixty-six percent felt the timeframe was sufficient for assessing teachers, with thirty-four percent disagreeing.

Table 1.6. ***Use of words consistently, frequently, appropriate, multiple, and sporadically, does not provide a quantitative measurement.***

Statement 6	n	%
Use of words consistently, frequently, appropriate, multiple, and sporadically, does not provide a quantitative measurement.		
Strongly Agree (SA)	52	23
Agree (A)	126	56
Disagree (D)	46	20
Strongly Disagree (SD)	3	1

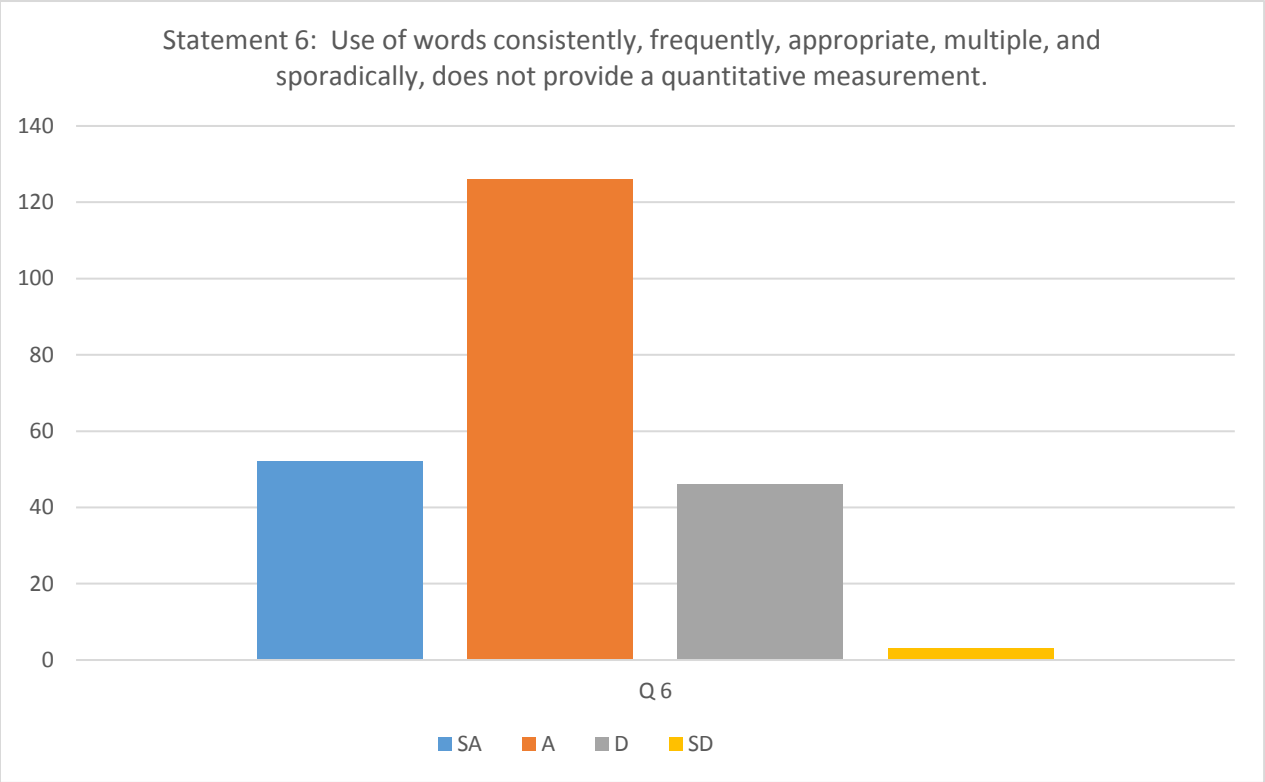


Figure 1.6. Analysis: Seventy-nine percent of administrators felt the word choice did not provide a quantifiable measure.

Table 1. 7. ***Statement 7: For each domain, having a number of specific artifacts or observable practices for each standard in the rubric in addition to classroom observations would be more effective in assessing teacher performance.***

Statement 7	n	%
Strongly Agree(SA)	26	11
Agree (A)	119	52
Disagree (D)	71	31
Strongly Disagree (SD)	13	6

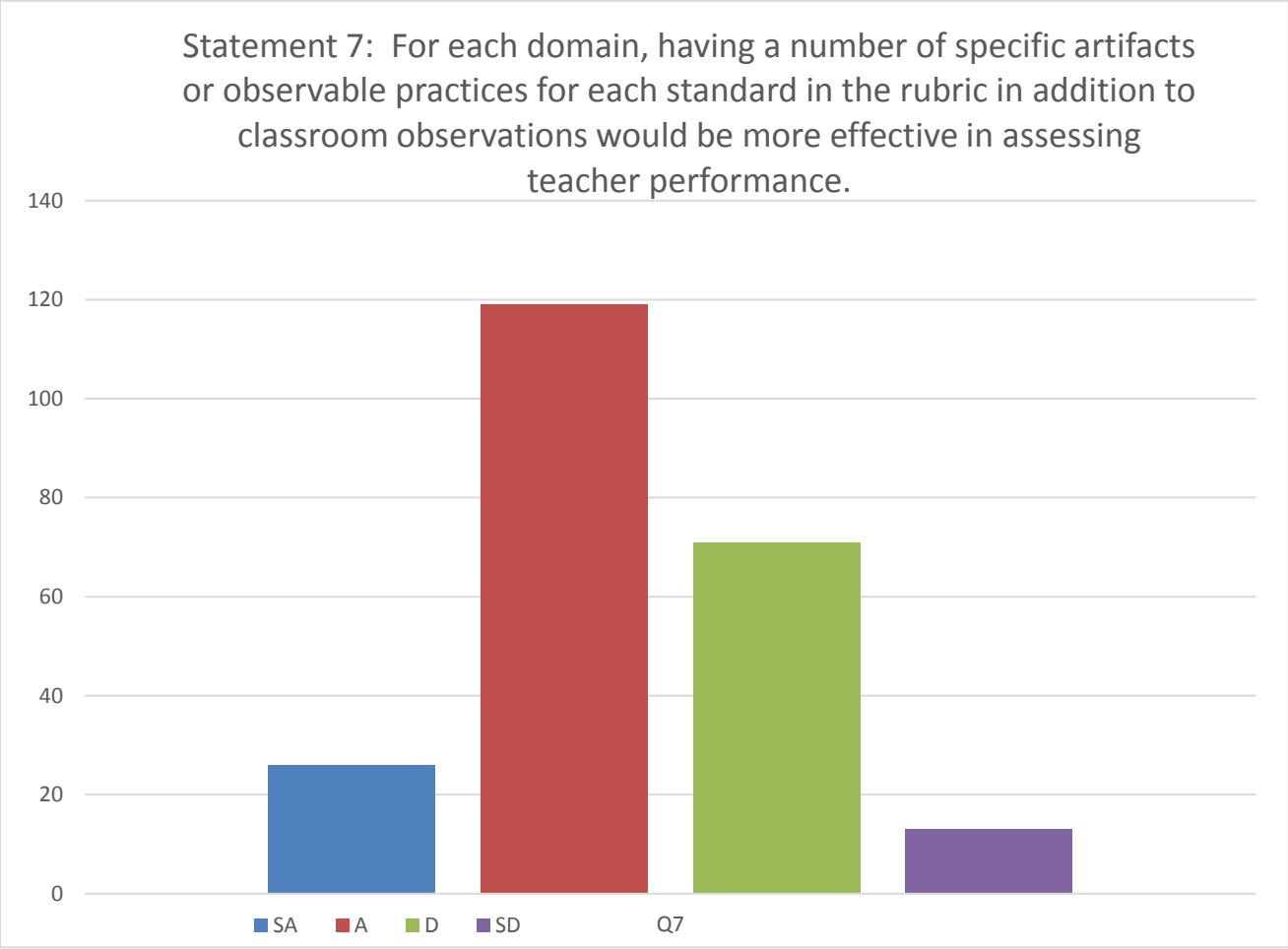


Figure 1.7. Analysis: Sixty-three percent believed that specific artifacts and practices would assist administrators in the evaluation process, with thirty-seven percent disagreeing.

