

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PURPOSE OF TRADITIONAL GRADING AND THE
INFLUENCE OF ESTABLISHED SCHOOL OR DISTRICT GRADING CULTURES, GUIDELINES,
AND POLICIES IN CONNECTICUT PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how public middle school teachers in Connecticut described their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. The research explored the problem of standards-based grading reform due to teachers' grading perceptions. The literature reviewed includes the challenges of traditional grading and its effect on students, standards-based grading reform, and the challenges associated with successful standards-based grading reform. Data for this qualitative study was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight participants who had experience as middle school teachers using a traditional alpha-numeric grading system. The findings from this study indicate that, (1) teachers believe the primary purpose of grading is to measure and assess student learning, (2) teachers believe that traditional grading is partially ineffective, (3) school and district grading policies remain open-ended and idiosyncratic with limited guidance by leadership, (4) there are pervasive school and district policies dissuasive of failure, and (5) teachers believe school and district policies diminish the value of grading. The results of this study indicate that there is a degree of consensus among teachers about the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning. Additionally, the results of the study indicate that school and district policies remain open-ended and idiosyncratic, and negatively influence teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading.

Keywords: Grading, grading reform, teachers' grading perceptions, teachers' grading practice, traditional grading, standards-based grading.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Grading is a phenomenon that dates back more than a century as a way to assess and provide feedback on student learning (Feldman, 2018; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Traditional alpha and numeric grades based on a 100-point scale became the standard for assessing and communicating student learning in most schools by the 1940s (Alex, 2022). However, while it may be a necessity in communicating academic achievement, a century of research has shown traditional grading to be a complex phenomenon in education because of the multifaceted nature of grades (Brookhart et al., 2016). Grades represent a composite of various factors, such as academic achievement, effort, and motivation (Brookhart et al., 2016).

Traditional grading practices have remained largely unchanged since they were adopted during the mid to late 19th century (Feldman, 2018). At that time, a rapidly changing country characterized by industrialization, urbanization, and mass immigration necessitated adapting the public education system to evaluate, motivate, and track a growing number of students more effectively (Feldman, 2018). The research on grading and grading reform has shown that the complexity partially lies in what teachers choose to grade (Brookhart et al., 2016; Cross & Frary, 1999; Feldman, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Grading practices embody teachers' beliefs about education and their valuation of student dispositions and attitudes (Brookhart et al., 2016; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Teachers rely on their professional judgement and experience to decide what assignments and attitudes are most important when assigning grades (Feldman, 2018). Teachers value fairness, and traditional grades have historically been a composite of both learning and behavior (Brookhart et al., 2016).

Research indicates that traditional grades are often subjective (Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a; McMillan, 2019). Studies have shown traditional or hodgepodge grades to have a high degree of variability, leading to questions about their reliability (Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey, 2015; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Rauschenberg, 2014). These hodgepodge grading practices can also be harmful to students. Research has uncovered grade inflation, deflation, and grading bias as typical issues of traditional grading (Arrafii, 2020; Berg et al., 2020; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Hardré, 2014; Quinn, 2023).

Though grading reform is not a novel idea, recent attention has questioned using traditional grades and the need to rethink how teachers assess and communicate learning (Fisher & Frey, 2020). Standards-based grading, which removes non-achievement factors and utilizes standards, has been promoted as a more accurate way to measure and communicate student achievement (Link & Guskey, 2022). Some research on the effectiveness of standards-based grading has been positive, showing a higher correlation between students' course grades and standardized test scores than in traditionally graded classes (Pollio & Hochbein, 2015). However, teachers, along with students and other stakeholders, will need time to think about the purpose of grades and the necessary changes in grading practice if standards-based grading reform is to be implemented effectively (Huey et al., 2022; Wilcox & Townsley, 2022).

Middle school teachers were the focus of this study because of the variation in grading practices at the different grade levels (Guskey & Link, 2019a). Guskey and Link (2019a) found that middle school teachers (6-8) and high school teachers (9-12) attach more weight to projects, summative assessments, and homework. Conversely, elementary school teachers (K-5) placed greater emphasis on formative assessments and classroom observations (Guskey & Link, 2019a).

In addition to the varied grading practices, student motivation begins to decrease in middle school and grades become transactional, used as an extrinsic tool to encourage student learning and behavior (Alley, 2019; Feldman, 2018).

Researchers have called for grading reform, but it remains a challenge (Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020; Guskey, 2015). Issues with traditional grading practices have been questioned by educators and researchers for over a century (Guskey, 2015). Woodbury and Gess-Newsome's (2002) Teacher-Centered Systemic Reform Model, one of the conceptual frameworks used to guide this study, shows that teacher thinking is central to the reform process and partially influenced by personal factors. In addition, Feldman (2018) identified that teachers have a personal connection with grading. He argued that ideas conflicting with the beliefs held by teachers about the purpose of grading pose a challenge for reform if they are rejected. Teachers' beliefs, ideas, and values about grades are critical to the decisions they make and are reflected in their grading practices (Kunnath, 2017). Furthermore, a lack of professional training or education about grading generates confusion about the purpose of grades and forces teachers to rely on experience to guide their practice (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

In addition to personal factors, Woodbury and Gess-Newsome (2002) also identified structural and cultural factors as influential on teacher thinking. They argued that for reform to succeed, leaders need to evaluate their efforts with a keen focus on teacher thinking and the systemic organizational changes needed to achieve the reform (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). Leaders should consider the necessary policies or procedures that must be implemented to support the reform effort as well as the school culture (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

The researcher's interest in this topic stemmed from their experience as a former middle school teacher and a current educational leader with experience using traditional grading

practices. As a teacher, the researcher experienced incongruencies between their grades and student performance on standards-aligned assessments. This resulted in a personal interest in the reliability of traditional grading. Driven by the research on traditional and standards-based grading and the need for reform, this research sought to uncover teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading and how these perceptions are influenced by school or district culture, guidelines, and policies on grading.

Definition of Key Terms

Cognitive Factors (Achievement Factors). Factors teachers consider when grading students related to their academic performance. Examples of cognitive factors may include formative and summative assessments, traditional tests, quizzes, or projects, oral presentations, and classroom observations (Guskey & Link, 2019a).

Elementary Levels. Grades kindergarten through fifth (Guskey & Link, 2019a).

Grading. The method by which marks are assigned to student work and cumulative academic performance (Brookhart et al., 2016).

Grading Reform. Reform designed to improve the accuracy and reliability of grades (Westerberg, 2016).

Hodgepodge Grading. Inaccurate and unreliable grading practices that utilize cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Cross & Frary, 1999).

Non-Cognitive Factors (Non-Achievement Factors). Factors teachers consider when compiling student grades not related to academic indicators. Examples of non-cognitive factors include work completion, homework completion, effort, behavior, work habits, and progress made (Guskey & Link, 2019a).

Secondary Levels. Grades six through 12 (Guskey & Link, 2019a).

Standards-Based Grading. Grades that are compiled from accurate indicators of student proficiency and measured against specific standards. The goal of standards-based grading is to remove non-cognitive factors and develop a more accurate representation of student learning (Munoz & Guskey, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2018; Schimmer, 2014; Schimmer et al., 2018; Spencer, 2012).

Traditional Grading. For this study, traditional grading will be defined as traditional letter or number grades assigned to students by teachers that are not explicitly tied to standards and may consist of both cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Brookhart et al., 2016).

Statement of the Problem

The problem studied is that standards-based grading remains a significant challenge to effectively implement and traditional grading practices remain largely entrenched in K-12 education as the result of teachers' grading perceptions (Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Nowruzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). In addition, research has shown there to be confusion about the purpose of grading as well as a lack of professional training or education on how to grade (Feldman, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). As a result, teachers become isolated, and their grading practices idiosyncratic (Feldman, 2018; McMillan, 2019). Olsen and Buchanan (2019) and Feldman (2018) both identified that teachers tend to lean more heavily on their personal beliefs, philosophies of education, and past experiences to guide their grading practices because of these conditions.

Education reformers have criticized traditional letter and numeric grades for being a hodgepodge of various cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a; McMillan, 2019). One of the primary issues with traditional grading is validity and

reliability, as there is a significant amount of difference in what teachers choose to grade and how they choose to grade it (Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Rauschenberg, 2014). Aside from being an inaccurate measure of student learning and academic achievement, traditional grading also leads to grade inflation and deflation and grading bias (Arrafii, 2020; Berg et al., 2020; Ferman & Fontes, 2022; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Hardré, 2014; Quinn, 2023). Grading bias can stem from various factors, including behavior, gender, and race (Berg et al., 2020; Ferman & Fontes, 2022; Quinn, 2023).

Despite the research showing a need for grading reform, standards-based grading efforts have met with considerable challenge due to the complexities of grading (Feldman, 2018; Guskey, 2020, 2021; Percell & Meyer, 2021; Spencer, 2012). The basic idea of standards-based grading is to remove non-achievement factors from students' grades and measure proficiency against standards (Link & Guskey, 2022). While some research has shown mixed accuracy of standards-based grading, others have argued that the fidelity of implementation may be the potential issue (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Link & Guskey, 2022; Pollio & Hochbein, 2015; Townsley & Varga, 2018). Research has shown that parent and teacher perceptions of standards-based grading have been positive regarding the clarity and depth of information it provides about student learning (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Swan et al., 2014).

Research demonstrates that little has changed over the last 100 years in terms of grading practice, and standards-based grading reform remains limited (Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020). The absence of training, education, or consensus on the purpose of grading forces teachers to utilize their knowledge and beliefs about grading to define their practice and reinforces the individuality of grading (Feldman, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Teacher-thinking is influential on their practice (Kunnath, 2017; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

When reform requires changing teachers' practices, it is necessary to shift their knowledge and beliefs about students and learning (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how public middle school teachers throughout the state of Connecticut described their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and how these perceptions were influenced by their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies. For this research study, traditional grading was defined as traditional letter or number grades assigned to students by teachers that were not explicitly tied to standards and may have consisted of both cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Brookhart et al., 2016). It is important to understand these perceptions because of the influence teachers' knowledge has on their grading practices (Kunnath, 2017; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

Research Questions and Design

The following research questions were addressed in this study. These research questions were designed following a review of the literature on traditional and standards-based grading, teachers' grading practices, and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to guide this study.

Research Question 1: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Research Question 2: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their school or districts' grading culture, guidelines, and policies?

Research Question 3: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe the influence of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Utilizing a phenomenological approach, eight participants were selected using a criterion sampling strategy. Participants selected for this study were public middle school teachers in Connecticut who had taught for at least three years and had experience utilizing traditional grading practices to assess and evaluate students. The researcher coded all interviews to develop significant themes related to the research questions. Themes and findings are analyzed and discussed in Chapter 4, along with implications and recommendations in Chapter 5.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study was driven by the researcher's own experience with the central phenomenon of traditional grading practices, both as a former public middle school teacher and current middle school department supervisor. Discussions around a shift to standards-based grading at the researcher's school prompted interest in grading reform. Initially, the intention was to focus solely on grading reform. However, additional research revealed this to be both a contentious and complex topic. After an initial review of the current literature, the focus of the study shifted from standards-based grading and grading reform to teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. This study was also driven by the researcher's desire to bring more teacher voice into the conversation around grading and grading reform.

The theoretical framework used to support this study was Piaget's cognitive constructivism. Constructivist learning theory states that the creation of knowledge is an active rather than a passive process and emphasizes the importance of prior knowledge and experience as learners attempt to construct new understanding (Narayan et al., 2012). Flavell (2020) stated that Piaget's theory of cognitive constructivism focused on the importance of the individual's internal knowledge structure or schema. An individual's intelligence and cognition are guided by

a process of assimilation and accommodation (Flavell, 2020). Flavell (2020) noted Piaget's belief that, as individuals are confronted with external realities, they attempt to either assimilate the new information into their existing knowledge structure or alter their existing knowledge structure to accommodate the new information.

Teachers' professional knowledge is a construct of their beliefs and is particularly influential in their perceptions, judgements, and behaviors (Kagan, 1992). Teachers' professional knowledge and beliefs about teaching grow with experience and, when confronted with new information, they must reconcile these ideas with their current beliefs (Kagan, 1992). The new knowledge has the potential to either confirm the teacher's beliefs and support learning or contradict their beliefs and inhibit it (Kagan, 1992). Feldman (2018) argued that teacher's grading practices are often influenced by their experience, values, and knowledge about education, emphasizing the role of constructivism and aligning with Kagan's (1992) seminal work on teacher-knowledge.

In addition to the theoretical framework, two conceptual frameworks were also identified to guide this research. The first is Kunnath's (2017) Teacher Grading Decision-making Framework which identifies teachers' "knowledge, beliefs, expectations, and values" as one of the three driving factors in teachers' grading practice. Additionally, a second conceptual framework, Woodbury and Gess-Newsome's (2002) Teacher-Centered Systemic Reform Model, positions teachers as central in the reform process, arguing that school change is about teacher change. Their framework demonstrates the connection between teacher thinking and practice and positions these within the larger context of personal, structural, and cultural factors. In addition to the theoretical framework, these two additional conceptual frameworks helped guide this study on teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of school or

district culture, guidelines, and policies. For grading reform to be successful, leaders need to evaluate their efforts with a focus on teachers' knowledge and beliefs (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). Constructivism provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how an individual's schema and experience interact in the formation of new knowledge (Flavell, 2020). The two conceptual frameworks then link teacher knowledge to practice (Kunnath, 2017; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). School reform aimed at changing teachers' practices must consider their thinking and work to shift their knowledge and beliefs (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Outlined below is a discussion of the assumptions, limitations, and scope which may have impacted the findings of this study. The researcher assumed that teachers would speak openly and honestly. However, experience, role, and site limitations likely affected the findings. It is important to note that this research study was intentionally limited to Connecticut public middle school teachers who utilized traditional grading to evaluate and assess students.

Assumptions

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) describe assumptions as the researcher's beliefs that may impact the study but for which no evidence exists. For this study, the researcher assumed that individuals selected to participate in this research would openly and honestly share their perceptions regarding the purpose of traditional grading. The researcher also expected that the participants would speak openly and honestly about their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, or policies. The researcher considered their own biases about grading as an educator. The researcher's experience with the central phenomenon of traditional grading may have influenced their analysis, interpretation, understanding, and presentation of the data. The

researcher took careful steps throughout the study to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Limitations

Limitations are inherent constraints within the study that may impact the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). For this study, limitations included those individuals who volunteered to participate in the research. Factors impacting teachers' perceptions of grading may have include the site at which they taught, their years of teaching experience, and the grade level and subject they taught. Research has shown that experience influences teacher practice, particularly with grading (Guskey, 2020; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Additionally, although it is assumed that teachers spoke honestly and openly about their perceptions regarding the purpose of traditional grading, teachers may have been guarded in what information they chose to share. This may have been especially true if their perceptions or ideas about grading were contradictory to established school or district guidelines or expectations. Lastly, Kagan (1992) argued that asking teachers directly about their knowledge or beliefs may not be the most effective method of soliciting their ideas as they may lack the ability to effectively articulate them. It is acknowledged that a phenomenological study about teachers' perceptions of the purpose of grading may be limited by participants' ability to communicate their ideas and understanding about their knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions (Kagan, 1992).

Scope

The scope of this study was confined to explaining how public middle school teachers in Connecticut described their experiences and perceptions about traditional grading. The researcher acknowledges other key stakeholders whose experiences and perceptions about grading are also valid and relevant. These may include students, parents, school leaders, and

community members. This research was limited to public middle school teachers for two reasons. First, teachers generally have extensive experience with grading as the primary phenomenon. Recent discussions about grading reform prompted the focus of this research study to better understand why teachers grade and how their perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading are influenced by their school or district's culture, guidelines, and policies on grading. Second, the focus was on middle school as a transitional period. Studies have shown differences in how elementary and secondary teachers grade (Guskey & Link, 2019a; Randall & Engelhard, 2009). Guskey and Link (2019a) found statistically significant differences in the weights that teachers assign to various categories based on the grade level. These differences may have posed a challenge in drawing meaningful conclusions about teachers' perceptions of the purpose of grading. Additionally, whether positive or negative, grading impacts student motivation and self-worth (Chamberlin et al., 2018). Alley (2019) concluded that student motivation decreases in middle school. This decrease in motivation coincides with an increased reliance on grades as an intrinsic motivator of learning and behavior (Feldman, 2018).