Table 1.8. ***Statement 8: There seems to be repetition in each standard.***

Statement 8	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	37	16
Agree (A)	145	64
Disagree (D)	44	20
Strongly Disagree (SD)	0	0

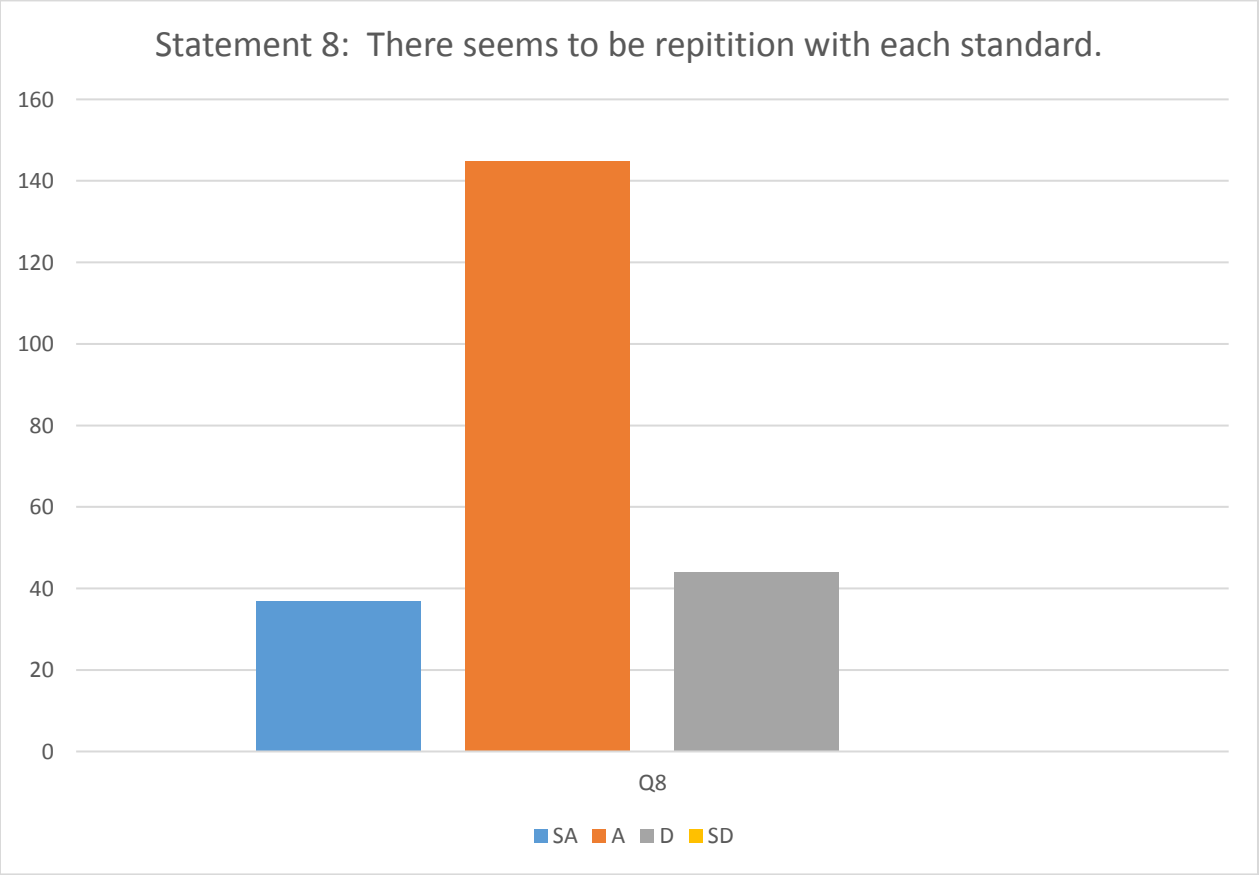


Figure. 1.8. Analysis: Eighty percent agreed that the standards overlapped and were redundant.

Table 1.9. Statement 9: The lack of uniformity in lesson plans and testing formats is problematic in assessing teacher performance.

Statement 9	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	36	16
Agree (A)	118	52
Disagree (D)	68	30
Strongly Disagree (SD)	6	2

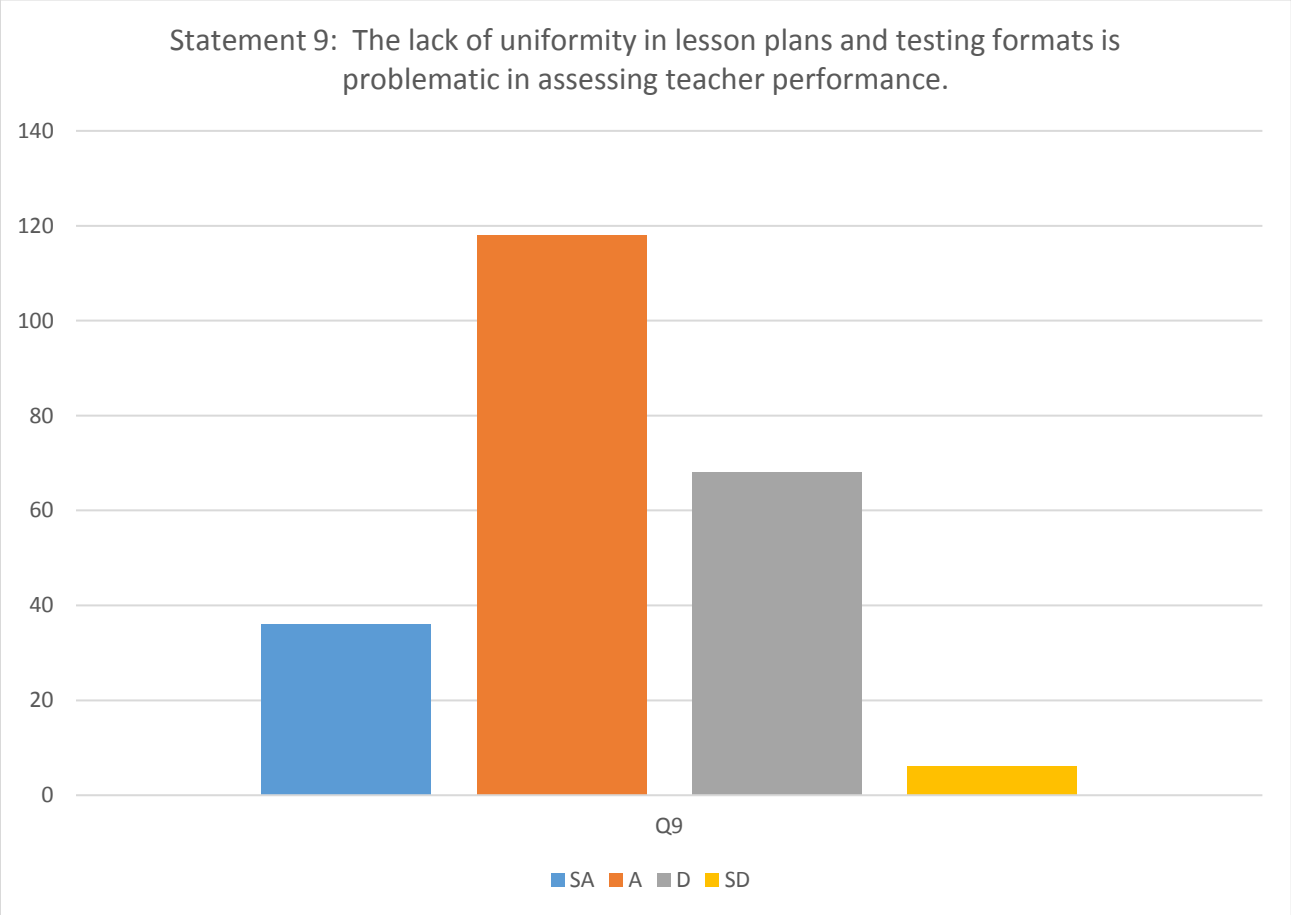


Figure 1.9. Analysis: Sixty-eight percent addressed the lack of consistency in formats as an issue in evaluating teachers.

Table 1.10. Statement 10: The wording in the domains needs to be simplified.