Rationale and Significance

The present research is significant because studies have documented the need for grading reform by highlighting the inaccuracies and harmful effects of traditional grades, which tend to be idiosyncratic and include a variety of non-cognitive factors (Berg et al., 2020; Cross & Frary, 1999; Ferman & Fontes, 2022; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; Quinn, 2023). However, despite these issues, traditional grading practices have remained mostly unchanged over the last 100 years (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2018). Though the concept of grading reform is not new, it has gained additional attention in recent years with calls for more accurate, reliable, and equitable grading methods

(Alex, 2022; Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020). Despite this, grading reform remains a significant challenge (Feldman, 2018; Guskey, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Percell & Meyer, 2021). Teachers' experience, knowledge, and beliefs about grading influence their grading practice (Kunnath, 2017). However, these personal beliefs and knowledge contribute to traditional grades' idiosyncrasies and validity issues (Feldman, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

Influenced by various personal, structural, and cultural factors, teacher thinking is related to practice (Kagan, 1992; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). Therefore, teachers are central in the reform process (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). This study sought to identify and describe teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading and how these perceptions were influenced by school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. McMillan (2019) argued that beliefs about grading need to be clearly articulated and discussed to clarify the purpose and strengthen the validity. He suggested that collaborative discussions will result positively by providing shared insights and experiences.

Information related to teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading can help inform educational leaders about teachers' desires so that they can work to align the goals of the reform to stakeholder interest and begin with the "why" before the "what" (Guskey, 2020, 2021). Additionally, research on the influence of school and district structure and cultural factors related to grading can help educational leaders identify their influence on teacher-thinking and consider what systemic changes to practice or policy may need to be considered for effective reform (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). These discussions about perceptions and alignment can help build the foundation for meaningful and lasting grading reform. Additionally, even though teachers are required to implement policy, they often feel a lack of efficacy in its creation (Hinnant-Crawford, 2016). As such, this research is also significant because it sought to include

more teacher voice in the conversation around grading and grading reform. While the present study may be most beneficial to those in the initial phases of the reform process, the researcher hopes that the results will provide a greater understanding of the intricacies of grading from teachers' perspectives. Rather than seek to understand teachers' grading practices, this study sought to identify and describe teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of school or district culture, guidelines, and policies around grading.

Summary

Nearly a century of research has shown traditional grading to be an unreliable, confusing, and inaccurate measure of student learning (Brookhart et al., 2016). Traditional grading practices can harm students, and grading bias based on behavior, gender, and race poses a significant challenge in accurately and fairly communicating student academic achievement (Berg et al., 2020; Ferman & Fontes, 2022; Quinn, 2023). However, successful grading reform remains relatively elusive in the K-12 public education system (Fisher & Frey, 2020). One of the primary issues is that experience, knowledge, and beliefs about teaching and learning drive teachers' grading practices and are often a personal reflection of their philosophy and practice (Feldman, 2018; Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Teachers are central to the reform process, and personal, structural, and cultural factors influence their knowledge and ideas (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). To work toward successful and sustained reform, teachers' perceptions, desires, and thinking, as critical stakeholders, must be considered, as well as the influence of school or district culture, guidelines, and policies related to grading (Guskey, 2020; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

The literature reviewed to support this study will be discussed in Chapter 2. Research for this literature review primarily involved the utilization of the University of New England's online

database. The research will explore the conceptual and theoretical frameworks used to support this study on teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. It will also examine the challenges of traditional grading practices and their effects on students as well as the history of standards-based grading and reform. Lastly, it will show the challenges associated with grading reform.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of grading stretches back centuries as a means of assessing student learning and providing feedback (Feldman, 2018; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Though evaluation of student learning may be necessary, a century of research has shown grading to be unreliable and complex (Brookhart et al., 2016). Traditional grading practices utilize a mix of cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Brookhart et al., 2016). Though traditional grades typically emphasize academic achievement, they also represent a measure of what the teacher values, such as student effort and success (Brookhart et al., 2016).

In the United States, the traditional grading system stems from rapid industrialization and population growth (Feldman, 2018). During the mid to late 19th century, the public education system sought an effective and efficient method of evaluating and tracking a growing number of ethnically diverse students (Feldman, 2018). A more standardized approach to measuring achievement was needed to replace outdated narrative reporting and provide an easy norm-referenced system that could communicate student learning (Feldman, 2018). Recent reform efforts have called attention to traditional grading methods and suggested rethinking how we evaluate and communicate academic achievement effectively and equitably (Alex, 2022; Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020).

Traditional grades are often a subjective measure of student knowledge and commonly include a mix of various cognitive and non-cognitive factors such as academic achievement, effort, and motivation (Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey, 2015; Guskey & Link, 2019a; McMillan, 2019). These varied and unreliable practices have remained largely intact since the 19th century (Feldman, 2018). Additionally, traditional grading can be harmful to students because they are often fraught with issues such as grade inflation and deflation and grading bias which make them

inaccurate, unreliable, and inequitable (Arrafii, 2020; Berg et al., 2020; Buckmiller & Peters, 2018; Ferman & Fontes, 2022; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Quinn, 2023). A more thorough discussion of the harmful effects of traditional grading will be discussed below.

Despite calls for reform, alternative grading models such as standards or competency-based grading remain the exception (Fisher & Frey, 2020). Standards-based grading removes or separates non-achievement factors, such as effort or participation, from achievement factors that measure student skills and knowledge against specific content standards (Munoz & Guskey, 2015). Similarly, competency-based grading seeks to remove non-achievement factors from students' grades, eliminating subjectivity and focusing instead on student proficiency of course objectives (Fisher & Frey, 2020).

Although not new, researchers and reformers have identified standards-based grading as an approach to more accurately measure and communicate student learning, eliminating non-achievement factors and utilizing standards to assess proficiency (Munoz & Guskey, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2018; Schimmer, 2014; Schimmer et al., 2018; Spencer, 2012). Munoz and Guskey (2015) argued that a best practice in reporting student learning in a standards-based model involved assigning an achievement grade based solely on the student's performance towards course objectives, and reporting non-achievement factors such as effort, participation, or homework completion separately.

While studies have shown mixed results regarding the effectiveness of standards-based grading, the fidelity of implementation may be a contributing factor (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Link & Guskey, 2022; Pollio & Hochbein, 2015; Townsley & Varga, 2018). Westerberg (2016) argued that standards-based grading involves more than a simple gradebook or report card

change. Standards-based grading requires teachers to carefully consider the standards, how they will be assessed, and the specific indicators to measure student proficiency (Westerberg, 2016).

Despite the concerns associated with traditional grading practices, reform has proven a significant challenge. Some researchers have noted that factors such as initiative fatigue, lack of clarity, misconception, and time have limited grading reform progress (Guskey, 2021; Percell & Meyer, 2021; Swan et al., 2014). However, one of the more significant challenges is related to teachers' perceptions of the purpose of grading because it is often closely connected with teachers' personal beliefs, knowledge, values, and experience (Feldman, 2018; Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Teachers' use of evaluative practices that include non-cognitive factors such as effort, motivation, and participation, while not necessarily beneficial, are often the result of their desire to help support and promote their students' success and are typically representative of what the teacher values as desirable traits for their students (Arrafii, 2020; Feldman, 2018; Kunnath, 2017).

Arrafii (2020), for example, found that teachers placed a high value on classroom attendance and behavior, rewarding students who maintained positive dispositions and exemplary attendance by including these non-achievement factors in their final grades. Additionally, parents and students typically support traditional grading practices (Cross & Frary, 1999; Franklin et al., 2016; Guskey, 2021; Peters et al., 2017). Franklin et al. (2016) concluded that parents found comfort in the more familiar traditional letter and number grades, expressing frustration over the lack of clarity in standards-based report cards. Peters et al. (2017) found that students resisted standards-based grading for similar reasons, they were unsure of the new grading system and expressed concern for their GPA, lower overall grades, and preparation for college.

However, Guskey (2021) argued that teachers and parents who initially resist grading reform are not purposefully oppositional but do so out of a genuine concern for the well-being of their students. Grading reform, he argued, disrupts one of the longest-held traditions in education, and any discussion of change naturally leads to hesitation and resistance. This resistance is especially true for teachers who see grades as a tool for motivation and parents concerned about college admissions and scholarship opportunities for their children (Guskey, 2021). Unfortunately, this resistance means that traditional grades remain the norm (Brookhart et al., 2016; Kunnath, 2017; Munoz & Guskey, 2015).

Initial research indicated grading and reform as a complex phenomenon and a contentious topic in K-12 education. The research shifted to traditional grading, including teachers' grading practices. Research on grading reform indicated that a variety of factors contribute to reform effort challenges, including resistance from students, parents, and teachers. Research exists on teachers' grading practices. However, interest in teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading became the primary focus. There is an inherent lack of consensus or understanding about the purpose of grading, which contributes to the varied grading practices utilized by most teachers. The four significant themes discussed in the literature review are the challenges of traditional grading, the effects of traditional grades on students, grading reform, and grading reform challenges. Within these four major themes exist several subthemes that present grading and grade reform as necessary but also complex, fraught with issues related to personal beliefs, external factors, and inadequate understanding.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

According to Ravitch and Riggan (2017), a conceptual framework helps guide the research study. It provides a justification and rationale for the study. Conceptually, the primary

driver for this research is the basic idea that grading is a central phenomenon in education and part of all teachers' lived experience.

Personal Interest

Interest in grading and grading reform stemmed from the researcher's experience in education as a former middle school teacher and current middle school department supervisor with experience with traditional grading practices. Leadership discussions around implementing standards-based grading at the researcher's school site prompted interest in grading reform. This study was also driven by the researcher's interest to bring more teacher voice into the conversation on grading and grading reform. Teachers often feel disconnected from policy and a distrust of policymakers who lack firsthand knowledge of classroom realities such as planning, teaching, and working with diverse student populations (Hinnant-Crawford, 2016)

Topical Research

A review of the literature revealed standards-based grading and grading reform, in general, to be a contentious topic within public education because of the level of control teachers have in assigning grades (Feldman, 2018). Grades remain an element of a teacher's identity and their autonomy (Feldman, 2018). This discovery prompted additional interest in grading and uncovered a more nuanced view. Grading is a more complex phenomenon than initially believed.

Feldman (2018) argued that teachers' grading practices are not arbitrary. Though their practices may be individualized, he suggested that teachers' grades reveal a lot about their beliefs and values. Grading becomes personal, and any discussion or question regarding a teacher's grading can invoke adverse reactions (Feldman, 2018). Olsen and Buchanan (2019) argued that grading is ubiquitous yet largely unnoticed. Without formal training, discussion, or policy, grading becomes personal, guided by a teacher's experience and philosophy. This discovery led

to an interest in the current study on teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading. More specifically, how middle school teachers describe the purpose of traditional grading and what influence established school or district culture, guidelines, and policies about grading have on these perceptions.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism served as the theoretical foundation for this research. While several prominent theorists, such as Vygotsky and Dewey, are credited with developing various types of constructivist learning theory, Piaget's cognitive constructivism is often considered the foundation of later works (Narayan et al., 2012). Constructivism, in its most basic form, is a learning theory that states knowledge is actively constructed (Narayan et al., 2012). Prior knowledge and experience play an essential role in how learners formulate meaning. Grading practices stem from a teacher's personal knowledge, experience, and philosophy (Feldman, 2018; Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Constructivism can therefore serve as a theoretical framework for understanding how teachers' knowledge about grading is formed and how this knowledge influences their practice and ideas about reform.

Piaget's concept of cognitive constructivism focused on learning as an active rather than a passive process (Amineh & Asl, 2015). According to Flavell (2020), Piaget suggested that, as we grow, we go through various stages of cognitive development which creates our internal knowledge structure or schema. Intelligence and cognition are influenced by a process called assimilation and accommodation where individuals, interacting with their surroundings, are confronted with external realities (Flavell, 2020). Individuals must organize and integrate this new information into their existing schema (Flavell, 2020). According to Flavell, Piaget believed that assimilation is the individual's effort to adjust or modify new information to fit within their

existing knowledge structure whereas accommodation is the restructuring of the individual's current schema to account for the new information. Flavell stated that Piaget saw this process as fundamental to an individual's cognitive progression. However, he argues that Piaget acknowledged the slow and limited progression. A quick and complete restructuring of an individual's knowledge structure is not possible and is contingent upon the extent to which the individual is prepared to both assimilate and accommodate the new information.

While Piaget's theory of cognition stems from his interest in the structural nature of knowledge, his work has been criticized for its lack of clarity and refusal to acknowledge the social nature of learning (Derry, 2013; Flavell, 2020). While Piaget's model of constructivism was based heavily on cognitive development and the individual's interaction with their environment, Vygotsky focused on the social nature of learning and knowledge (Aminah & Asl, 2015). Merriam and Bierema (2014) suggested that constructivism is less of a single theory and more a collection of beliefs about learning, linked by a common understanding of the role of experience in the active construction of knowledge.

In his seminal research, Kagan (1992) argued that teachers' professional knowledge is a construct of their beliefs. Because teaching is often ambiguous and isolating, each classroom context is different, and therefore leads to personal pedagogical beliefs which form the foundation of knowledge and influence a teacher's perceptions, judgements, and behaviors (Kagan, 1992). According to Kagan, teachers, when confronted with new information, must reconcile these ideas with their current beliefs. The new knowledge will either confirm the teacher's current beliefs, and therefore facilitate learning, or contradict these beliefs and inhibit learning (Kagan, 1992). Olusegun (2015) argued that if new information contradicts an individual's ideas, they can either accept the new learning and adjust their current beliefs or

reject it. Research on grading practices has indicated that teachers tend to rely on their personal beliefs and past experience to guide their grading decisions (Kunnath, 2017; Nowruzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

For example, a study by Nowruzi (2021) indicated that some teachers felt grading was a “gut instinct” that required teachers to learn how to grade through “trial and error” (p. 15). Additionally, Olsen and Buchanan (2019) found that teachers who participated in a full-year professional learning initiative around grading reform tended to adopt the views presented to meet their own needs, and that their experiences either contradicted or reaffirmed the new knowledge they received about grading. Kagan (1992) argued that, as teachers’ experience grows, so too does their professional knowledge and beliefs about teaching. Constructivist learning theory can therefore serve as an effective theoretical framework used to guide this study.

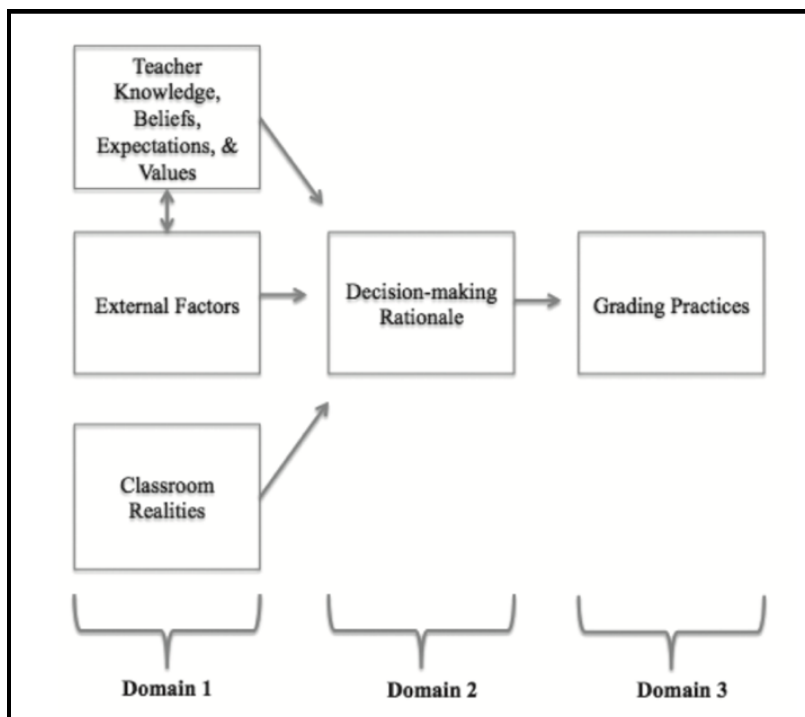
As a theoretical framework, constructivism can account for the formation of teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about grading because knowledge is built from beliefs and related to an individual’s prior experiences (Kagan, 1992). However, to illustrate the direct influence of a teacher’s knowledge and beliefs on grading, as well as the role of a teacher’s knowledge and beliefs within the larger structure of school reform, Kunnath’s (2017) Teacher Grading Decision Making Framework and Woodbury and Gess-Newsome’s (2002) Teacher-Centered Systemic Reform Model were also employed in this research. Kunnath’s Teacher Grading Decision Making Framework identified three key elements shaping teachers’ grading decisions and, ultimately, their practice. The first, “teacher knowledge, beliefs, expectations, and values,” is part of the basis for this study and directly tied to constructivist learning theory. Kunnath believed that these are largely shaped by educational preparation, teaching, and other classroom-

related experiences. Kunnath also suggested that the interplay between teacher knowledge, external factors, and classroom realities could lead to contradiction and compromise between teachers' beliefs about grading and their actual practice. These influences, he argued, contribute to hodgepodge grading and inaccurate representations of student learning. However, teachers' grading practices alone are not enough.

While Kunnath's (2017) framework is valuable in conceptualizing the role that knowledge, beliefs, and values play in grading, it does not account for change. As shown in Figure 1, Kunnath's Teacher Grading Decision Making Framework identified three key elements shaping teachers' grading decisions and, ultimately, their grading practice. These three elements include a teacher's knowledge and beliefs, external factors, and classroom realities.

Figure 1

Teacher Grading Decision-Making Framework



Note. This figure demonstrates how teacher knowledge and beliefs, influenced by external factors, and combined with classroom realities, impact decision-making and, ultimately, teachers' grading practices. From "Teacher Grading Decisions: Influences, Rational, and Practices," by J. P. Kunnath, 2017, *American Secondary Education* 45(3), p. 71. Copyright 2017 by American Secondary Education.

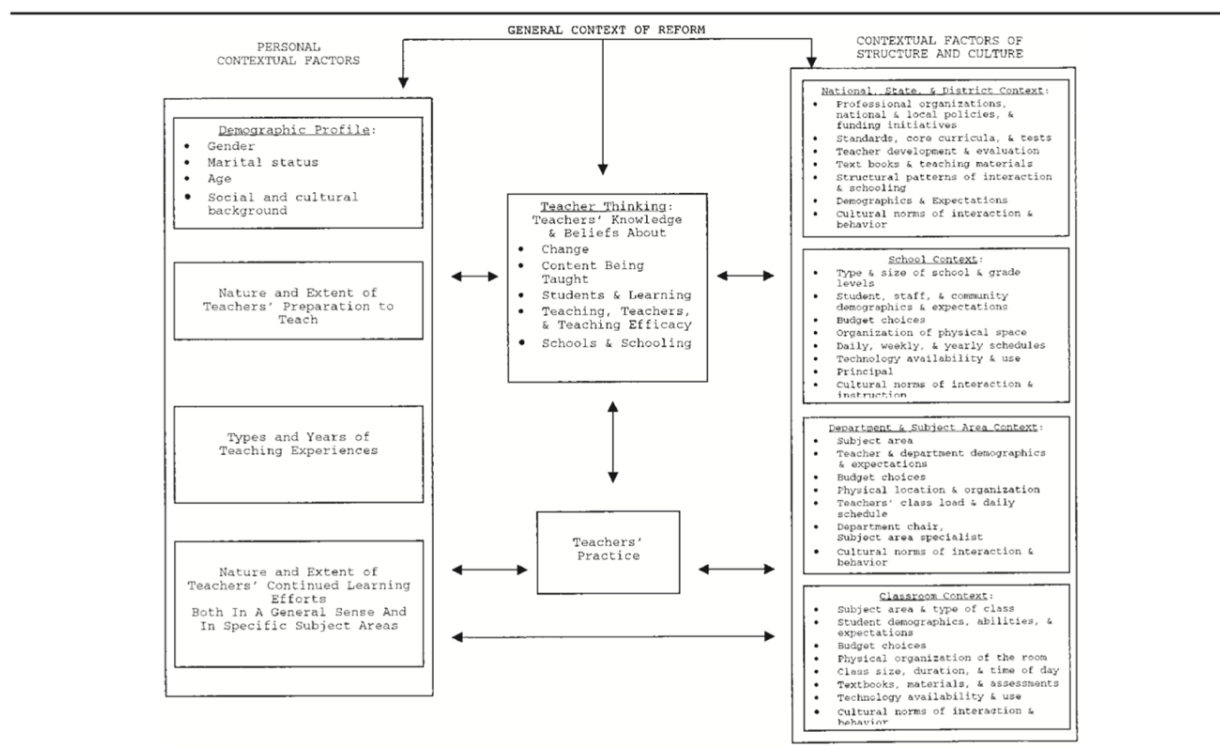
The second conceptual framework, Woodbury and Gess-Newsome's (2002) Teacher-Centered Systemic Reform Model (TCSR), also justifies understanding teacher thinking. Just as Kunnath's (2017) framework does, the TCSR model also links knowledge and thinking as directly influential on practice. Woodbury and Gess-Newsome stated that teachers are often both the root of the issue and the key to change. Like Kagan (1992), they suggested that if a teachers' knowledge or beliefs are incongruent with the goals of the reform, actual change is unlikely. In addition, Kimonen and Nevalainen (2005) suggested that simple changes related to curricula or equipment, identified as first-order change, do not necessarily succeed because they fail to change teachers' beliefs. Therefore, the TCSR model helps identify personal, structural, and cultural factors that influence teacher thinking.

Woodbury and Gess-Newsome (2002) argued that the TCSR model is ultimately about teacher change. When considering reform efforts, particularly those that target long-held traditional ways in education, such as grading, it is essential to consider teacher knowledge, experience, understanding, and the influence of structural and cultural factors. Educational leaders need to consider the policies and procedures that shape teacher thinking and the necessary changes required for successful school reform (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

As shown in Figure 2, the TCSR model positions teachers as central in the reform process, more specifically, their knowledge and beliefs.

Figure 2

Teacher-Centered Systemic Reform Model



Note. This figure connects teacher-thinking to practice and positions it within the larger context of reform. Teacher thinking is influenced by personal contextual factors such as teaching preparation, years of teaching experience, and teacher professional growth. Additionally, the figure connects teacher thinking to structural and cultural contextual factors at the national, state, school, department, and classroom level. From “Overcoming the Paradox of Change Without Difference: A Model of Change in the Arena of Fundamental School Reform,” by S. Woodbury and J. Gess-Newsome, 2002, *Educational Policy* 16(5), p. 773 (<https://doi-org.une.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/089590402237312>). Copyright 2002 by Corwin Press.

Both Kunnath's (2017) Teacher Grading Decision-Making Framework and Woodbury and Gess-Newsome's (2002) Teacher Centered Systemic Reform Model connect teacher knowledge directly to practice. As conceptual frameworks, they highlight the role knowledge plays in practice and reform. However, as a theoretical framework, constructivism provides a foundation for understanding how knowledge is formed. Constructivism requires understanding a learner's ideas, beliefs, and experiences so that they can be built on (Olusegun, 2015). Guskey (2020) argued that a central component of the change process is understanding stakeholders' desires and then working to align the goals of the reform to those desires. For grading reform efforts to be successful, leaders need to understand the influence of more significant structural and cultural factors at the school and district level on teachers' knowledge and beliefs (Kunnath, 2017; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

There is value in understanding teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading. As Guskey (2020) suggested, identifying desires and aligning goals is critical. Given the issues of validity and reliability associated with traditional grading, grading reform is justified. However, given what we can understand about grading and change from Kunnath's (2017) Teacher Grading-Decision Making Framework and Woodbury and Gess-Newsome's (2002) Teacher-Centered Systemic Reform Model, we must work first to understand teachers' thinking about the purpose of traditional grading as well as the influence of school and district culture, guidelines, and policies.

Challenges of Traditional Grading

Nearly 100 years of published literature shows grading to be an inaccurate and often confusing indicator of student learning due to the use of both cognitive and non-cognitive factors such as student achievement, effort, and participation (Brookhart et al., 2016; Cross & Frary,

1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a; McMillan, 2019). A study by Guskey and Link (2019a) concluded that as much as 10-20% of students' traditional grades often consist of factors such as effort, participation, and work completion. Adding to the confusion is the discrepancy between what teachers choose to grade and how they choose to grade it. Teachers' grading practices are idiosyncratic and can vary based on grade-level, experience, and subject (McMillan, 2019).

Variability and Reliability of Traditional Grades

One of the most significant themes to emerge from the research on traditional grading is that there is a high degree of variability in how teachers grade (Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Rauschenberg, 2014). Guskey and Link (2019a) conducted research into the factors that K-12 teachers consider when determining students' grades. They found considerable variation between elementary and secondary teachers. Elementary teachers relied more heavily on formative assessments and classroom observations when determining students' grades as opposed to secondary teachers who placed a greater emphasis on summative assessments (Guskey & Link, 2019a). McMillan et al. (2002) found considerable variation in elementary school teachers' grading practices. Similar to other studies, the authors concluded that teachers considered different factors when compiling grades and that there was a greater degree of variability between teachers in the same school than there was between different schools, emphasizing teacher preference in establishing grading practices.

Nowruzi (2021) conducted a study of secondary English Foreign Language (EFL) teachers grading and found a greater emphasis on non-achievement factors such as improvement, effort, and class participation. In follow up qualitative interviews, teachers expressed various justifications for their grading practices, including motivation, flexibility, lack of training, and external factors such as student, parent, and administrative pressure. Nowruzi concluded that the

EFL teachers placed a greater emphasis on the process of learning, such as academic engagement, and were more concerned with the consequences of grades than their utility.

To understand the direct impact of these varied grading practices, Brimi (2011) conducted a study analyzing grades teachers assigned to a single piece of student writing. The teachers included in the study had been trained on the “6+1 Traits of Writing” model with the expectation that a more standardized form or grading would help eliminate some degree of subjectivity. A single piece of student writing was utilized and graded by 73 teachers. The initial results showed a range of 46 points, with the highest being 96% and the lowest being 50% (Brimi, 2011). Most of the scores fell at the extreme ends of a letter grade range or were divisible by 10. The paper received an “A” by 10 teachers, a “B” by 18 teachers, a “C” by 30 teachers, a “D” by nine teachers, and an “F” by six teachers (Brimi, 2011). The study revealed that, despite teachers working in the same district and trained on the same grading method and evaluating the same piece of student writing, there was still a high degree of variability. It was determined that various factors such as lack of knowledge about the student, lack of understanding about the writing process, and unfavorable views towards the writer’s stated position on a contentious topic may have been influential in the final grade that each teacher assigned (Brimi, 2011). Additionally, it was discovered that the most difficult teachers who assigned some of the lowest grades provided the least written feedback to students (Brimi, 2011). Even when rubrics were employed, there was considerable discrepancy in how they were used. At times, individual writing components were scored in the proficient to high range, but overall summative scores fell in the average to below average range (Brimi, 2011).

Justification for Traditional Grading Practices

Clearly, idiosyncratic grading practices raise a serious question over the reliability of traditional grades. Researchers have explored the influence and justification for these grading methods. Kunnath (2017) found that teachers' grading practices were linked to both internal and external factors. His study revealed that teachers felt a certain level of autonomy in their ability to use traditional grades to help students pass a class. Participating teachers' grades were a mix of both cognitive and non-cognitive factors. Teachers also expressed concern about the perceptions associated with giving too many low grades and administrative pressure to minimize "Ds" and "Fs" (Kunnath, 2017). Kunnath concluded that teachers justified their grading based on these influences but that the dichotomy created a struggle between grading as a measurement of student learning and the teacher's basic philosophy of promoting student understanding and success. Personal perceptions were a factor in Brimi's (2011) study, however, Brimi raises the possibility that some teachers may view easy grading as a sign of weakness, a failure in their ability to teach students. Regardless, both studies (Brimi, 2011; Kunnath, 2017) indicate that personal perceptions play a role in teachers' grading practices, even if the grades they are assigning are not an accurate representation of student learning.

Teachers are not alone in their support for traditional grades. Cross and Frary (1999) found that most students and parents also support traditional grading practices which they believe should include a mix of ability, effort, attitude, and behavior. Parents, for example, worry that alternative grading practices may affect college admission or scholarship opportunities (Guskey, 2021). Additionally, Franklin et al. (2016) identified parental frustration over both the lack of clarity and purpose of alternative grading methods. They suggested parents gravitate towards traditional grades due to experience and familiarity.

Effects of Traditional Grades on Students

Research has demonstrated that traditional grades are vague, confusing, and often inaccurate. While a more thorough discussion of grading reform and the challenges associated with it will follow, it is important to note here that standards-based grading, or any variation of the same principle, is designed to bring clarity to grading by measuring what students know and can do and by eliminating non-achievement factors such as homework completion and effort (Link & Guskey, 2022). Unfortunately, there is resistance by teachers, parents, and students when it comes to grading reform (Cross & Frary, 1999; Franklin et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2017). While inaccurate and confusing grades are certainly a problem in and of themselves, validity alone does not fully describe the issue of traditional grades. Confusion aside, traditional grades can be harmful to students.

Grade Inflation and Deflation

One of the key issues with grades which utilize non-achievement factors is inflation, or the raising a student's grade. While teachers typically have students' best interests in mind when assigning grades, grade inflation poses a real challenge (Arrafii, 2020; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Kunnath, 2017). Arrafii (2020) conducted a study of secondary English Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesia and found that they used inflation to bump grades despite understanding that the grades they issued were not an accurate representation of their students' knowledge. Arrafii concluded that internal and external factors accounted for the practice of grade inflation. Teachers indicated that external pressure from students, parents, and administrators was one of the primary reasons they inflated grades. However, teachers also indicated that, internally, they worried that lower grades would bar students from graduation, college admission, or certain post-secondary employment opportunities.

Griffin and Townsley (2021) looked at the impact of grade inflation and deflation on high school math students. Utilizing both summative assessments and final course grades, which included homework and “employability” grades consisting of non-achievement factors, the authors were able to identify the impacts of grading on students. While grade inflation and deflation were relatively small at an average of 1.49%, it was determined that, when non-achievement factors were considered, 479 students, or 61.5%, ended with final course grades inflated above their summative assessment grade (Griffin & Townsley, 2021). This compared with 299 students, or 38.4%, whose grades were deflated when homework and employability were considered. Of the students who participated in the study, 66 ended up with passing course grades despite failing assessment grades and 10 ended up with failing course grades despite passing assessment grades (Griffin & Townsley, 2021).

Evidence of grade inflation becomes more apparent at the post-secondary level. A study by Buckmiller and Peters (2018) found that, though challenges exist for university admissions counselors in analyzing non-traditional, standards-based grades, many preferred them to the use of traditional grades. Admissions directors expressed frustration over grade inflation. They indicated a regular and consistent need for academic remediation as traditional grades were an inaccurate measure of student learning. Additionally, Kunnath (2017) found traditional grading practices to be inequitable. His study concluded that teachers are often more flexible in adjusting students’ grades depending on class rank. Students in remedial reading or college preparatory classes tend to have more subjective grades than their counterparts in honors or advanced placement courses. Kunnath found that teachers tend to be more forgiving of lower-level students than they do of students in honors or AP. Such practices create issues of equity and lead to misrepresentation of student progress in remedial classes (Kunnath, 2017).

Grades and Motivation

Grading reform can invoke teacher uncertainty over student motivation, effort, and work completion (Guskey, 2021). Even students express worry that alternative forms of grading may impact their motivation to learn and leave them unprepared for college (Peters et al., 2017). Despite research showing that alternative grading methods do not negatively impact post-secondary college students' success, these issues remain a primary concern (Guskey et al., 2020). However, traditional grading may not be the most effective form of motivation when it comes to learning (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Koenka et al., 2021). Koenka et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of research pertaining to grading and student motivation. Student motivation and achievement was measured between two separate comparison groups. The first group compared students who received traditional grades with students who received no feedback. The authors concluded that students who received a grade versus no feedback did in fact perform better than their counterparts. However, these students had less intrinsic motivation to learn (Koenka et al., 2021). The second group compared students who received traditional grades with students who received written feedback in the form of comments (Koenka et al., 2021). The researchers concluded that, generally speaking, students who received additional feedback experienced greater intrinsic motivation and that this resulted in greater academic achievement.

A study by Chamberlin et al. (2018) of undergraduate students came to a similar conclusion as Koenka et al. (2021). The authors examined the effects of traditional grading versus narrative feedback. They concluded that traditional grades “promoted anxiety, a sense of hopelessness, social comparison, as well as a fear of failure” (p. 11). By comparison, students who received narrative feedback were more positive about their academic performance (Chamberlin et al., 2018). In qualitative interviews with a handful of students, the researchers

found that students who received feedback were able to reflect more critically on their learning, identifying areas of competence as well as areas for improvement.