Statement 10	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	58	23
Agree (A)	130	57
Disagree (D)	41	18
Strongly Disagree (SD)	1	0

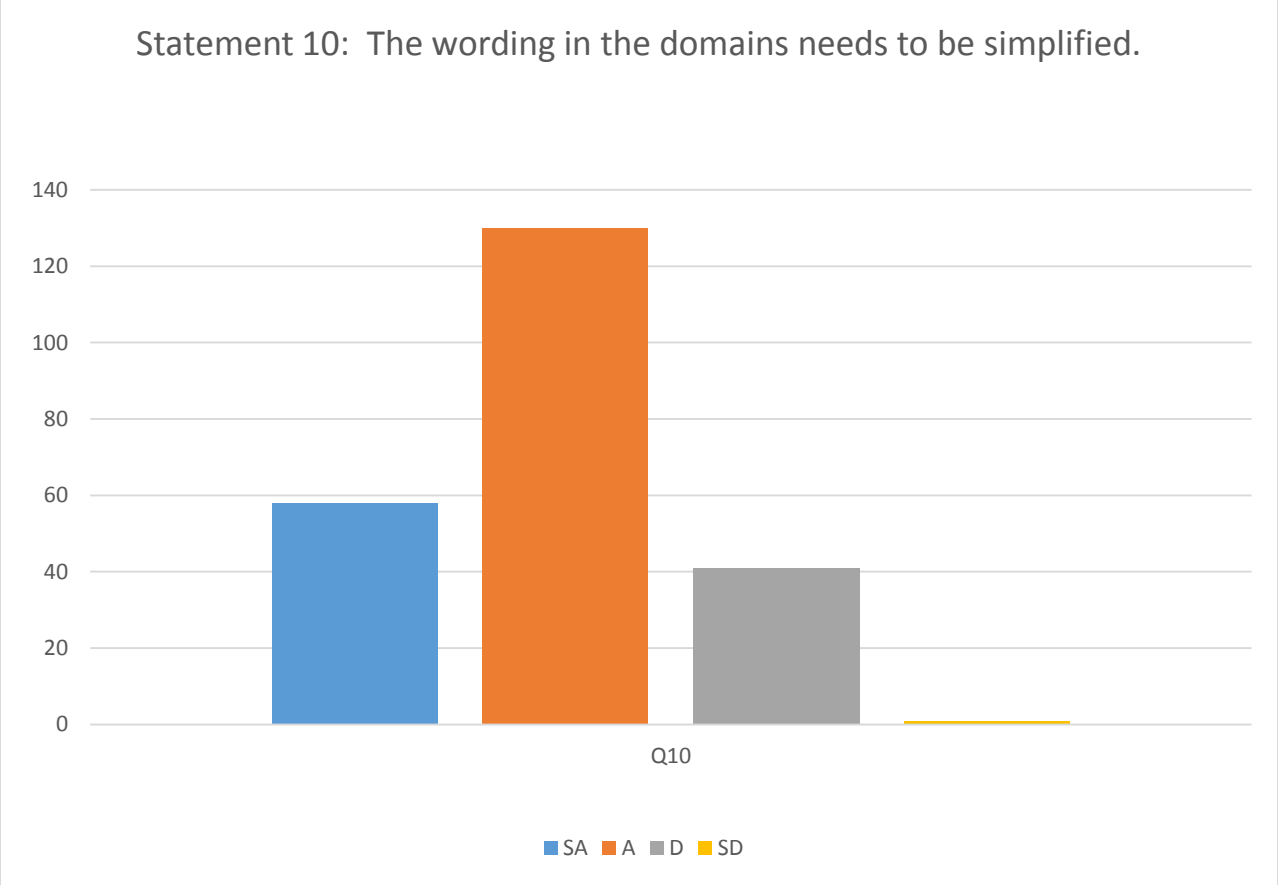


Figure 1.10. Analysis: Eighty percent thought the choice of words in each Domain needed to be simplified.

Table 1.11. Statement 11: Wording is not fair for new teachers.

Statement 11	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	25	11
Agree (A)	102	45
Disagree (D)	99	43
Strongly Disagree (SD)	2	1

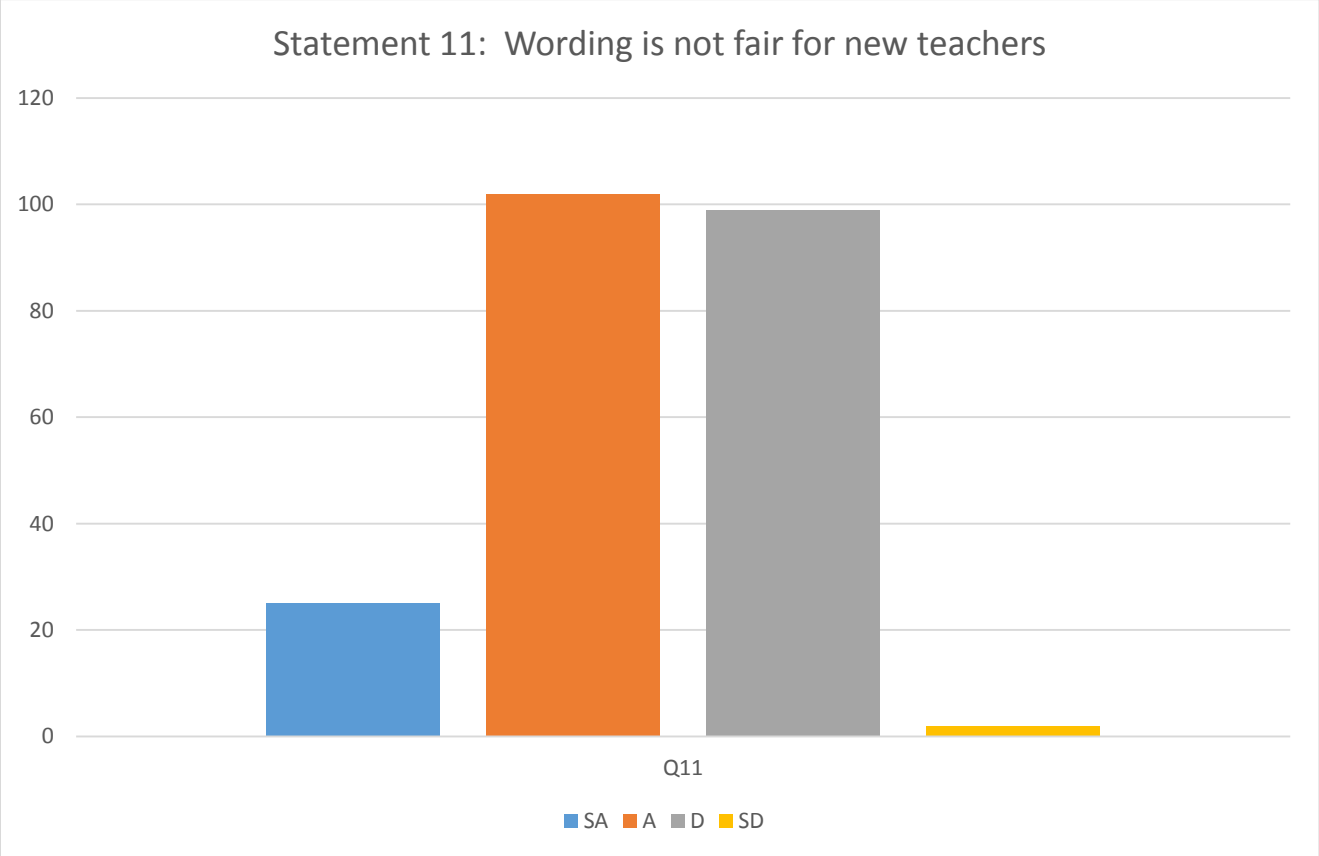


Figure 1.11. Analysis: Fifty-six percent felt the wording was difficult for new teachers, while 44% thought the wording was fair.

Table 1.12. Statement 12: Being 'frequent', but not 'consistent' in regards to relevance in student's lives is acceptable.