Feldman (2018) also argued that traditional grades reinforce extrinsic motivation and demotivate learning. Students, he suggested, enter elementary school at a young age with a natural desire for exploration, however, by the time they get to middle school, their mindset shifts. Grades become more of a commodity and the innate curiosity and excitement of learning exhibited in elementary school is lost (Feldman, 2018). Authentic and independent learning are replaced by compliance and students become interested in the number of points an assignment is worth (Feldman, 2018). They look for extra credit opportunities and ways they can earn more points to raise their grade. Feldman (2018) argued that grading becomes transactional as students bargain with their teachers. Unfortunately, teachers often feel that this incentivization of learning is worthwhile and that the feedback grades communicate help ensure students are successfully meeting basic classroom expectations (Feldman, 2018). A study by Guskey and Link (2019a) found that the prevalence of homework completion and class participation grades increased between elementary school and secondary school.

Grading Bias

Another critical issue of traditional grades comes in the form of grading bias. Grading bias occurs when students receive different grades for similar work based on non-academic factors (Hardré, 2014). Grading bias can lead to feelings of inequity and demoralization for students. Bias can stem from a variety of factors including personal knowledge about the students, pre-conceived ideas about student aptitude, and individual student attitude (Hardré, 2014). Ferman and Fontes (2022) studied the impact of behavior on students' grades and determined that better behaved students received higher grades than their less behaved peers.

Unfortunately, grades are often used to elicit desired behavior (Ferman & Fontes, 2022).

However, the authors concluded that using grades to manipulate positive student behavior miscommunicates their academic performance and knowledge. The authors also advocated a separate evaluation system for grades and behavior.

For example, Berg et al. (2020) found gender grading bias present in math classes in Switzerland. The authors concluded that, due to the decentralized grading system, boys typically received lower course grades compared to their standardized assessment grades. This created issues of equity as course grades were used as entrance criteria for high school (Berg et al., 2020). Schuster et al. (2021) found similar grading bias in pre-service teachers of primary school students in the subjects of math and German. Their study confirmed a stereotype-contrasting bias, meaning the gender perceived as weaker in the subject were graded more leniently with better grades but more feedback. However, the study also found that grading bias was only present for those teachers who believed in gender stereotypes.

Unfortunately, grading bias can also be the result of racial bias. Quinn (2023) conducted a grading study utilizing a simple second grade narrative writing sample in which participants were told the sample was from either a white male student or a black male student. Teachers used two different grading tools to assess the student work. The first was a generic and purposefully vague rubric that asked participants to score the work below, at, or above grade level but with no specific criteria (Quinn, 2023). The second was a more detailed grading rubric which gave specific measures by which to evaluate the student's work. The results indicated that, when using the simple rubric, white teachers were 8% less likely to rate a black student's work as being at or above grade level (Quinn, 2023). However, when using a more standardized and detailed grading rubric, scores for the two writing samples were nearly identical. The study,

conducted by Quinn in 2023, revealed that female teachers were 7% less likely to rate the black student's work as at or above grade level compared with male teachers where the results were not statistically significant.

Grading Reform

Research has shown that traditional grading practices are not only inaccurate but are also harmful to students. Grade inflation and deflation, motivation, and grading bias can negatively affect students, miscommunicate aptitude, and create issues of equity. Grading reform takes different names, whether it is standards-based, competency-based, or proficiency-based, the idea is similar, remove non-achievement factors and communicate what students know and can do (Link & Guskey, 2022). For clarity, the term standards-based grading will be utilized with the understanding that other terms for grading reform carry the same idea.

Standards-Based Reform and Grading

Grading reform is not a new concept; however, it remains a significant challenge in K-12 education (Fisher & Frey, 2020). Before looking more closely at the goals of standards-based grading, it is important to briefly consider the history of the standards-based reform movement in the United States. *A Nation at Risk* largely set the tone for the educational reform push in the country that began in 1983 with the Regan administration (Park, 2004). Though highly debated, the report recommended many changes, one of which included the adoption of standards that were both rigorous and measurable.

Outcomes-Based Education, or OBE, was an early effort at standards reform (Evans & King, 1994; Stanford University, 2000). Unfortunately, OBE was vague and became an umbrella term for several different educational reform efforts (Evans & King, 1994). In 1994, President Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Goals 2000 sought to systematically

reform public education and called for reading and math testing to ensure students were meeting the national education standards (Clinton Digital Library, n.d.). In 2001, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act which put an emphasis on standardized assessments as a means of measuring annual yearly progress, or AYP (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001).

Following in the wake of No Child Left Behind came the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2010. The standards were designed to unify public education across the country by replacing wildly varying state standards with a common set of rigorous content standards (ASCD, n.d.). States that adopted these college and career-ready academic standards received extra funding under Obama's 2013 Race to the Top legislation (Race to the Top Act, 2013).

The standards-based reform movement has prioritized a focus on core academic curriculum, including reading, writing, and math, and established a measure of accountability that includes accurate and reliable reporting of student performance (Volante, 2012). The idea of standards-based grading is aligned with the larger goal of the standards-based reform movement in the United States. The focus is on compiling and reporting accurate indicators of student proficiency against grade-level standards and eliminating non-achievement factors such as motivation, effort, and work completion (Munoz & Guskey, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2018; Schimmer, 2014; Schimmer et al., 2018; Spencer, 2012).

For example, Munoz and Guskey (2015) suggested that merging various indicators, factors, and variables into one grade distorts their meaning. Standards-based grading begins with teachers understanding the standards students are expected to master, designing thoughtful assessments that target these standards, and then selecting appropriate evidence of student proficiency in meeting the standards (Munoz & Guskey, 2015). In addition, O'Connor et al. (2018) suggested that assessments must be purposeful. They stressed the need for a limited

number of high-quality assessments versus numerous low-quality assessments and argued that grades are not a punishment but an up-to-date and accurate representation to student learning and proficiency (O'Connor et al., 2018).

Stakeholder Perceptions of Standards-Based Grading

Overall, the perceptions about the effects of standards-based grading (SBG) have been positive (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Lewis, 2022; Swan et al., 2014). In a study conducted by Swan et al. (2014), the authors found positive feedback from both teachers and parents related to standards-based grading and reporting. Both indicated that they felt the new approach to grading and communicating student achievement provide “more” or “much more” in terms of the amount, quality, and clarity of the information as well as the perceived ease of reading and understanding standards-based grades.

Knight and Cooper (2019) studied teachers' perceptions of standards-based grades (SBG) as it related to instruction, learning, and assessment. They discovered that teachers felt positively about the use of standards-based grading as it made planning more purposeful. Additionally, teachers found that their classrooms were not only more supportive of students' needs but also more conducive to learning as standards-based grading eliminated the fear of making mistakes and provided multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate their proficiency (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Lewis (2022) also found standards-based grading to be an effective approach to reducing students' test anxiety. While his study did not conclude that SBG had a direct effect on students' growth mindsets, it was limited in that it could not specifically isolate the effects of courses using a standards-based grading approach from those still using a more traditional approach (Lewis, 2022).

Implementation and Effectiveness of Standards-Based Grading

While some perceptions about standards-based grading may be positive, less research has been conducted on the correlation between standards-based grading and student performance on standardized assessments. Townsley and Varga (2018) examined whether standards-based grades do in fact more accurately depict student learning. They concluded that while the use of standards-based grading did not influence students' grade point average (GPA) as compared to their traditionally graded counterparts, it did influence their performance on the American College Test (ACT). Students who were exposed to standards-based grading performed worse than their peers in traditionally graded courses on both the ACT math and English test (Townsley & Varga, 2018). This study also illustrated that standards-based grading did not detract from motivation, evidenced by similar GPAs between both standards-based and traditionally graded courses. While the results of this study may be troubling for proponents of grading reform, it is important to note that, as the authors suggested, students used to a traditional grading model may have a slight advantage over their SBG peers in that their aim on the ACT is likely to score high marks as a reward versus demonstrating their mastery (Townsley & Varga, 2018). In addition, this particular study was limited to just two high schools, one which "uses standards-based grading" and one which used traditional grading. Little is discussed regarding the fidelity of implementation or the particulars of teachers' standards-based grading practices (Townsley & Varga, 2018). This is important because research has shown that one of the key issues in implementing standards-based grading reform deals specifically with a lack of clarity around the purpose and criteria (Link & Guskey, 2022).

One of the key findings from Knight and Cooper's (2019) study was that there were "compromises" between adopting standards-based grading and maintaining traditional grades.

They concluded that teachers struggled to fully implement standards-based grading while still operating within a system that utilized traditional grades. This compromise prevented teachers from truly embracing some of the most important elements of standards-based grading (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Knight and Cooper found that teachers still incorporated student behavior and raised or lowered borderline students' grades to passing based on effort and work completion. These teachers were essentially operating in a gray zone, attempting to implement standards-based grading practices but bound by the limitations of a traditional grading system (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Additionally, a study by Guskey et al. (2020) regarding standards-based grading and its impact on high school students' transition to college concluded that not only is standards-based grading still in its infancy, but that the high schools included in the study had not implemented their grading reform with fidelity.

Other studies have shown a more positive correlation between standards-based grading and student performance on standardized assessments. For instance, Pollio and Hochbein (2015) discovered a positive correlation between standards-based grading and student performance on state standardized assessments. In their study, they compared state test results of high school students who received traditional grades in math and science to students who received standards-based math grades. Pollio and Hochbein found that 55% of students in the standards-based math class who received an "A" or "B" scored either proficient or distinguished on the state math assessment. This statistic was nearly double their peers in the traditional math and science course where only 26% and 28% of students respectively earning either an A or B attained a score of proficient or distinguished on the state assessment (Pollio & Hochbein, 2015). However, Pollio and Hochbein cautioned that there is still a discrepancy as 45% of students who scored an "A" or "B" in the standards-based math class failed to obtain either a score of proficient or distinguished

on the state assessment. Additionally, they found that the correlation between higher grades in both the traditional and standards-based courses and performance on state assessments was weaker for minority students, raising a concern over equitable grading and grade inflation (Pollio & Hochbein, 2015).

A more recent study by Huey et al. (2022) looked at the impact of grading reform on student performance in middle school mathematics. The primary change involved taking practice assignments and making them process grades rather than product grades, essentially removing practice work from students' summative grades and academic standing (Huey et al., 2022). The result of the switch showed that student performance on assessments decreased and that the number of practice assignments students completed dropped. Additionally, gains on reassessments were negligible as they produced only a small increase of the number of students meeting proficiency. Some students expressed that they were less likely to complete the practice assignments because they knew it would not affect their grade (Huey et al., 2022).

While the initial results the Huey et al. (2022) study may be a cause for concern, it is important to note that the author's suggest a switch in grading policy requires a greater level of student understanding. Ultimately, most students in this study were more concerned with their final grade than the acquisition of knowledge, confirming Feldman's (2018) theory that students lose their intrinsic motivation to learn and instead focus on the accumulation of points. However, a small number of students indicated that their completion of practice assignments was not affected by the change in grading policy. For these students, they saw practice assignments as means to an end, a way to prepare for the assessment. Additionally, some students expressed that the new grading policy created less stress and made learning easier.

The Huey et al. (2022) study reveals that there is a clear difference in the way students think when it comes to grading. For some, completing work is about earning credit. When grades were removed, many students no longer felt the need to complete assignments they perceived as inconsequential to their grade (Huey et al., 2022). However, despite being a small subset, some students viewed practice work as important, despite whether it was graded because, in the end, it is ultimately about learning. Therefore, Knight and Cooper (2019) suggested that teachers find a new way to encourage desired student behavior. For some, this involves a more explicit description of the purpose as well as helping students understand the impact of not completing their work, even when it is not graded (Knight & Cooper, 2019).

Huey et al. (2022) revealed that most students are accustomed to traditional grading and are therefore more extrinsically motivated. Despite this, a few of the students who participated in the study still saw the value in practice work. Additionally, one of the primary goals of standards-based grading is to communicate student learning more accurately by removing non-achievement factors (Link & Guskey, 2022). While the results of the study indicate a dip in student performance due to mindset, this is not the only goal of grading reform and, as the authors concluded, it requires on-going conversations and teacher involvement in the decision-making process.

According to Wilcox and Townsley (2022), grades are not about motivation but about accurate communication of student learning. This idea requires a fundamental shift in student, parent, and teacher thinking. Many of the student responses in the Huey et al. (2022) study indicate that students only do their work because of the grade they expect to get. Wilcox and Townsley stated that standards-based grading is intended to shift students' focus from points to the application of learning.

Standards-Based Reporting

One of the goals of standards-based grading is to make grades more transparent and accurate (Westerberg, 2016). Part of achieving this goal involves changing how grades are recorded (Westerberg, 2016). Traditional gradebooks combine various elements, including non-achievement factors, into a single measure of student learning (Westerberg, 2016). However, under standards-based grading, teachers must carefully consider the specific skills assessed and develop proficiency scales that measure progress toward each (Westerberg, 2016). In a standards-based grading system, non-achievement factors such as effort, participation, and work completion may be reported separately from scores measuring student proficiency on specific standards or entirely omitted (Westerberg, 2016). Westerberg (2016) argued that one of the primary shifts when utilizing this alternative approach to traditional grading is understanding the discontinuation of traditional weighting systems for quizzes, tests, or homework. Instead, student progress on each of the skills is weighted the same. However, formative and summative assessments may still count for more as they typically measure more than one specific standard (Westerberg, 2016).

Standards-based report cards can more clearly communicate student proficiency and deficits in critical skills related to specific content standards (Percell & Meyer, 2021). However, reporting standards-based grades may be time-consuming for teachers (Percell & Meyer, 2021; Spencer, 2012). Subjects often have multiple standards, and teachers have expressed frustration with the effort and time required to report progress for each (Percell & Meyer, 2021). Additionally, while the benefits of standards-based report cards mean more accurate reporting of student learning, it can be overwhelming for families to review and understand numerous indicators of student progress (Spencer, 2012).

Percell and Meyer (2021) argued that one of the primary issues with switching to standards-based grading is that many grading and reporting platforms are typically designed for a traditional grading system. While platforms such as Schoology allow for standards-based reporting, they are often more expensive and require additional training for teachers to effectively use (Percell & Meyer, 2021). Guskey (2015) suggested that one of the factors contributing to grading validity issues was systems that forced teachers to merge various indicators of student learning, including achievement factors such as skills and knowledge, and non-achievement factors such as effort and participation, into a single letter or number grade. This practice of merging various indicators in a single summative assessment is one of the primary issues with traditional grade reports and requires changing how we communicate learning (Guskey, 2015).

The Impact of Standards-Based Grading on Student Transition to College

While not a specific focus of this study, one of the biggest concerns with standards-based grading reform revolves around effectively preparing students for post-secondary college success (Wilcox & Townsley, 2022). As such, a quick exploration of the effect of standards-based grading on students' transition to, and success in college will be briefly explored. Students, teachers, and parents all worry that standards-based grading disincentivizes learning, limits motivation, and creates a false sense of reality out of synch with the more traditional grading approach used by most colleges and universities (Franklin et al., 2016; Guskey et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2017). A study by Guskey et al. (2020) sought to identify whether the implementation of standards-based grading in high school had any impact on students as they transitioned to college. Using a mixed-methods approach that involved interviewing first-year university students, the authors found that while some commented on the negative aspect of

becoming accustomed to reassessments in high school, most responded positively to the impact of standards-based grading. In response to the biggest challenge students faced in transitioning to post-secondary education, most identified social concerns such as living on their own or meeting new people (Guskey et al., 2020). The authors concluded that, for these 18 students, the use of standards-based grading in high school did not appear to negatively affect their transition to college.

While Guskey et al. (2020) identified that most of the students in their study believed standards-based grading to be inconsequential in their successful transition to college, a study by Buckmiller et al. (2017) sought to identify university students' perspectives of standards-based grading strategies implemented in a college level course. The basic tenants of standards-based grading, which involved detailed feedback against course objectives and opportunities for students to resubmit assignments, were utilized in a three-week summer course focusing on educational technology (Buckmiller et al., 2017). Initial results from interviews indicated that students who had not previously experienced standards-based grading were unsure and admitted that the new approach required a shift in their thinking (Buckmiller et al., 2017). Despite the uncertainty, students admitted that the new approach to assessment provided a greater level of learning and increased ownership (Buckmiller et al., 2017). The authors stated that students were appreciative of the opportunity to reflect on their learning and found the standards-based approach more fair and less subjective than traditional grading.

Grading Reform Challenges

Despite evidence of the harmful effects of traditional grading practices and promises of standards-based grading as a more descriptive, valid, and reliable form of grading, reform efforts remain a challenge (Feldman, 2018; Guskey, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Percell & Meyer,

2021). Fisher and Frey (2020) argued that the traditional grading system is outdated and called on educators and leaders to rethink the way we measure and communicate student learning. However, despite the need, traditional grading practices remain the norm and examples of successful grading reform the exception (Fisher & Frey, 2020).

Teachers' Beliefs About Grading

Studies regarding teachers' grading practices can provide some insight into teachers' beliefs about the purpose of grading (McMillan, 2019). However, McMillan (2019) argued that that studies regarding the purpose of grading are more limited. Research on grading practices reveals that one of the things teachers value most is promoting student success (Chen & Bonner, 2017; Cox, 2011; Cross & Frary, 1999; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan & Nash, 2000; Nowruzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). McMillan and Nash (2000) defined this as "pulling for students." Kunnath (2017) found that of 13 influences on teachers' grading practices, "desire for student success" and "desire to promote student understanding" ranked among the highest (p. 74).

Similarly, Nowruzi (2021) found that teachers utilized nonacademic factors to ensure grading flexibility that allowed for greater student achievement. Cox (2011) found that seven of out of nine teachers interviewed believed that student effort should be a contributing factor when grading, citing students who work particularly hard but perform poorly on assessments. Chen and Bonner (2017) found that novice teachers favored the use of nonachievement factors like effort and attitude as academic enablers to support student success. These additional studies corroborate McMillan and Nash's (2000) original study which demonstrate a strong desire for teachers to "pull" for their students and Kunnath's (2017) findings which showed student effort as one of the most significant elements influencing teachers' grading practices. Taken together,

these studies indicate a strong desire among teachers to use nonacademic factors when grading to support students.

Another dominant theme centered around teachers' beliefs about grading is motivation (Cox, 2011; Feldman, 2018; Kunnath, 2017; Nowruzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). As noted earlier, Feldman (2018) argued that, as students enter middle school, grades become transactional, and their mindset shifts from intrinsic curiosity to external motivation. Teachers see grades as a way to encourage student participation and work completion (Kunnath, 2017; Nowruzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Cox (2011) found that a district grading policy which set minimum test scores at 50% and required the acceptance of late work to reduce failure and encourage motivation were met with teacher resistance. The primary concern was that these types of policies did not prepare students for the "real world" or the demands of future employment (p. 80).

Teachers' beliefs about grading may also stem from personal vulnerability. Feldman (2018) suggested that conversations about grading are so challenging because grades are intimately connected with teachers' beliefs and values. Not only do they represent one of the final remaining elements of teacher autonomy in a rapidly changing landscape of expectations and initiatives, but grades are also an element of teacher identity (Feldman, 2018). What teachers choose to grade and how they choose to grade it is often representative of what they value and prioritize as important foundations of student knowledge and behavioral dispositions. Beyond this, there is evidence that teachers attach some level of self-efficacy to grades (Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Olsen and Buchanan (2019) found that a decrease in students' grades following a shift in grading policy prompted feelings of anxiety among teachers who saw the decrease as a failure in their ability to effectively teach students or support learning. Kunnath

(2017) found external perceptions to be influential in the way teachers grade. Additionally, there is evidence that teachers worry about administrative pressure when assigning low grades (Kunnath, 2017; Nowruzi, 2021).

Teachers' Knowledge About Grading

Grading is a common, yet largely overlooked and individual phenomenon in education (Feldman, 2018; McMillan, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Lacking formal training of assessment and measurement, teachers are left to themselves to define their grading policies (Feldman, 2018). As a result, teachers grading becomes idiosyncratic, even within the same school and at the same level (Guskey, 2009; McMillan, 2019). This reinforces teachers' reliance on past experience and personal beliefs (Feldman, 2018). Guskey (2009) speculated that part of the problem likely revolves around a lack of clear guidance, policy, or training at the school level. McMillan (2019) suggests more teacher collaboration and discussion around grading to elicit shared ideas and experiences, arguing that there is an unacknowledged acceptance of varied grading practices. He suggests a need for policy that takes these variations into consideration.

A lack of understanding or training on grading was uncovered by Olsen and Buchanan (2019). They found that teachers were not only unsure of how to grade students, but that this confusion resulted in contradictions about the purpose of grading. Nowruzi (2021) found similar confusion amongst secondary English Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who indicated that they received no training and instead relied more heavily on instinct as well as trial and error. Kunnath (2017) found that of the 13 factors influencing teachers' grading, which ranged from student success and understanding to motivation and student behavior, formal or informal school or district policies ranked relatively low. Unfortunately, there is no additional exploration of the reason behind this low rating. Wisch et al. (2018) found that 41% of the teachers surveyed in

their study believed that their school had adopted a standards-based grading policy when, in reality, none of the schools had a formal policy and only one provided any guidance about using a standards-based approach. In addition, despite the belief that their schools had adopted standards-based grading practices, only 8% of the teachers indicated they allowed students to redo work and retake assessments and 80% penalized students for late work, indicating a reliance on nonachievement factors (Wisch et al., 2018).

School Leadership and Culture

Guskey and Link (2019b) argued that grading practices are often overlooked by school administrators due to several factors. The first is that grading is not typically a central component of teacher evaluations. Second, like teachers, most educational leaders do not have any formal training on grading. Last, as previously mentioned, grading is a complex phenomenon and a deeply rooted educational practice and reform involves disruption of this long-held tradition. Guskey (2021) suggests leaders start with the “why” before the “what” and “anticipate” and “address” challenges.

In addition to leadership, Olsen and Buchanan (2019) argued that school culture and vision matter. They suggest that successful grading reform requires critical school-wide supports and a clear vision. Educational leaders can not shy away from the work. Link (2019) argued that educational leaders have a responsibility to set the purpose for grading and ensure fair, accurate, and equitable grading practices. Townsley et al. (2019) surveyed 100 high school principals regarding their receptiveness to implementing standards-based grading and their perceptions of the challenges associated with reform. Seventy-nine percent of participants indicated that a switch to standards-based grading was part of their five-year vision (Townsley et al., 2019). However, participants indicated a few barriers to implementation, with the most significant

barrier being teacher resistance. School principals worried that teacher mindset would be hard to shift and that many experienced teachers would not see the value of standards-based grading. By and large, fear of change was the most significant obstacle identified (Townsville et al., 2019).

In addition to teacher resistance, Townsville et al. (2019) also identified time, professional development, and resistance from other stakeholders including parents and central office as barriers to grading reform. The authors' recommendation for school leaders looking to successfully implement standards-based grading is to go slow. Townsville et al. argued that teachers will need time to think about the purpose of alternative grading and suggested soliciting teacher feedback and input on necessary professional development. School administrators should engage teachers in conversations about the purpose of grading and how grading and assessment help students develop academically (Townsville et al., 2019). This as a more effective approach than simply providing information (Townsville et al., 2019). These recommendations are similar to Guskey (2020) who suggested attempts at creating cognitive dissonance through confrontation, mental manipulation, and emotional appeal are ineffective strategies for change. Instead, understanding stakeholders' desires, in particular teachers, and aligning the goals of the reform are a far more powerful approach (Guskey, 2020).

The Role of Policy

Unfortunately, there is no specific research that exists on the type, extent, or influence of grading policies in Connecticut. Connecticut delegates school governing power to local and regional boards of education, and this includes policies related to grading (Connecticut Department of Education, 2020; Mooney, 2018). In addition, district grading policy changes have been met with opposition by teachers' unions (Koerting, 2022). Croll et al. (1994) identified four roles teachers can take in regards to policy: teachers as partners, teachers as

implementers, teachers as opponents, and teachers as policy makers. The latter is most closely associated with the research that shows, in the absence of training, guidance, or collaboration, teachers tend to rely on their experiences, beliefs, and knowledge as they construct their own grading policies (Feldman, 2018; McMillan, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Additionally, Hinnant-Crawford (2016) found that teachers feel they have little efficacy or knowledge on how to shape policy and were instead simply implementers. Teachers had a level of distrust for policymakers and felt that their decisions were misinformed and lacking knowledge of classroom realities.

Summary

Grading is a long-standing phenomenon in education (Brookhart et al., 2016). Research has shown traditional grading to be an unreliable method of measuring and communicating student learning (Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Nowruzi, 2021). Additionally, traditional grading methods are harmful to students and create inequality (Arrafii, 2020; Buckmiller & Peters, 2018; Kunnath, 2017). Despite these critical issues, students, teachers, and parents still largely support these grading practices (Cross & Frary, 1999). Grading reform efforts have looked at standards-based grading as a method to effectively gauge and communicate student learning by removing non-achievement factors and focusing on student proficiency against specific grade-level content standards (Munoz & Guskey, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2018; Schimmer, 2014; Schimmer et al., 2018; Spencer, 2012). Studies conducted on the efficacy of standards-based grading have been mixed with some showing partial to moderate correlation to student performance on standardized assessments (Pollio & Hochbein, 2015; Townsley & Varga, 2018). However, the fidelity of standards-based grading implementation has shown to be weak at best, making any effort to

gauge the true effect of grading reform on student proficiency difficult in the most optimistic of scenarios (Guskey et al., 2020; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Link & Guskey, 2022).

Despite the lack of validity inherent in traditional grading models and calls for grading reform, change remains elusive, hampered by several obstacles including teacher and parent opposition and administrative support (Feldman, 2018; Guskey, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Percell & Meyer, 2021). Studies have shown that teachers remain cautious about another new reform initiative (Percell & Meyer, 2021). Coupled with a lack of clarity about the purpose of grades and in the absence of any training or professional preparation around grading practices, teachers tend to rely on their own personal philosophies of education and experience in guiding their grading practice and rationale (Feldman, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

Grading reform efforts may not have had the level of impact and implementation reformers would like, studies have shown that continued dialogue, understanding, professional development, and collaboration around the purpose of grading can elicit change (Cox, 2011; Erickson, 2011; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). It is important to note that, though not necessarily a new concept, grading reform remains on the fringes of our current education system (Fisher & Frey, 2020). It is evident that there is a great deal of work left to be done. Signs of forward progress, regardless of how small, are cause for optimism, but also caution, as we navigate changing one of the oldest and most deeply held phenomena in education.

The goal of this qualitative study was to understand Connecticut public middle school teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and how these perceptions were influenced by their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies. In Chapter 3, the methodology for this qualitative phenomenological study is presented. Chapter 3 will show how the approach allowed for a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions about the purpose of

traditional grading and the influence of school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. It will also reveal how the research was conducted and supported through constructivist learning theory. Limitations, ethical issues, and trustworthiness are also addressed.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

A century of research shows that grading is a complex phenomenon in education (Brookhart et al., 2016). Additionally, these traditional grading practices have remained unchanged since the 19th century (Feldman, 2018). Research has shown teachers' grading practices to be an inaccurate measure of student academic achievement, relying on a mix of cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Brookhart et al., 2016; Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a). Recent reform efforts have called for a more accurate and equitable approach to grading (Alex, 2022; Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020). While several factors, such as initiative fatigue, time, and misconceptions about standards-based grading have contributed to the challenge of reform, part of the issue lies in teachers' knowledge and perceptions about the purpose of grading (Feldman, 2018; Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Exacerbating this situation is a lack of professional training on the purpose of grading, which further isolates teachers in their practice and reinforces the individualized and idiosyncratic nature of grading (Feldman, 2018; McMillan, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

The problem studied is that standards-based grading remains a significant challenge to effectively implement and traditional grading practices remain largely entrenched in K-12 education as the result of teachers' grading perceptions (Feldman, 2018; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Nowruzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how Connecticut public middle school teachers described their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and how these perceptions were influenced by their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies. This research addressed the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Research Question 2: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their school or districts' grading culture, guidelines, and policies?

Research Question 3: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe the influence of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

This research utilized a phenomenological research approach. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) defined qualitative research as a deep level of inquiry in which researchers immerse themselves in the "exploration, discovery, and description" of their participants' experiences and perspectives (p. 38). Phenomenology is described as an effective way of studying participants' lived experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Phenomenologists look beyond individual experiences and attempt to find and understand a commonality or essence related to the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). A qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach was well suited to this study and aligned with the purpose statement and research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Researchers have argued that one of the primary issues with traditional grading is that it is too individualistic, and teachers are isolated in their practices (Feldman, 2018; McMillan, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Because of these idiosyncratic grading practices, McMillan (2019) suggested shared conversations around grading to help identify common experiences and insights that can further clarify their purpose. Kunnath's (2017) Teacher Grading Decision-Making Framework and Woodbury and Gess-Newsome's (2002) Teacher-Centered Systemic Reform Model (TCSR) both emphasize teacher thinking and knowledge as influential on

practice. Woodbury and Gess-Newsome's TCSR model further identifies the importance of teachers' thinking about the area of reform as well as influence of structural and cultural factors in supporting or inhibiting change. Both of these conceptual frameworks align constructivist learning theory which states that the creation of knowledge is an active rather than a passive process influenced by prior learning and experience (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Flavell, 2020).

Site Information and Demographics

For a phenomenological study, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that participants be selected from one or more different sites. Since the researcher sought to understand public middle school teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies, the sites included public middle schools in Connecticut. Whereas the study sought to understand teachers' perceptions of traditional grading, the selected school sites utilized a traditional alphanumeric grading system. School districts in this study were limited to schools within the state of Connecticut. Connecticut lacks a central grading policy and instead vests considerable governing authority in local and regional boards of education which have the responsibility of creating rules, policies, and procedures for establishing and maintaining quality public elementary and secondary schools, including policies related to grading and student promotion (Connecticut Department of Education, 2020; Mooney, 2018).

The researcher's relationship to participants in this study was as the principal investigator and sole interviewer. Access to potential participants and sites began with approval from the University of New England's Institutional Review Board to begin the study. After approval was granted, the researcher recruited potential participants by generating email lists from publicly available emails provided by the Connecticut State Certification Bureau. Participants who

elected to engage in this study included self-identified middle school teachers from the state of Connecticut who had at least three years of teaching experience.

Participants and Sampling Method

A criterion sampling method was utilized to select participants for this research. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that, due to the nature of qualitative research, a purposeful sampling strategy allows the researcher to select participants that will best help answer the research questions and help the researcher understand the problem. All selected participants were at least 18 years of age or older, self-identified public middle school teachers in Connecticut who had experience utilizing a traditional alphanumeric grading system to evaluate and assess students and who had taught for at least three years. The participants for this study varied in the subjects and grades they taught, and the schools and districts they worked in. The goal was to interview and collect data from eight teachers to identify commonalities in their shared experiences and beliefs. Therefore, this study was not site-specific and any teacher, provided they met the criteria outlined, was eligible to participate.

Participants for this study were recruited via email using the participant invitation letter (Appendix A) in which they were invited to self-identify for inclusion in this study. The researcher gained access to potential participants' emails through the State of Connecticut's Bureau of Certification. Teachers in the researcher's home district were filtered out to avoid any conflict of interest and were not sent a recruitment email (Appendix A). Emails were then sent to potential participants. Recruitment was open seven weeks until eight participants were self-identified as meeting the criteria for the study. All participant's names and email addresses were stored on a master list which was securely stored in a password protected file on the researcher's password protected home computer.

All participants who met the criteria to engage in the study were provided with the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B) which outlined the purpose of the study, what was involved in the project, the type of data being collected, and information pertaining to beneficence, confidentiality, and withdrawal. The Participant Information Sheet was shared via email with participants in the recruitment email. The Participant Information Sheet was also reviewed at the start of the interview to ensure that participants were fully aware of the scope and nature of the study as well as their ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Data was collected through individual, semi-structured interviews with the selected self-identified participants. Interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom video conferencing and participants selected a location of their choice from which to participate. This allowed for greater ease of conducting and recording interviews as well as collecting and analyzing interview transcripts. During the interview, only audio was recorded, and participants had the option to keep their cameras off and to end the interview at any time.

The interview followed the researcher-created interview protocol developed for this research (Appendix C). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) highlight the importance of an interview protocol as a tool to keep the process structured and a place to record notes during the interview. Prior to the interview, participants received a copy of the Participant Information Sheet through email. The researcher began the interview with a review of the key components of the information sheet, including the type of data being collected, participant confidentiality, and procedures to withdraw from the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) stressed the importance of honesty as an ethical consideration when conducting qualitative interviews and for the researcher to be open and to avoid any form of deception.