Statement 12	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	11	5
Agree (A)	73	33
Disagree (D)	121	54
Strongly Disagree (SD)	18	8

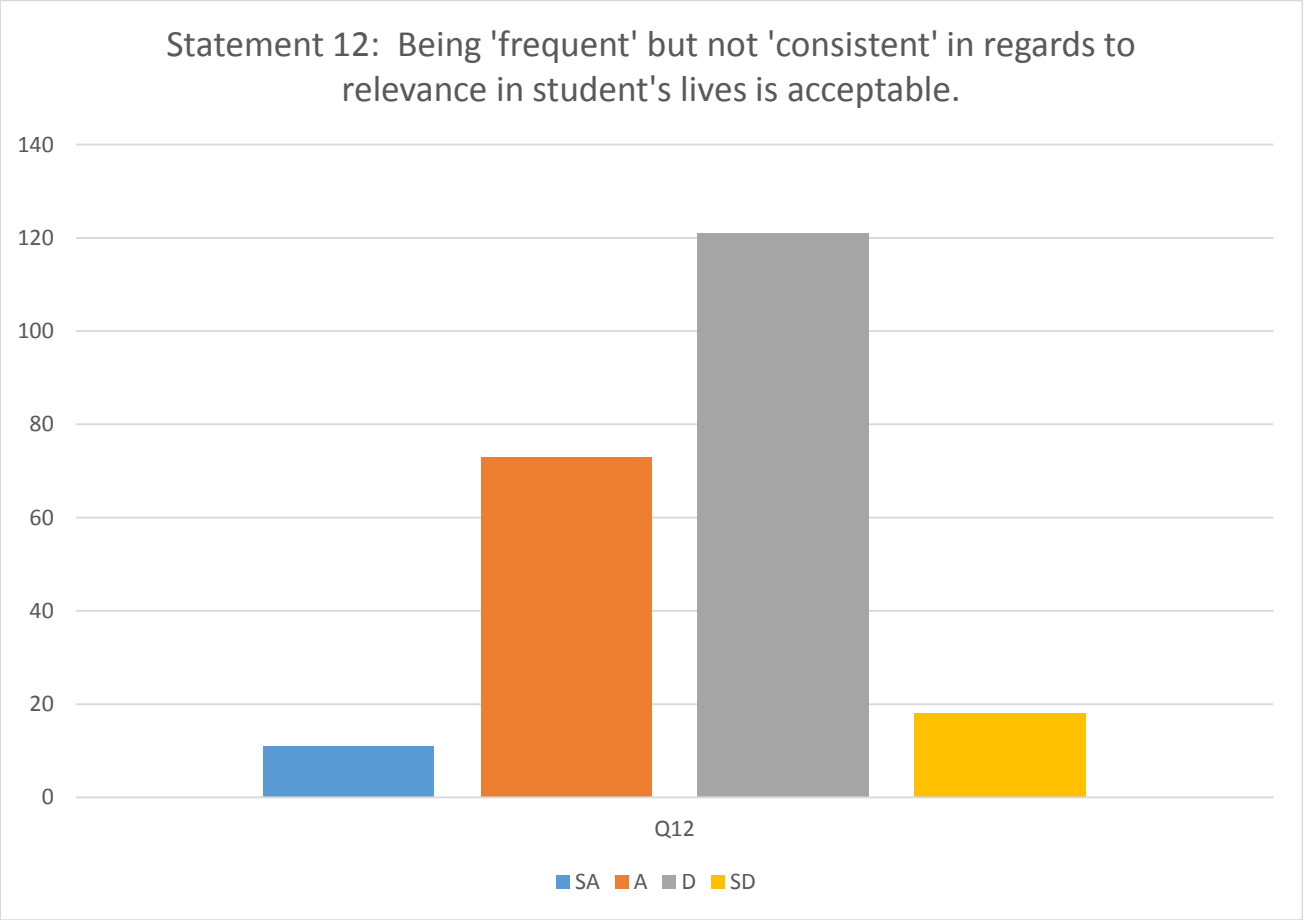


Figure 1.12. Analysis: Sixty-two percent of administrators indicated that class work relevance to students' lives needed to be consistent, while thirty-eight percent thought that frequent relevance was acceptable.

Table 1.13. Statement 13: I use the PLC meetings to assess the planning domain.

Statement 13	n	%
Strongly Agree(SA)	13	6
Agree (A)	134	58
Disagree (D)	75	34
Strongly Disagree (SD)	7	2

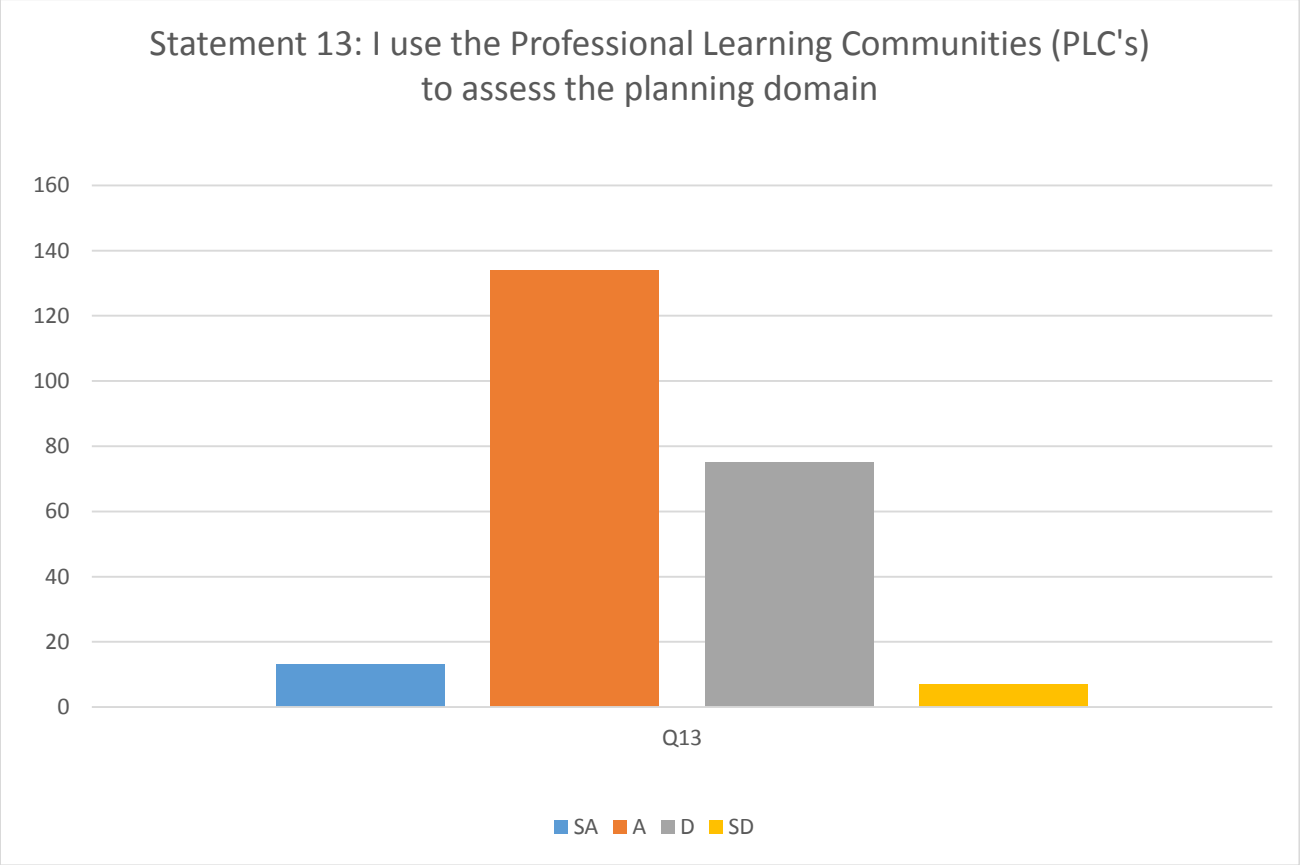
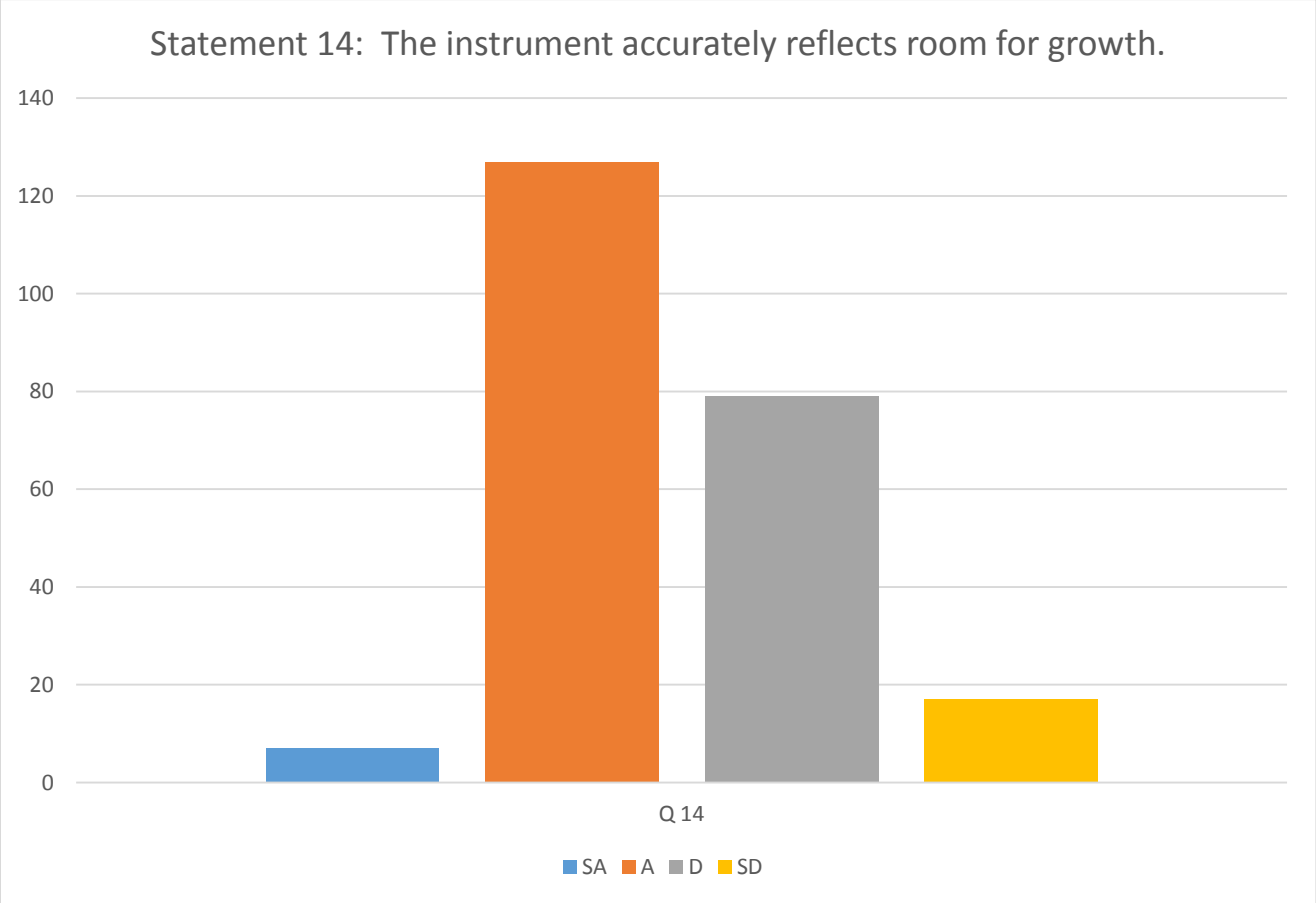