After gaining verbal consent to begin and to record, participants were interviewed on Zoom. The interviews took approximately 30 to 60 minutes to conduct. During this time, the interviewer carefully listened to the participant being interviewed. Field notes were taken and follow-up questions for additional clarification or explanation of ideas were asked as necessary. Following the conclusion of the interview, the participants were thanked for their time and reminded again of their voluntary participation in the study. The participants had the contact information of the researcher should they have had any additional questions about the study or their participation.

Upon conclusion of each interview, transcripts were auto transcribed via Zoom and saved as a Word document in a password protected folder on the researcher's home computer. All information was deidentified, including names and locations, and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to ensure confidentiality. All transcripts were reviewed in conjunction with the audio recording and edited as necessary to ensure fidelity to the participant's responses. Transcribed interviews were then sent to each participant for review to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the data. Participants were given 5 days to review the transcripts and provide feedback if necessary. If participants did not reply within 5 days, the transcripts were assumed to be accurate. Once all interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy by participants, the master list was destroyed and all participant information, including names and emails, was deleted. All participant data was maintained in a password protected electronic folder on a password protected computer only accessible to the researcher for the remainder of the study.

Data Analysis

The analysis process followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral. Upon completion of data collection, the researcher read and memoed emergent ideas from the

transcripts. The researcher conducted an initial readthrough to get a sense of each interview and for the database in its entirety. Following this initial readthrough, the process of memoing, or coding began. Saldana (2008) defines a code as a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Saldana (2008) also emphasizes coding as an interpretive act which is largely defined by the particular lens through which the researcher approaches the transcript.

Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed and coded. The coding process began by developing an initial set of codes based on the emergent ideas and themes present in the database. Additional coding cycles were conducted utilizing these initial codes with a focus on reducing the number of codes to a final, manageable list which captured the essence of the participant’s ideas about to the purpose of traditional grading and the perceived influence of established school or district cultures, guidelines, and policies. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that a shortlist of no more than 25-30 codes be developed regardless of the length of the transcript, or the amount of data collected.

Following coding, a list of five themes was developed. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) define themes as aggregated codes that identify major ideas in the database. Developing themes requires collapsing codes into similar categories. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested looking for repetitions in the coded database as one helpful way to begin identifying emergent themes. Codes generated from the coding cycles were analyzed. Similar or repeated codes were combined to begin forming themes related to the participants’ described experiences and perceptions about grading.

Lastly, the researcher assessed interpretations and represented the data. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe interpreting the data as “abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the

larger meaning of the data” (p. 194). For this study, data from the coding process and themes was used to make larger interpretations about teachers’ perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and how these perceptions were influenced by their school or district’s grading culture, guidelines, and policies.

Limitations, Delimitations and Ethical Issues

The research conducted has limitations and delimitations. It was important to recognize and mitigate these to ensure credibility throughout the study and to identify the transferability of the data. In addition, the limitations and delimitations of this study affect the recommendations for future research and constraints within the research design. Limitations include considerations regarding participants’ background, experience, and location as well as the grade-level and subject they taught. Delimitations include a short discussion about why middle school teachers were selected as the specific focus of this study versus other key stakeholders. Additionally, ethical issues considered include respect for persons, beneficence, and concerns related to justice.

Limitations

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), limitations are the constraints within the research study that impact the findings. The first limitation of this study was the sample size and population. While it would have been ideal to collect data from teachers with as many diverse backgrounds, experiences, and skill sets as possible, the study was limited to those teachers who choose to self-identify and participate.

In addition to the sample population, another limitation was the site itself. Ideally, collecting data from teachers at multiple sites would have yielded the greatest set of perceptions and experiences. However, the scope was limited based on the first eight participants who self-

identified as meeting the criteria for the study. This may have limited the study to a few sites. Another potential limitation of this research is what participants chose to share regarding grading. Participants may have been unwilling to share too much insight regarding their own grading practices or any information that may have been contradictory or seen as critical of established grading policies in their schools or districts. A key step in mitigating this potential limitation was to establish a sense of trust with the participants by ensuring their confidentiality and being open and honest about the purpose of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Lastly, in his research on teacher-thinking, Kagan (1992) argued that soliciting teachers' beliefs is a challenging process. He argued that, often, teachers lack the ability to clearly articulate their ideas and knowledge. As such, it is acknowledged that this phenomenological study designed to elicit teachers' perspectives on a complex phenomenon such as grading may be limited by participants' ability to clearly communicate their ideas. The researcher carefully developed interview questions aligned to the research questions and utilized the interview protocol.

Delimitations

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), delimitations are the limits placed on the study intentionally by the researcher. They argued that delimitations help narrow the focus of the research. Regarding this study, one important delimitation was seeking to explore teachers' perceptions about grading. There are other key stakeholders, including students, parents, administrators, and community members whose experiences and perceptions about grading are also valued and worth studying further. The decision to focus solely on teachers in this study was made because teachers have extensive experience with the phenomenon at hand. The research conducted to support this study demonstrates that challenges identified with traditional grading

models and grading reform are based primarily on teachers' grading perceptions and practices. While other stakeholders may be impacted by these practices, understanding teachers' perceptions about how and why they grade may help provide a better impetus for grading reform efforts in the future.

The decision to focus solely on public middle school teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading was made because of the varied grading practices between teachers at the elementary and secondary levels (Guskey & Link, 2019a; Randall & Engelhard, 2009). These differences may have made it more difficult to accurately identify commonalities and develop themes. Middle school is seen as a transitional period where motivation decreases and the focus shifts to extrinsic motivation (Alley, 2019; Feldman, 2018). The decision to focus on Connecticut public school teachers derived from the researcher's positionality and the fact that Connecticut is a local-control state lacking a unified grading policy (Connecticut Department of Education, 2020; Mooney, 2018) Finally, any participant from the researcher's home district was filtered out and not asked to participate in this study to ensure objectivity and avoid any conflict of interest.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues are a critical consideration when conducting qualitative research. Creswell and Poth (2018) stress the importance of honesty. They emphasize the need for researchers to be forthcoming in the purpose of their study and how they intend to protect the confidentiality of their participants. Considerations they outlined throughout the data collection and analysis process include selecting and accessing appropriate sites for research, selecting an appropriate sampling strategy, sharing the rationale for why certain participants have been chosen, considering the impact of data collection, and how data will be collected and confidentially

stored. The Belmont Report outlines three critical areas of ethical consideration which include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

Regarding respect for persons, the Belmont Report states that research involving human subjects requires participants to enter the study voluntarily and with enough information (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). For this study, participants were public middle school teachers who had experience with the central phenomenon of traditional grading. The purpose of the research study was shared with perspective participants during the recruitment process via the participant information sheet. Individuals who voluntarily agreed to participate in the research study were provided with additional information about both the purpose of the study as well as the data being collected. They were also be made aware that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time. Participants were notified of their confidentiality.

Beneficence deals with participants' protection from harm. According to the Belmont Report, this means maximizing potential benefit while minimizing potential harm (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). One of the critical steps in this research of reducing any potential harm or risk involved participant confidentiality. No information regarding names or locations was shared. All collected data was securely stored in a password protected computer and files. In addition, participants were made aware that this study's intent was to help bring more teacher voice into the conversation on grading and grading reform, and to help administrators identify how teachers perceive the influence of their school or district's grading policy on their perceptions of the

purpose of grading. Following the conclusion of the research, all identifiable information was deleted.

The last ethical consideration is justice. The Belmont Report outlines considerations researchers must address to ensure their participants are not treated unjustly (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). To this end, benefits to which a person is entitled should not be withheld and no burden should be imposed unduly. With regards to this study, all participation was fully voluntary. No individuals were selected for sake of ease or manipulability. A criterion sampling method was utilized to ensure that participants were public middle school teachers in Connecticut who had experience with the phenomenon of traditional grading. Participants' time was respected. The researcher attempted to minimize any disruption or undue burden on individuals who volunteered to participate in the research. None of the benefits of this study were withheld from any participants.

Trustworthiness

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), trustworthiness in qualitative research means accounting for the steps that have been taken to ensure the findings are accurately representative of the situations described by the participants regarding the central phenomenon being investigated. Four criteria are used to establish the trustworthiness of findings in qualitative research. These include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) state that credibility deals with how accurately the researcher represents their participants thoughts, feelings, and actions in their findings. To establish credibility in this study it was necessary for the researcher to identify and acknowledge

personal biases regarding grading. As a former public middle school teacher, the researcher had their own experiences and perceptions about grading. In addition, the researcher had experience as an educational leader who had engaged in not only research on the topic of grading, but professional development around standards and competency-based grading, and their personal experiences and perceptions likely differed from the study's participants.

Throughout the research, due to their own significant experience with the central phenomenon and connection to teaching, the researcher continually monitored and evaluated personal biases. In addition to journaling and reflective notetaking, the researcher utilized thick description of all the processes including selection of sites and participants through the collection, analysis, and presentation of the data and findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To ensure reliability, all interview transcripts were sent to participants for their review as part of member-checking.

Transferability

Transferability relates to how the study transfers to broader populations and similar sites or situations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). All participants in this study were Connecticut public middle school teachers who had taught for at least three years and had experience with traditional grading. To ensure a greater level of transferability of this research study, in-depth descriptions of the participant and sampling method have been provided.

Dependability

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) define dependability as the “stability and consistency of data over time” (p. 204). They state that dependability refers the researcher's efforts to ensure that all steps in the data collection and analysis process have been thoroughly described and clearly articulated. This includes a discussion of the research design.

Throughout the process, the researcher kept detailed notes and records. These notes and records, along with member checking, ensured a greater degree of dependability of the research and data analysis process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In addition, to ensure the researcher's own bias did not affect the interpretation of the data, they described their own experience with the phenomenon of grading as a former middle school teacher to bracket themselves from potential participants' experiences. The researcher also engaged in reflective journaling throughout the study. This process allows readers to interpret the findings and assess the trustworthiness of the results (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Confirmability

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), Confirmability focuses on “establishing that the researcher's findings and interpretations are clearly derived from the data” (p. 204). This requires the researcher to show how conclusions were reached. Confirmability helps to limit subjectivity and bias (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

To ensure the confirmability of this study, decisions regarding the methodology and data analysis have been outlined in the previous sections. This study utilized a phenomenological approach. Criterion sampling was used to select participants best suited to answer the research questions. Participants were interviewed using the interview protocol (Appendix C). The researcher followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral. Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher utilized journaling, as suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), to ensure the highest level of objectivity and provide evidence of the data analysis process, as well as to allow for assessment of trustworthiness by readers.

Summary

Despite research demonstrating a need for grading reform, standards-based grading remains a significant challenge to implement, and traditional grades remain commonplace in K-12 education as a result of teachers' grading perceptions and practices (Feldman, 2018; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Nowruzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Because teachers' grading practices include a mix of cognitive and non-cognitive factors, traditional grades are often inaccurate and unreliable (Brookhart et al., 2016; Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a). As a result, recent reformers have called for establishing a more reliable and equitable approach to grading (Alex, 2022; Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020).

This phenomenological study sought to understand and describe Connecticut public middle school teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading and how these perceptions were influenced by established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. The research was guided by the following questions:

Research Question 1: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Research Question 2: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their school or districts' grading culture, guidelines, and policies?

Research Question 3: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe the influence of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Using a criterion sampling method, eight middle school teachers were selected and interviewed. Following Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral, all interview transcripts

were coded. Codes were then used to identify themes related to teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading and the perceived influence of school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies.

Limitations and delimitations existed in this study. Limitations included sample size and population, number of represented sites and openness on the part of the participants.

Delimitations included limiting the research to only one stakeholder group and narrowing that to middle schools in Connecticut.

Ethically, this study sought to reduce harm to all participants. All participants were teachers over the age of 18. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research. All identifying information was stored on a master list in a password protected folder on the researcher's password protected computer. Following the conclusion of the study, all identifying information, including audio recordings and the master list, were destroyed.

The findings of this research will be reviewed in Chapter 4. A presentation of the findings will be presented, and an exploration of the data analysis will be discussed. There will also be a presentation of results and findings organized to include an account of all collected data.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine Connecticut public middle school teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. A century of research has shown traditional grading practices to be a complex and unreliable mix of cognitive and non-cognitive factors including academic achievement, effort, and motivation (Brookhart et al., 2016, Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey, 2015; Guskey & Link, 2019a; McMillan, 2019). While recent research has called attention to these inequitable and unreliable grading practices, traditional grading remains largely in place in K-12 education as a result of teacher's grading perceptions (Alex, 2022; Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Nowruzzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). This research study addressed the following three questions:

Research Question 1: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Research Question 2: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their school or districts' grading culture, guidelines, and policies?

Research Question 3: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe the influence of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Using a phenomenological approach, eight research participants were recruited via email using a criterion sampling strategy. A list of email addresses for all Connecticut certified teachers was provided by the Connecticut Certification Bureau. Participants self-identified for inclusion in this study as Connecticut public middle school teachers who taught for at least three

years and had experience utilizing a traditional alpha-numeric grading system to assess students. The research study was open to any Connecticut educator who met the criteria. Participants who qualified were asked to complete one semi-structured, 60-minute interview conducted via Zoom.

The researcher followed the interview protocol (Appendix C) created for this study. During the interview, audio was recorded, field notes were taken, and follow up questions were asked for further clarification or explanation of the participant's ideas. Upon conclusion of the interview, audio files were transcribed using Zoom's automatic transcription feature. Each of the audio transcripts was downloaded and reviewed in conjunction with the audio recording and field notes to ensure accuracy. Edits to the transcripts were made as necessary. All transcribed and edited interviews were then sent to participants for final review. Upon conclusion of member-checking, analysis of the data began.

Analysis Method

Data analysis followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral. This data analysis process outlines five key steps: (1) managing and organizing data, (2) reading and memoing emergent ideas, (3) describing and classifying codes into themes, (4) developing and assessing interpretations, and (5) representing and visualizing the data. Creswell and Poth suggested an initial readthrough of the transcript to get a sense for the database in its entirety. During this initial readthrough, the researcher began memoing emergent ideas, experiences, and descriptions related to each participant's ideas about the purpose of grading, and their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies. In addition, the researcher also analyzed the influence of these guidelines and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading.

Following the initial readthrough and memoing of the transcript, the researcher began coding the data. According to Saldana (2008), a code is a "word or short phrase that symbolically

assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based” text (p. 3). Two coding cycles were conducted. Due to the length and detail of data captured from participants during the interview, transcripts were broken up into three sections related to each of the three research questions. The first coding cycle utilized Initial Coding, and focused on the words and phrases each participant used to describe their perceptions and experiences related to grading. Several codes were produced.

Presentation of Results and Findings

The researcher gathered data from Connecticut middle school teachers who had taught for at least three years and had experience using a traditional alpha-numeric grading system. All participants were at least 18 years of age. Participants were asked to self-identify if they qualified for this study in order to participate. Eight teachers, Daisy, Penny, Amy, Victor, Craig, Susie, Richard, and Neil participated in this study.

Presentation of Interview Question Responses

Interview questions were designed to allow participants to share their experiences surrounding the three research questions. The first set of questions focused on participants’ descriptions of the purpose of traditional grading. The second set of questions focused on participants’ descriptions of their school or districts’ grading culture, guidelines, and policies. These questions encouraged participants to describe specific school and district policies around grading as well as how grading was discussed and utilized by teachers and school leaders. The final set of questions focused on participants’ descriptions of the influence their school or district’s grading culture, guidelines, and policies had on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading. Questions in all three areas encouraged details and allowed for participants to share additional information that may not have been specifically sought after.

Descriptions of the Purpose of Traditional Grading

All of the participants described the purpose of traditional grading as a measure of student learning. Participants talked about the importance of measuring academic standards, skills, and content knowledge. Some participants also described grading as a way to measure student participation, effort, and work completion. Of the eight participants, Daisy, Neil, and Richard focused on the purpose of grading as a way to measure student mastery of standards and skills. Daisy spoke at length about the difference between assessing a student's ability to memorize rote facts versus applying their knowledge. They felt that the purpose of grading was to assess more than recall, stating "who really cares, you know? Yeah, go on Jeopardy to want to know the fact." Daisy felt that, as a result of technology, students have easy access to information, explaining "I got kids doing that. They Google for a question...and they just cut and paste it and put it in there." When describing the purpose of grading, Daisy reiterated the importance of mastering skills and applying knowledge. Neil's response was similar, but they also pointed out the importance of content.