Figure 1.13. Analysis: Sixty-four percent used PLC meetings as a key source in assessing the Planning Domain.

Table 1.14. Statement 14: The instrument accurately reflects room for growth.

Statement 14	n	%
Strongly Agree(SA)	16	7
Agree (A)	144	63
Disagree (D)	60	26
Strongly Disagree (SD)	10	4



Statement 1.14. Analysis: Seventy percent agreed that MSTAR provides information for areas of growth, with thirty percent disagreeing.

Table 1.15. Statement 15: The rubric levels accurately represent a teacher's performance level and the implementation of best practices.

Statement 15	n	%
Strongly Agree(SA)	7	3
Agree (A)	127	55
Disagree (D)	79	34
Strongly Disagree (SD)	17	8

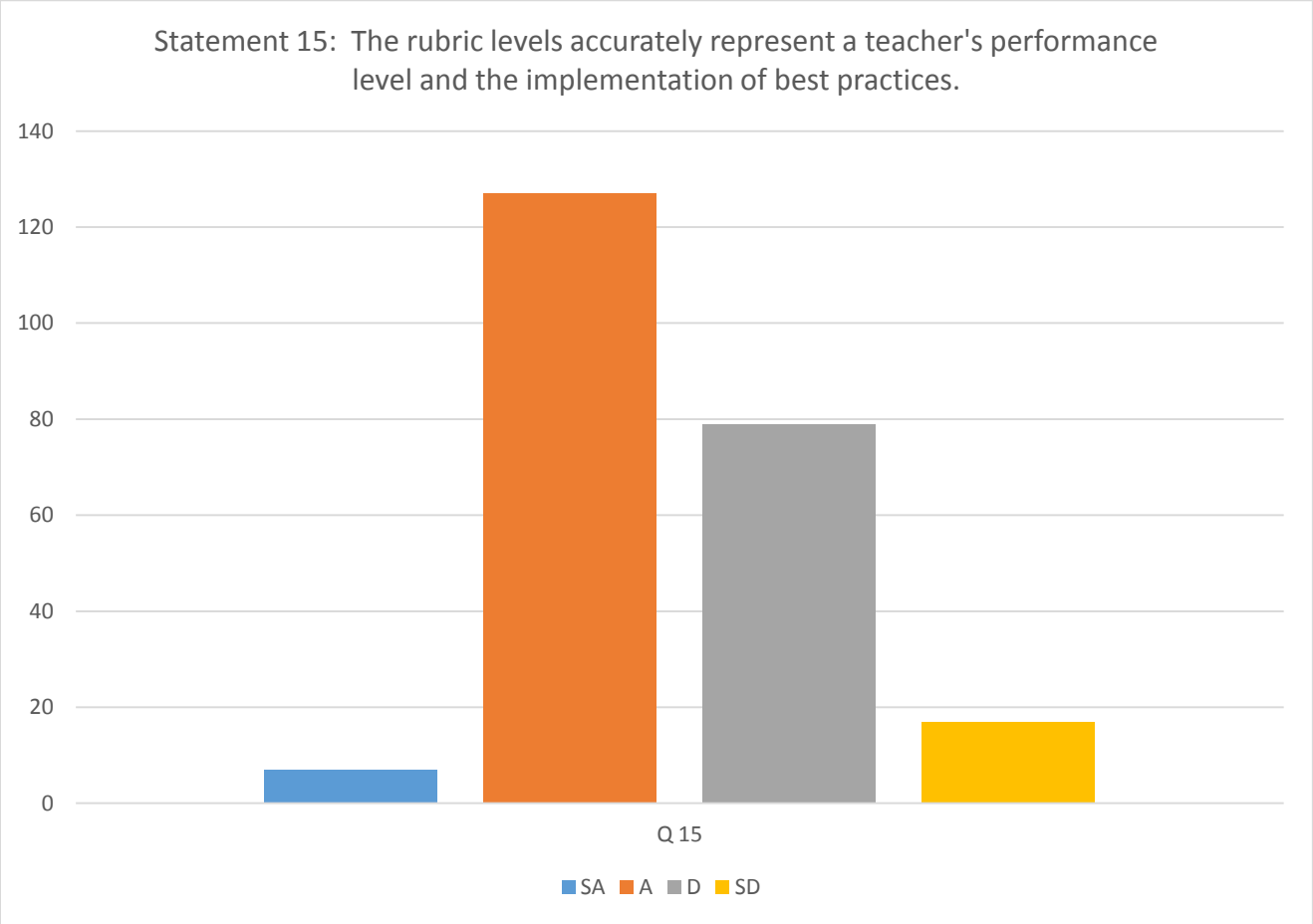


Figure 1.15. Analysis: Fifty-eight percent felt the rubric showed a teacher's performance and use of best practices, while forty-two percent disagreed.

Table 1.16. Statement 16: The MSTAR evaluation instrument raises teacher awareness and effectiveness.

Statement 16	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	35	15
Agree (A)	132	58
Disagree (D)	48	21
Strongly Disagree (SD)	14	6

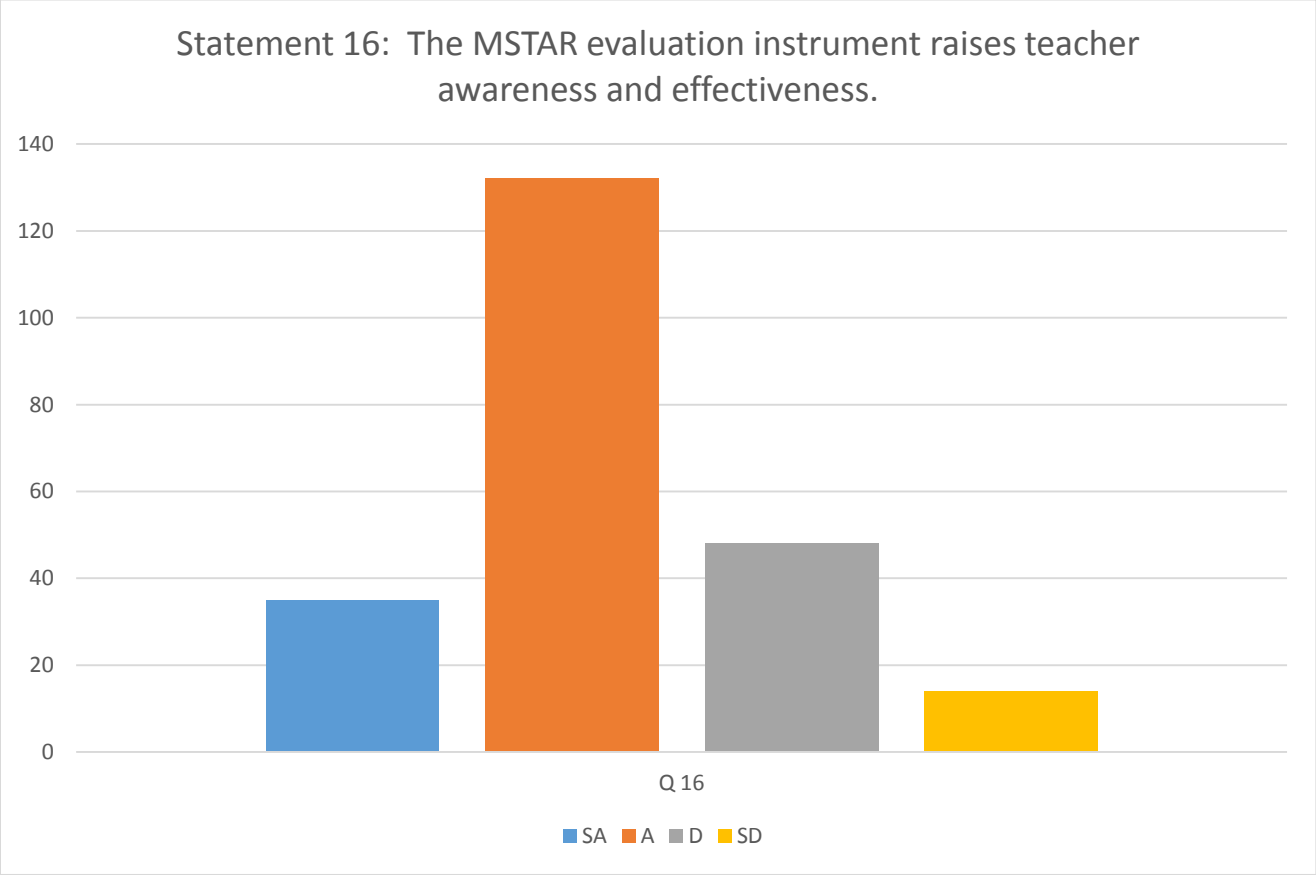


Figure 1.16. Analysis: Seventy-three percent believed MSTAR served to raise awareness and effectiveness, with twenty-seven percent disagreeing.

Table 1.17. Statement 17: The MSTAR evaluation instrument allows for equity of teacher evaluations.

Statement 17	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	17	8
Agree (A)	111	49
Strongly Disagree (SD)	76	33
Disagree (D)	24	10

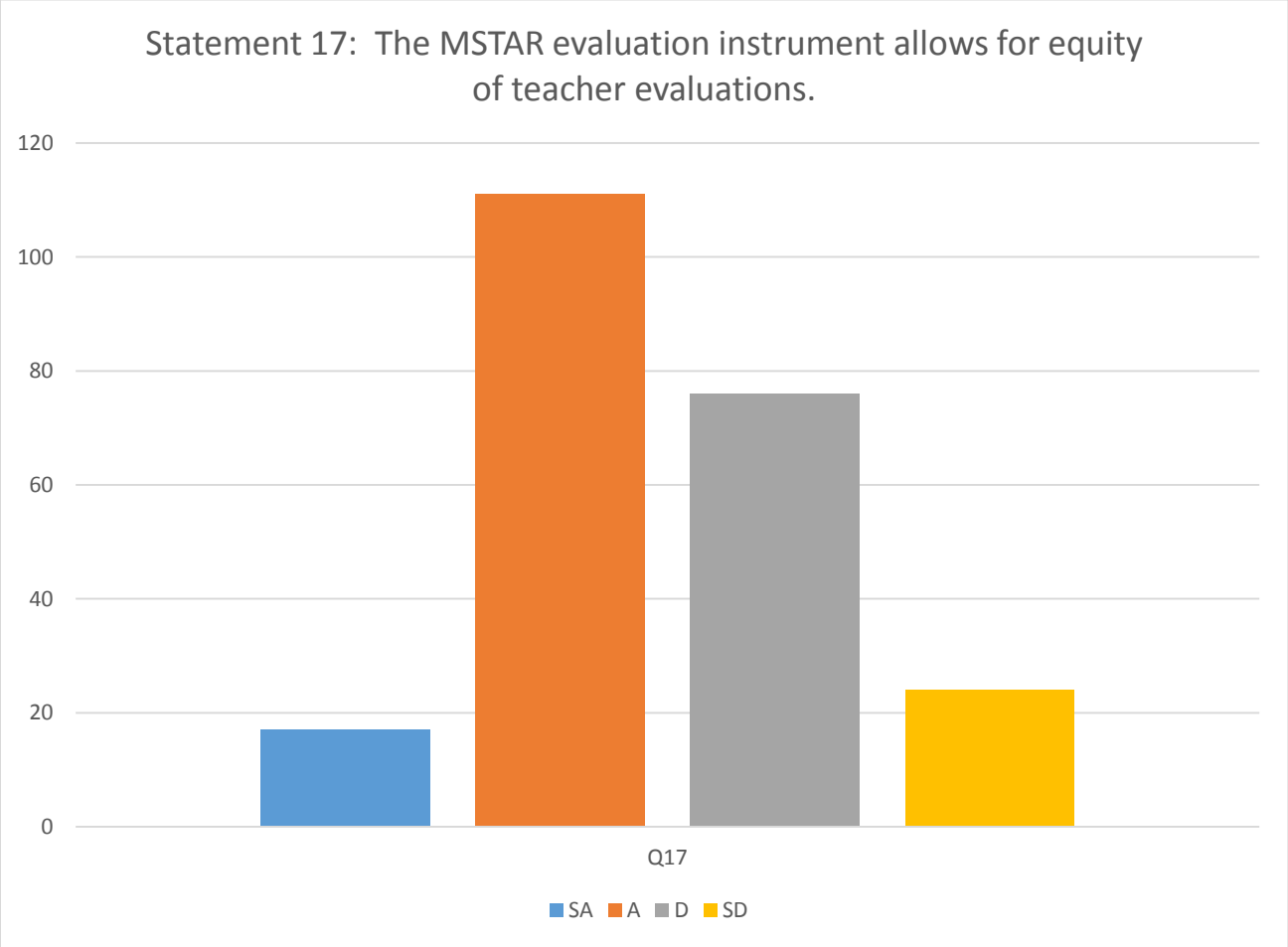


Figure 1.17. Analysis: *Fifty-seven percent felt the instrument allowed evaluation equity, with forty-three percent disagreeing.*

Table 1.18. Statement 18: The MSTAR evaluation instrument encourages Professional Learning Communities (PLC) with collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity.