When describing the purpose of grading, Amy, Richard, and Susie talked about student-self-reflection and growth. Amy described the importance of student self-assessment and their ability to progress monitor not only their academic growth but also their effort, participation, and social-emotional wellbeing. Amy explained:

At the end, I'll have a reflection piece, and I would say, what was an area that was challenging for you? What do you want to work on? What has been easy for you? What have you been enjoying in this class? And I will also add, like a social-emotional piece, like, is there something going on that you would like to share. Because, sometimes, you know, kids, they have things going on, and it does reflect on...their performance.

Richard's description was similar. When talking about the use of standards-based reporting, they said "it's definitely well worth it, because when they get their report card back, they can literally go through and assess themselves. And we have students actually go through, so do you think you understood the concept of interpreting and analyzing graphs?"

Susie also talked about the importance of self-reflection but shared that their understanding of the purpose of grading was heavily influenced by their experience on the school's SRBI committee. Susie explained, "that's when I really started understanding the breakdown of this, like, why am I referring you for SRBI?" Susie described this as a "huge eye opener," explaining "when I first started really attending those, I was like, alright, I need to really understand my students better." Like Richard, Susie found value in breaking down standards and trying to understand what a student's grade represented. In discussing their experience at an SRBI meeting, they explained:

When I brought to the meeting, I was like, oh well, she has a "C," she's doing all right, and they were like, well, what does that "C" mean? And I was like, means she's doing average...she's got a "C." She's not too bad, not too good. And they were like, we need a lot more info from you. So I was like, okay, that's when I started breaking down and being like, well, you know...her adding is off, you know, she can't regroup specifically.

That's what the problem is.

Susie explained how this process better allowed them to understand their students and pinpoint areas of success and struggle.

Penny, Victor, and Craig described the purpose of grading a bit more generically. They all discussed the importance of measuring student learning. However, they focused more on

content and understanding of the material. For these three participants, the purpose of traditional grading was to show how much students had or had not learned.

While all eight participants described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning, Daisy, Victor, and Neil also talked about the importance of traditional grading as a measurement of student effort and participation. Victor and Neil did not go into great depth other than to say that they felt at least a part of the grade should reflect these non-academic factors. However, Daisy felt more strongly about the importance of including these factors when grading, discussing the difference between participation and active engagement. When talking about their students, they explained “they feel the need like if you just keep raising your hand and shouting like anything out, you’re participating, like no. I said, you really gotta be engaged in the conversation...you gotta ask good questions.” Daisy felt that participation was an important part of grading and that it provided “wiggle room” to pull for students who may need an extra boost in their grade. However, Daisy also described “bad participation,” and said “participation is, you know, relevant to what the discussion is on.”

Descriptions of School or Districts’ Grading Culture, Guidelines, and Policies

Several of the participants described their school or district’s grading cultures, guidelines, and policies as open-ended and vague. There was a considerable amount of variation between departments and idiosyncratic grading practices between teachers in several of the participants’ schools. A couple of participants talked about administrative pressure to keep grades up. Daisy, for example, when describing how grading was discussed by school leaders said “I was told this is what you’re going to do. This is what we use. So, I didn’t feel like there was a discussion in that.” Daisy felt that administration kept track of teachers’ grades and explained “they want to know you’re not doing a good if you’re giving out D’s and F’s.” Daisy believed that this

administrative pressure caused teachers to inflate students' grades. When explaining how teachers were able to reduce the number of students failing, Daisy said "what I know was the answer is they just fake the grades." Daisy described this culture and administrative pressure as overwhelming. They felt that it created leniency for students and put a burden on teachers when it came time to grade late work at the end of a term or marking period.

When describing their school and district's grading policies, Amy had a similar experience. They explained that there was administrative pressure to keep grades up. Amy felt that this was partially influenced by parents, explaining:

It came from administration, and what I found out too, a lot of it had to do with parents. You know, you get a lot of irate parents, and I guess, you know, for a lot of the administration, it's you know, it's challenging to deal with irate parents, and they're demanding, you know, certain things, and people don't like to say no, I guess.

Like Daisy, Amy also described this policy as frustrating for teachers, saying "you have so many opportunities to submit late work. So I would see a lot of frustration from teachers where, you know, an assignment was due, an assignment that was like two months old, you still had to accept it."

Penny described their school's grading policies as very open ended. Similar to Amy and Daisy, Penny found the experience frustrating. The lack of guidance was overwhelming and created uncertainty. Penny talked about how some teachers were testing out a program called Modern Classroom. Penny spoke positively about this approach, saying that it "takes a classroom from more traditional teacher centered to a fully student-centered approach." Penny was looking for more support with grading but felt that it was not a priority in their school. They felt that

there was more of an emphasis placed on standardized assessment scores and that grading was discussed infrequently by school leaders.

When describing their school and district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies, a few teachers reverted to the work they were doing within their individual departments. For example, Victor and Richard talked about collaboration with their colleagues to ensure grading practices were equitable and consistent. Craig felt that, while other departments had more of a focus on grading, their department, being a non-tested subject, was less concerned with grades.

Richard's description of their school's grading policies and guidelines was similar to most of the other participants in that it was open-ended and varied. However, Richard also described some unique grading guidelines their school had in place. For example, they explained that "homework at the middle school level should be minimal. They say, keep it under 10%." They also explained that the majority of a student's grade should be based off of assessments. Additionally, Richard explained that their school discouraged the use of non-academic factors when grading, specifically effort. Richard had mixed feelings about the rationale for limiting effort, saying:

They don't even want to see that in there, because they're like, well, how do you measure effort? Which is interesting, because, you know, they want the specific standards for that, yet the other ones you could just say, well, homework, what are the standards?

Specifically? What are you looking for for homework? What are you looking for for assessments, and they don't want effort. They think it's too subjective.

Susie had a unique experience to share. Their school had switched from traditional grading to standards-based grading. Susie talked favorably about the use of standards-based grading. Before the switch, they felt that their school's grading policies and guidelines were ill-

defined. Susie talked about how teachers had a lot of discretion and were told to use their professional judgement. This created idiosyncratic practices. Susie explained the grading discrepancies between teachers:

If you got the lady who was a sweetheart who loved you and she was just like my kids are all getting A's...and there was no proof to back it up. It was just, oh, well, I have an "A" in my book, so there you go.

Like some of the other participants, Susie felt there was some administrative pressure to grade up when their school was using traditional grading. However, they spoke positively about the switch and said "it really improves everything...it's definitely more defined...it is like we're not just taking the grades you have on this paper and making up a grade. You gotta have some proof now."

In describing their school's grading guidelines and policies, Neil did not feel they were fully responsive to all students' needs. Neil talked favorably about the work his school had done towards bringing more continuity to grading over the past couple of years. However, they felt that there needed to be more flexibility in differentiating grades for special education. Specifically, Neil felt that participation and effort were critical components of special education students' grades. Neil said "I can't put that effort, participation, and behavior grade into it, and that we're kind of stuck with grading in the same way that the general ed teachers are when we're differentiating everything else." In addition, Neil was serving on a grading committee the school had established. They spent considerable time describing their work as part of this committee. This experience was influential for Neil who said "they really did want to make sure there was that continuity across the board."

Descriptions of Perceived Influence on the Purpose of Traditional Grading

Participants generally described the perceived influence of school and district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies as detracting from the value of grading. Of the eight participants, Daisy, Penny, Amy, Victor, Craig, Susie, and Richard talked negatively about the influence they perceived their school and district's grading policies had on their perceptions about the purpose. Neil was the only participant who did not speak negatively about their school or district's policies on grading. When speaking about the work school administrators had undertaken to bring more continuity and guidance to grading, Neil said:

They realized what we didn't have in place and...really worked to try and put those pieces into place, and grading was really a big one. So, I think, trying to streamline that and making sure that it's meaningful, that it's purposeful, and that it's not a waste of time for anybody, students, teachers, families, administrators, and that when we get phone calls, we can talk intelligently about what we're seeing when we look at the gradebook.

Neil felt that the changes their school had implemented were well received by teachers. When asked if they felt their school's new guidelines and policies were influential on their perceptions of grading, Neil said "I think a lot of what they, we, what we've put in place has mirrored my ideas."

When describing the perceived influence of their school and district's grading policies, Richard felt frustrated by the lack of progress they had made towards grading reform and described feeling held back. Richard speculated that part of the issue might be pushback from parents and the community but also felt that there was a lack of necessary support to move the work forward. Richard explained:

Maybe there's just not the right amount of resources or teams that have been set up for doing this and have voluntarily set up committees. Usually, committees are the ones that drive the change...I don't think there's a committee and enough people and man hours who are willing to tackle this and tackle it right.

Richard felt that administration might be hesitant but believed that a change would not be that difficult, explaining "like anything else, change is hard. But I wouldn't think the transition would be as difficult as maybe the real top administrators might think it is."

Susie felt that, before their school switched to using standards-based grades, grading policies and guidelines diminished the value and purpose of grading. Susie described their experience as a new teacher struggling with student behavior. They explained how they shifted the focus away from behavior and towards academics, saying "it was a personal thing. I was like I have to do something if I'm going to survive this. I gotta figure out how this is gonna work." Susie described being influenced by their students, explaining that they often struggled with personal issues and discussed the need for limiting the use of non-academic factors such as homework and instead focus more on academic skills.

Similar to Susie, Craig was also more influenced by their students than specific school or district policies. While Craig did describe how school policies diminished the value of grading, they also described their experience working in a majority-minority district with a high percentage of free and reduced-lunch students. Craig talked about student trauma and the influence this had on the way they taught their class. Craig also discussed the importance of teacher-student relationships. Craig explained "my students influence my grading...I think I have 72 students for this year. Those 72 students influence the way I grade."

Daisy, like the other participants, described a diminished value to grading as a result of school and district policies. However, Daisy described their experience as a part-time college educator. Daisy explained situations where post-secondary students struggled with basic academic skills. Daisy described students who felt unprepared for success in college as a result of being passed through middle and high school. They also took some time to describe a perceived difference between older and younger generation-teachers' views towards grading policies dissuasive of failing students, explaining "we are somewhat unhappy about this, like, you know, let the kid fail."

The remaining participants, Penny, Amy, and Victor all described a similar influence as the other participants. Penny felt that grading was not a high priority in their school and that the primary focus was on accessibility and dual-language programs to support their population of students. Amy did not believe that school policies that passed students along aligned with their beliefs about grading, describing being "thrown off" early in their career when they were told to bump students' grades to at least a 50. Victor described being influenced by their school's policy due to the fear of failure, adding that this created a layer of stress for teachers who tend to err on the side of caution and create easier assignments to help boost students' grades.

Presentation of Themes

A total of five themes emerged from the data: (1) teachers described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning; (2) teachers believed that traditional grading is partially ineffective; (3) school and district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies remain open-ended and idiosyncratic with limited guidance by leadership; (4) several teachers described pervasive school or district cultures, guidelines, and policies dissuasive of failure and the perceived negative effects on students; and (5) teachers described how unclear school or district

policies diminished the value of grading. Themes one and two relate to the first research question and represent how teachers described their perceptions of the purpose of grading. Themes three and four relate to research question two and represent how teachers described their school or districts' grading culture, guidelines, and policies. Finally, theme five relates to research question three and represents how teachers described the influence of their school or districts' grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading.

Theme 1: Teachers Primarily Described the Purpose of Grading as a Measurement of Student Learning

Theme one relates to the first research question on how Connecticut public middle school teachers described the purpose of traditional grading. All eight participants described the primary purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning. Specifically, teachers described how grading should show student understanding and mastery of content, their application of knowledge, their growth and progress, and their ability to perform academic skills and standards. Additionally, some teachers also described the purpose of grading as a way to inform instruction and help both teachers and students see areas of struggle, success, and growth. While this was the predominant theme that emerged when participants were asked to describe the purpose of grading, a few also talked about the use of non-academic factors and the need for grading to also measure student effort, attitudes, and behaviors and to encourage greater participation and motivation.

Each participant had a slightly different way of describing what they meant by learning and the components they considered important when grading students. Daisy described the purpose of grading as a way to assess students' "understanding of content material" and their capabilities. They did not believe that grading should be used to measure a student's ability to

memorize facts, explaining that this places “an undue stress upon kids.” They described their assessments as “more skills based,” allowing students to apply their knowledge. However, Daisy was also one of the participants who described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student effort and participation. While they did not believe that this was the primary purpose of grading, they did explain that “sometimes there’s the participation or effort component within there.” Daisy’s emphasis on the importance of grading for effort and participation likely stemmed from their own experiences as a student. Daisy explained:

I thought, you know, if I didn’t do something you deserve a zero. You do poorly on it, you get a bad grade, you know? You mark it on. It’s like you can’t just give people credit for, you know, showing up in the classroom.

Daisy also referenced teaching experience when describing the importance of effort and participation, explaining that students who put forth no effort deserved to earn a zero. Part of this perception was also shaped by Daisy’s experience as a part-time post-secondary college teacher. Daisy referenced “the power of a zero” and “are A’s always A’s?” When asked to describe what they meant by this, Daisy said “if everyone in your course gets an ‘A,’ are they really like earning it?” Daisy believed that students were too used to getting “easy A’s” and that it was necessary to challenge them more.

Penny described the purpose of grading in a more idealistic way, distinguishing what they wanted grading to be versus what they felt it was. Penny explained:

What I want it to do is show me where my kids are at, what they are succeeding with and they’re struggling with. I think in today’s educational society it more often shows me which kids are doing their work, which kids are not doing their work, as opposed to who actually understands what’s going on.

Penny also described how grading should show students where they are in terms of their progression and understanding of content. They explained that students not getting an “A” or a “B” are “not grasping the content to the level that, as a teacher, I hope you’re grasping it.” Penny also talked about teaching in a school for a year where mastery-based grading had been introduced. Penny liked the connection mastery grading made between the standard, what was being taught, and what was being assessed, saying “that’s what I feel like grades are supposed to be, and they have moved away from.”

Amy described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student growth. They shared their belief about the importance of standards and the ability to see where students are successful or struggling. Amy stated:

So I think the purpose of grading is to see, you know, if students have shown growth. At least to me, you know, so I could say, what I do like about ACTFL is how we have different modes. I could say, look, I could tell that you have improved in grammar, but you know, you’re struggling with listening and reading assignments. We gotta focus on that. So that’s what I think grading is, personally, to show growth.

ACTFL is the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages which, Amy explained, were the standards used by their school for teaching foreign languages. Beyond measuring growth, Amy also described the importance of grading and student self-reflection. When asked what they believed was the connection between grading and student learning, they said “I think if you give the opportunity for students to self-reflect, which I have, they could see how they’re doing.” Amy described how, based on their experience, students tracking and reflecting on their own growth helped increase pride in their work and investment in learning.

Similar to Amy, Susie, talked about the importance of grading as a way for students to reflect on their progress and provide feedback on their performance. Susie believed that grading was not only a reflection of student learning but also a reflection of teacher efficacy. Susie said “overall, it’s not only a reflection on them, but also on the teacher.” They went on to explain:

You want the majority of your kids to pass. So, if you’re looking through your gradebook, and the majority of kids have C’s and D’s, you gotta think to yourself, what am I doing wrong here? What can I be doing better?

Susie, whose school had made the transition to standards-based grading, also spoke about how traditional grades measured a variety of non-academic factors including behavior, homework, and attendance.

Victor also described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning. They stated that “there should ideally be a correlation between the grade and the level of mastery of the content.” For Victor, grading was a little more straightforward. They said:

I think the purpose of grading is to reflect what has been learned in class...I would think that a kid, ideally, a kid who is getting a 90 or better has learned 90% or better what you have taught them. You know, a kid who has a 65 has learned about two-thirds of what skill or knowledge you meant to impart.

Similar to Daisy, Victor believed that part of the purpose of grading was to increase student motivation, stating “I think it’s also something that’s designed to increase motivation for students, you know? Keep dangling carrots over their head, and they’ll keep working harder.” When asked how they felt about grading being used to increase student motivation, they said “I’m fine with that aspect of it.” However, Victor also said “but the flip side of it is that it’s also

unmotivating for the kids who are not getting A's...the student who gets 61 is negatively reinforced.”