Statement 18	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	27	12
Agree (A)	138	61
Disagree (D)	51	23
Strongly Disagree (SD)	11	4

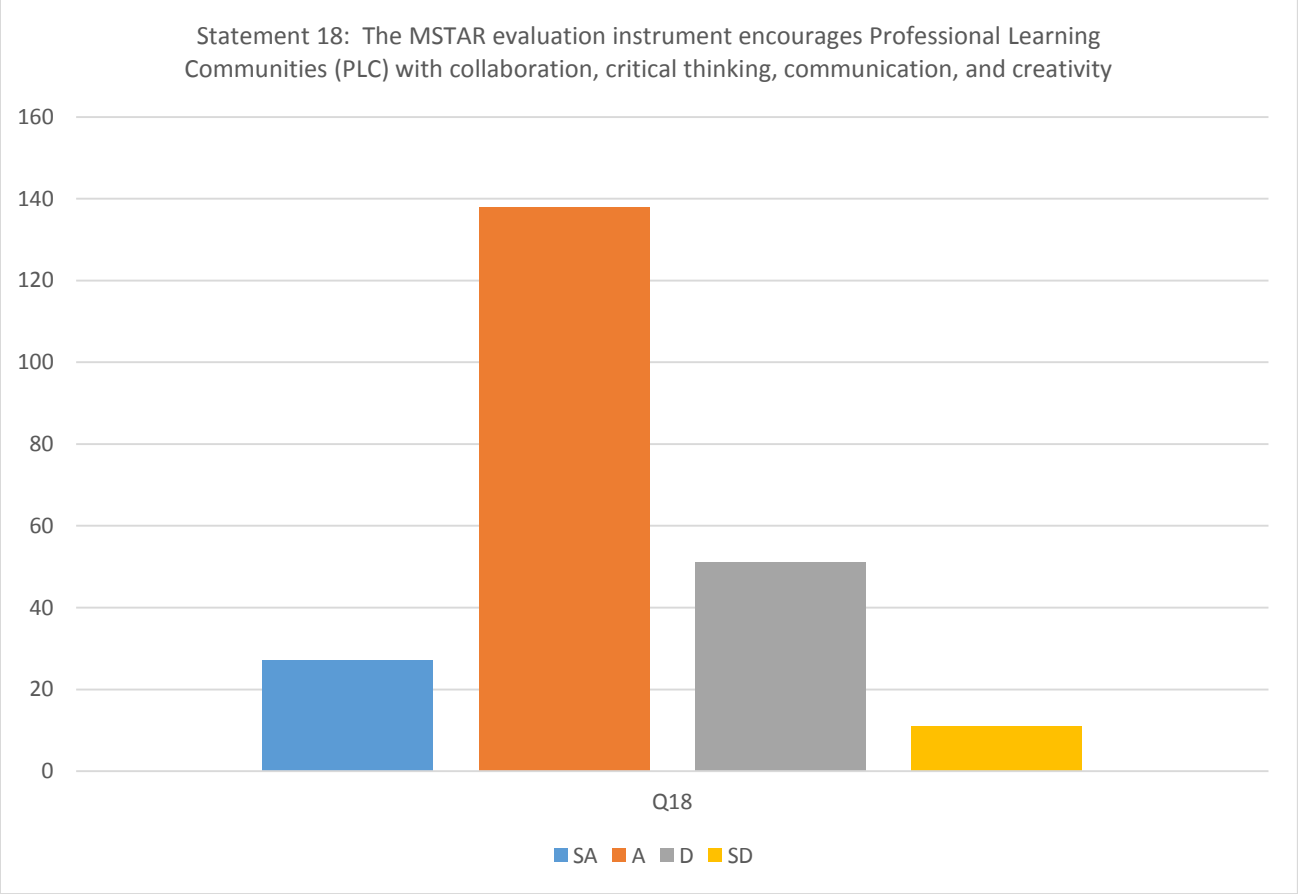


Figure 1.18. Analysis: Seventy-three percent believed the MSTAR encouraged PLC work, with twenty-seven percent disagreeing.

Table 1.19. Statement 19: The MSTAR evaluation instrument encourages more frequent interactions between the teacher and the school administrator.

Statement 19	n	%
Strongly Agree(SA)	40	17
Agree (A)	141	62
Disagree (D)	40	17
Strongly Disagree (SD)	9	4

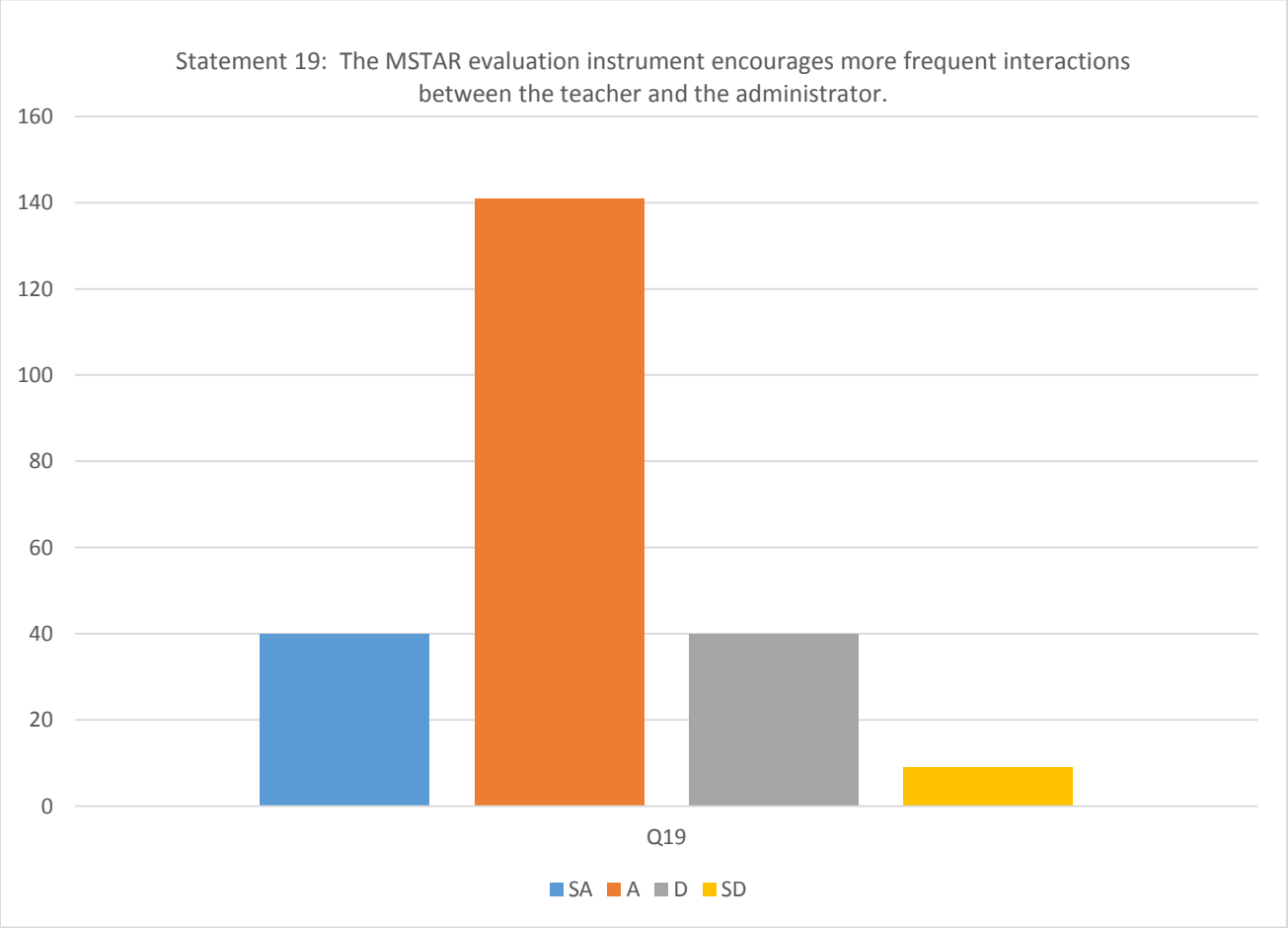


Figure 1.19. Analysis: Seventy-nine percent felt the instrument supported more interactions, with twenty-one percent disagreeing.

Table 1.20. Statement 20: The MSTAR instrument raises the expectation of distinguished teaching.

Statement 20	n	%
Strongly Agree (SA)	42	18
Agree (A)	127	56
Disagree (D)	51	22
Strongly Disagree (SD)	10	4

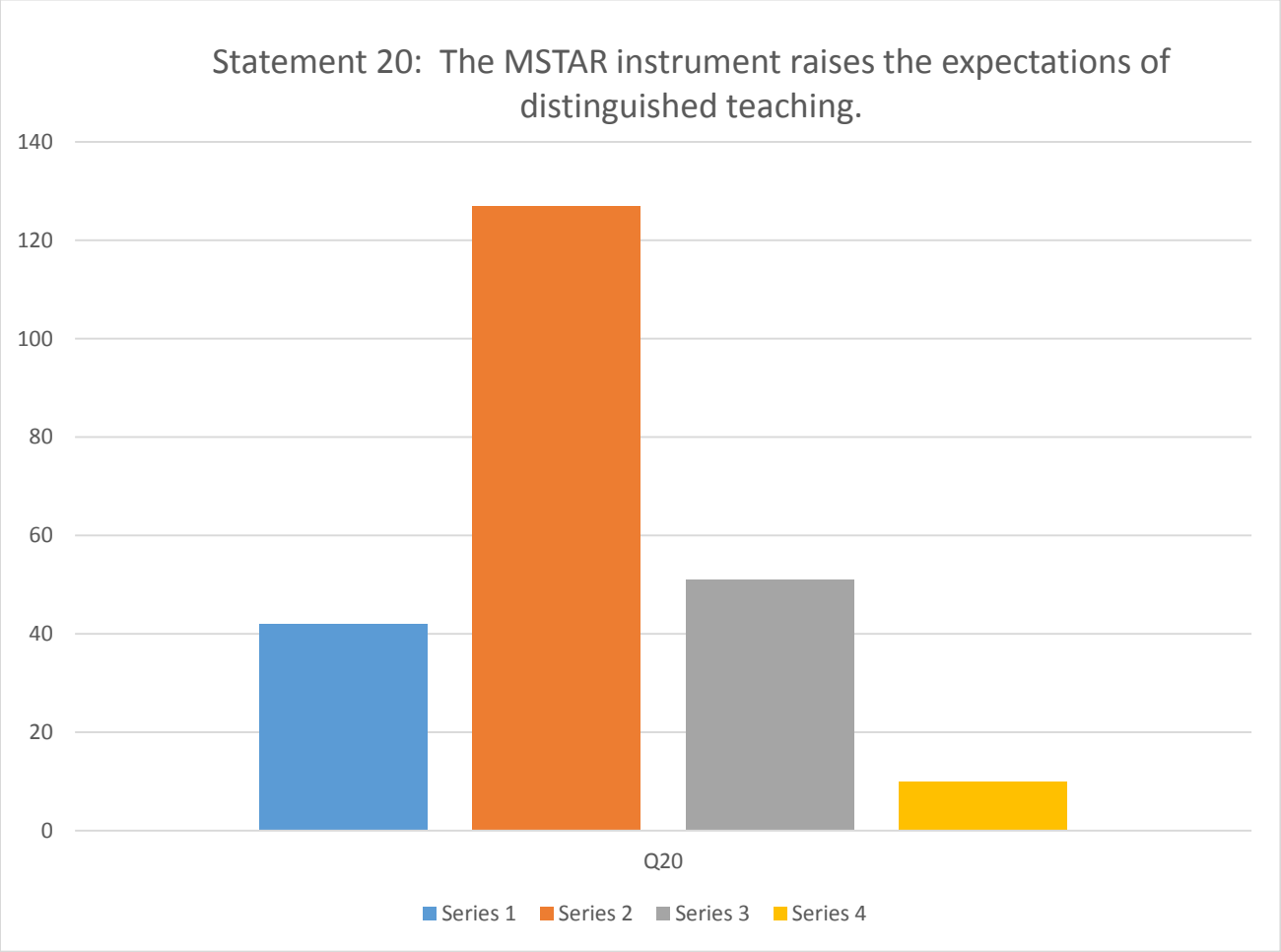


Figure 1.20. Analysis: Seventy-four percent believed MSTAR raised the expectation of distinguished teaching, while twenty-six percent disagreed.

Summary of Responses by Theme

Survey responses were categorized by the themes of Principal Training (Statement 1), Time (Statements 4, 5), Expectations (Statements 2, 3, 12, 14, 15, 20), Word Choice /Clarity of Directions (Statements 6, 8, 10, 11), Equity (Statements 7, 9, 17), and Collaborative Support (Statements 13, 16, 18, 19).

Principal Training (Statement 1): The State Department of Education provided multiple training sessions on the M-STAR instrument. 75% (n=170) of the surveyed principals believed they had received the necessary training, but 25% (n=57) principals did not feel they were adequately prepared to use the instrument.

Time (Statements 2, 3, 4, 5): Feedback on the number of observations required (7) indicated 61% (n=143) of administrators felt that 4 observations would be adequate to cover both formative and summative teacher assessments. The amount of time required for Teacher Observations was adequate for 75% (n=169) of the principals surveyed, but the time to assess the observations was not sufficient for 34% (n=77) of the principals.

Expectations (Statements 12, 14, 15, 20): 'Consistent relevance' in teaching content was important to 37% (n=84) of principals surveyed, and 'frequent relevance' was acceptable for 61% (n=139). One hundred and sixty principals believed M-STAR showed areas for teacher growth, but only 59% (n=134) thought it depicted teacher performance accurately. Overall, 169 (n=74%) principals felt MSTAR raised understanding of distinguished teaching.

Word Choice /Clarity of Directions (Statements 6, 8, 10, 11): There was consensus that clear and concise language was not provided with M-STAR. Wording did not provide adequate direction for quantifiable measurements, and 80% (n=182) of principals felt that repetition in the

standards hindered the ability to focus on the unique characteristics of each standard for teacher feedback.

Equity (Statements 7, 9, 17): M-STAR currently utilizes artifacts in the Domains of Planning, Assessment, and Professional Responsibilities, but not in the Observation Domains of Instruction and Learning Environment. 64% (n=145) of principals agreed on the need for a number of specific artifacts and observable practices for each standard, and the district autonomy in formats of lesson planning and testing made it difficult for 68% (n=154) principals to assess teachers, with 100 concerns about equity of teacher evaluations across the state using M-STAR.

Collaborative Support (Statements 13, 16, 18, 19): Professional Learning Communities are a statewide requirement, yet 27% (n=62) did not see the meetings as important in planning content and pedagogy of lessons, establishing higher order thinking with instructional goals, accommodating student diversity, and aligning units with state standards. 74% (n=167) of principals agreed that the M-STAR process raised teacher awareness and effectiveness, and 80% (n=181) agreed that the instrument encouraged dialogue between administrator and teachers.

Implications

The results of this study suggest that there is an overall favorable response to the new accountability instrument created by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) on the part of principals. From this study it can be concluded that the majority of respondents utilized the new M-STAR with some degree of understanding of the evaluation instrument as well as finding the instrument more effective than ineffective. However, the responses on every statement on the survey showed evidence of a lack of deep understanding to effectively ensure that the evaluation process is being conducted systematically and with fidelity throughout the state. It is

suggested that more extensive explanation of, training in, and feedback on the evaluation instrument can assist in further developing common understanding for optimum use. Therefore, the recommendation is to continue frequent dialogue and training opportunities on the Domains and the Standards within M-STAR to help principals use this accountability tool more effectively and consistently.

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