Craig also believed that the purpose of grading was to measure student learning. Craig explained “purpose of grading is to see where a student is...how they're progressing, what have they learned? What have they not learned? So on and so forth. In theory. This is the idea of grading.” Craig's description of measuring student learning was similar to Victor's. Craig stated that, in theory, “the students that get an 'A' learned everything. They know it all...They're above average. 'C,' they learned just about everything but they, you know, they're missing some things. D's and F's, they didn't learn a lot.” Craig also briefly touched on grades and motivation. However, they did not elaborate much on their feelings about grades being used as motivation. Instead, Craig simply expressed the belief that grades “can be a motivator for some and some other kids just don't care. It doesn't matter to them.”

While Richard's perception of the purpose of grading was also to measure student learning, they went into a bit more depth about student understanding and mastery of content. Richard described the purpose of grading as a spectrum across a student's entire academic career. It was not just mastery of content in one grade, but also the progression within learning strands throughout each grade. They believed that students should be able to see their growth over time and talked about the purpose of grading as a means for student self-reflection and goal setting. For Richard, the purpose of grading was more about how it helped students. When asked what they believed the connection between grading and student learning was, they stated “self-assessment, self-reflection, peer-evaluation, and having those conversations openly and honestly, without any shame, without any judgement, and without feeling like you're a failure. Those are the real keys behind true learning.” Richard also briefly talked about the importance of grading

for student self-efficacy. They believed that grading should allow students to see their progression without comparison to peers and to help them set goals to meet standards.

Neil, like all the other participants, described the purpose of grading as a measurement of students' ability to perform standards and skills and as a measurement of their understanding of content. They stated that grading should be "to assess the student's progress in the material that is being taught to show their ability or inability to...perform the Common Core Standards and specific skills." However, like a couple of other participants, Neil also talked about grading as a way to measure participation and behavior, stating:

So, I truly believe that attitude...it's something that we should be assessing because that does affect the student's ability to perform the tasks we are asking them to do, or to perform the things that we expect them to do, as you know, as a teacher, as a student.

Neil's belief that attitudes were an important part of grading likely had to do with their district's recent work for Portrait of a Graduate. Neil stated that this aspect of the grade should be tied to the attitudes and behaviors students are expected to demonstrate.

Theme 2: Teachers Believed that Traditional Grading was Partially Ineffective

Theme two also relates to the first research question. When asked about their perceptions of the purpose of grading, all eight participants discussed the need for grading to measure student learning. While participants had slightly different ideas about how grading should measure student learning, all agreed that this was the primary objective. However, when asked about the purpose of grading, several of the participants followed up with their perceptions about the reality of grading. For many, there was a difference between what they felt the purpose of grading should be and what the purpose of grading was. There was a consensus among the participants that traditional grading is at least partially ineffective.

During the interview, when asked what they believed was the connection between grading and student learning, Daisy mentioned that “if done correctly, as a measure of their learning.” When asked to elaborate on what they meant by “if done correctly,” Daisy talked about assessment of student learning, explaining that, when assessing students, it should be more than just testing memorization of facts and definitions. For Daisy, grading was about measuring the application of student knowledge. They spoke about Depth of Knowledge and the need to push students beyond simple recall. Daisy felt that assessments that measured students’ ability to remember facts, names, or terms put “undue stress” on kids and were not effective in showing student learning. Daisy stated several times that grading should measure skills. Daisy explained “it’s the skill. Can they, if you give them information, draw a Punnett square and give the percentages of this and that and know the genotypes and phenotypes, and it’s the application.”

Penny also explained that the purpose of grading was to measure student learning. However, they felt grading was more effective at indicating which students were doing their work and which ones were not. When asked whether they believed traditional grading was effective at measuring student learning, they said “I don’t think traditional grading methods are.” Penny felt that traditional grading was not effective at representing what students know. They talked about test anxiety and poor performance on assessments. Penny explained:

Every year I have a kid who either has test anxiety or struggles to express themselves in writing, you know, and I know they know the content if they, if I talk to them about it, they get it, right, do the class work and they get it. And then you give them the test or the essay, or whatever it is, and it doesn’t convey on the rubric or the grades. You know, whatever the points are for the test doesn’t convey their understanding the way I know they understand it. You know so you’ll have the kid who in class is participating and

seems to know what's going on, and then they have so much anxiety over the text that they just like can't do it. And you end up with kids who have a forty, and now their grade bombs their overall, you know, average plummets and they're getting a "C" or a "D," even though I know they get the content better than that.

Part of Penny's perceptions about the ineffectiveness of traditional grading stems from experience teaching bilingual Spanish students. They talked about grading and the effects of language barriers in a dual-language school. Penny said that, because so many students spoke Spanish, "I often struggle with the concept of is the grade they're getting because they don't like the test and stuff? Are they getting it because they didn't know the content or cause they didn't know the English?"

Amy also shared the belief that traditional grading is ineffective at accurately communicating student learning. They felt that school and district policies, which will be discussed in greater detail below, led to grade inflation and did not adequately prepare students for high school. Amy said, "it feels like the grades are not a true reflection of students' work." Amy also talked about expectations and student motivation saying, "I feel that in a way, expectations have been lowered at the middle school." Amy believed that there was an overemphasis placed on homework and classwork and not enough placed on assessments. They said:

I could have a 90%, but I'm not really an "A" student. I'm really a "C" or a "D" student because of my assessments, but I'm showing that I am an "A plus" student or a "B plus" student because of my homework and class activities.

As a result of these grading practices, Amy felt that traditional grading was not effective at showing a student's true capabilities. These perceptions about lower grading expectations may

have resulted from Amy's own experiences as a student. They explained "I think back when I was in school back in like 98, it was straightforward...I feel that during the 90's we had higher expectations. They were harder on us for sure."

Victor had also talked about the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning. However, when asked what they believed was the connection between grading and student learning, Victor said "I think from what I talked about as the ideal, that's changed...There's a certain amount of compliance that's graded. A certain amount of adhering to the script of what the classroom looks like is graded." Victor also shared the perception that grading relies heavily on non-academic factors such as homework completion and participation. They stated that, as a result of these grading practices, "a lot of a grade now is not reflective of what you know, but...what motions you are willing to go through." As a result of these perceptions, Victor felt that traditional grading was inaccurate and used to reenforce compliance and expected student behaviors.

Craig discussed how idiosyncratic grading practices created invalidity. Craig, like the other participants, initially spoke about how grading should measure student learning but quickly changed the focus and began discussing their perceptions about the issues associated with traditional grading practices. Craig talked about the lack of standardized grading and the different grading styles between themselves and the other three social studies teachers in the school. Because of these idiosyncratic practices, Craig said "just because they get an 'A' in my class, doesn't mean they'd get an 'A' in another class. So the purpose of seeing who's an 'A' student, it's different for each teacher." Similar to Penny, whose perceptions about the ineffectiveness of traditional grading were influenced by their Spanish-speaking students, Craig also felt that traditional grading was limited in communicating what students actually know and

how successful they will be. When discussing their perceptions of grading, Craig talked about how they had changed over time, stating:

The connections with grading now, I could see a student that gets a “C” and still understand that they’re going to be successful because of the way they did things...The “C” doesn’t mean they’re a bad student anymore. I think the “C” student could be just as successful, that “C” will tell me just as much about the student being successful as the “A” could.

Craig was also very candid about the importance of grades at the middle school level, stating “grades don’t matter in middle school. The students that I have can fail every single class and they’re getting moved on to the next grade.”

When sharing their perceptions about the purpose of grading, Susie also discussed how traditional grading was ineffective at accurately reflecting student learning. Susie talked about how traditional grading was too broad and included a mix of non-academic factors such as behavior, homework, and attendance. Their school, which had switched to standards-based grades, used to use traditional grading, and Susie felt that traditional grading did not effectively capture students’ experiences. When speaking about students’ personal lives or issues, Susie said “you know your mess doesn’t tell me how intelligent you are. It tells me your emotional intelligence, but not so much your academic intelligence.” Because of their unique experience having switched from using traditional grading to standards-based grading, Susie was able to speak to the importance of reducing non-academic factors and grading student mastery of specific standards. They talked about the lack of clarity in traditional grading and how standards-based grading provide greater insight. Susie stated that:

Back in the day was just math in general. So didn't matter what we were doing in math. Your math grade was this. So, this allows for specification. It allows for "okay, she can add and subtract, but then, when it comes to multiplication, she's struggling." So it does let parents know what the breakdown is. It's also good for me with feedback, because, like, if I know my class, all of them failed fractions, then I have to go back and redo fractions, but if none of them failed...then I can continue on that.

This unique experience allowed Susie to speak to the vagueness of traditional grading and their ineffectiveness at accurately communicating student learning.

Richard, when asked to share their perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading asked "ideally, or what I think it's for?" Like the other participants, Richard saw a discrepancy between what they believed was the ideal purpose of grading and the reality. Richard began by discussing their perceptions about what they believed was the reality of grading. Richard talked about leveling and accountability, but also shared how traditional grading can be harmful to students. Richard felt that there needed to be more conversation around grading, explaining that "grades could crush kids." They also spoke about how the use of traditional grading could "falsely inflate other kids' thoughts that they are understanding things," and that "it can create this competitiveness that doesn't need to be there." Richard stated "that irks me when it affects the motivation of a child, their self-confidence. That really bothers me...and grading translates into that if it's not done correctly.

Neil shared the perception that traditional grading is ineffective because "kids don't understand what the purpose of grading is." They believed that "grades aren't what matter. It's what you know or what you don't know." Neil talked about middle school students putting too much emphasis on their grade without really understanding what the grade is supposed to

represent. They stated “students put too much thought into what their grade is, and not what the grade is representing and what they had to do to get there. I wish they would.” Neil also stated that they did not “necessarily agree with traditional-based” grading but that they also were not fully in support of standards-based grading either. Neil did, however, state that “in trying to show that connection between grading and student learning...standards-based grading would probably help students to understand the meaning behind grading.”

Theme 3: School and Districts Grading Cultures, Guidelines, and Policies remain Open-Ended and Idiosyncratic with Limited Guidance by Leadership

Theme three relates to research question two on how teachers describe their school or district’s grading culture, guidelines, and policies. A few participants described some work their schools or districts had done to try and bring some continuity to grading practices. For example, one prevalent practice that was common for all eight participants was a 50% policy where teachers were unable to give students grades lower than a 50. While the use of this policy varied between schools, it was present in some form. Some schools provided guidance around grading in terms of required categories, weights, and number of assignments. However, this was not common for every school and these policies also varied.

Neil’s description of the work their school was doing was the most comprehensive of the eight participants. They shared that, until a recent change in administration, the school had a very open-ended policy. Neil said that:

Up until this past year, there really hasn’t been much direction on a district or school level, except a couple of criteria that we had to follow loosely. So, it really was kind of an open-ended thing, trial and error. Seeing what worked best for getting the students, you know, the grades for students based on their performance.

When asked if they felt the policy on grading was shifting, Neil stated “yeah, it’s shifted tremendously.” Neil described a grading committee the school had established to look at the discrepancies in grading practices and the work their school had done around bringing more continuity and providing more guidance. However, Neil explained “I still feel as if there’s a lot of inconsistencies, and I feel as if there are some teachers who just want their gradebooks to look good.” Neil shared that while there are now common categories and descriptors for the gradebook, the percentages for each category were still up to the individual departments. They described a wide variation in category percentages, citing assessments which ranged from 10% to 70% of a student’s final grade.

Similar to Neil, Richard described grading practices in their school as departmentalized.

They explained:

We try to stay as sort of a science department or PLC in the same grading way. Math, the same thing, social studies, same thing. So, it’s more department, but even as a teacher within that department, you do have a bit of leniency.

When asked to describe their school or district’s grading policy, Richard said “behind the other districts.” They added “we are not at the point where parents and children could easily say, I have mastered this concept because...and they can name it out, or I have grown over the course of the school year because I’ve learned boom, boom, boom, boom!” Richard also described different grading practices between the elementary and middle school, explaining that students get confused by the different grading systems when they transition to middle school. Richard did describe some basic grading guidelines teachers were expected to follow, including minimizing homework and prioritizing assessments. Richard also felt grading was becoming more collaborative within their school, explaining “used to be more in a silo, in isolation. Now, there’s

a number of common assessments, if you will, that we're starting to come about and we're seeing together."

Craig described a similar situation in their school. However, while they said that grading was heavily departmentalized, they also explained that, unlike math, ELA, and science, which all had more standardized grading practices, social studies did not. Craig said:

So, when it comes to our policy for our grading, like my grades, I have 25% is test and projects, 25% is quizzes, 25% is homework, 25% is classwork. My counterpart in the other eighth grade class, his is not the same as mine. So, there is no policy of what I, we have to be...it's up to your discretion.

When asked if there were any other specific grading policies at the school or district level, Craig said "not really." The only policy they described at the school level was that they were required to enter one non-effort grade per week into the gradebook. When asked if they would appreciate any additional guidance on grading, Craig said "I would love guidelines. I would love weights. I would love to say, hey, this is what were gonna do."

Victor felt that the school they taught in had a specific grading policy which was described as "very effective for motivated students." Victor's description of their school's grading policy was similar to the other participants. There was some guidance on the categories and the number of assignments teachers were expected to have for each. Also, similar to other participants, grading at Victor's school was department-based. Victor explained "we want all eight-grade social studies to have an equal number of assessments. So, we're making sure that the students are receiving an equitable education, no matter who they have." Victor described a more collaborative culture of grading in their school where departments meet regularly, and teachers discussed assignments being put in the gradebook. However, when asked if this was a

teacher or department-initiated grading practice, Victor explained “that is a teacher-initiated thing.” They also said this practice differed by department and that yearly instructional goals are set by each department’s supervisor. While Victor’s description of their school’s grading policy and culture demonstrated a higher degree of continuity and collaboration than some of the other participants, grading practices still varied between departments and guidance was limited to the categories and number of assignments teachers were expected to grade.

Amy’s description of their school’s grading policy also showed that, while there was some guidance, it was mostly up to each department. They explained:

Our department was all the same. We all had to have the same weighted percentage. You want all of your science teachers to have the same, you know, weighted percentage, same with math. They all had to have the same. They don’t have to have the same exact assessments or class activities per se, but definitely the same categories and weighted percentages had to be the same.

Amy also explained that their department used common assessments, such as tests and projects, which had to be the same. When asked if they believed grading was collaborative in their school, Amy felt it was but within the department. However, their description of that collaboration mostly focused on the use of common categories and weights. When asked if there was any collaboration in grading student work or assessments, Amy said that it was independent.

Daisy’s experience as a middle school teacher spanned across several districts. Daisy explained that, at times, they were the only science teacher, and due to a lack of colleagues in the same department, there was a significant amount of flexibility when it came to grading. When teaching in schools with other science teachers, Daisy said that grading was more collaborative within the department. Like several of the other participants, Daisy talked about similar

assignments and categories. They explained that, at the middle school, the department supervisor helped establish category weights but that “other departments would do different things.” Daisy spoke positively of the collaboration around category weights, stating that “in some ways it was kind of good.” However, Daisy explained that, even with common categories and weights, teachers still graded differently.

Penny and Susie described even less guidance on grading in their schools. When Penny was asked how they would describe their school or district’s grading policy, they replied “vague.” Penny stated “I am allowed to construct my grades however I wish.” When asked if there was any collaboration on grading, Penny explained that, as the only science teacher in the school building, “I was kind of told whatever feels right, do. Our district-wide science department doesn’t have any guidance on it.” Unlike the other participants, Penny said their school and district did not even provide weights and that, as a teacher, they were provided with “nothing...literally nothing.” When asked if they would appreciate more guidance from the school or district, Penny said:

I would like a little more guidance because I think it leaves it very open that I’m not sure all science classes in the district are getting equal amounts. Like how do you compare “oh, they got a ‘C’ in my class, but the other class in the other school that’s supposed to be teaching the same thing, they got an ‘A,’” well, what’s the difference? Like there’s no real way to compare the grades across schools, even though our curriculum is supposed to be able to do that.

Penny described being frustrated and overwhelmed by the lack of guidance. They explained that other schools in the district had more specific grading policies but that it was very much dependent on school leadership.

Though Susie's school had switched to standards-based grades, they explained that, when still using traditional grading, guidance was very limited. Susie explained that the school's grading policy was not well defined. They said:

Everything, it was up to the teacher's discretion. I mean, they tried to give us like baselines, but you know, if I say "oh, well, I think she's awesome, and she's just having some trouble, you know she tries she deserves that 'B.'" You know, they say like use your professional, you know judgement. But in reality, every teacher's different. So professional judgement can vary. So, it wasn't very even across the board, especially depends on who you got.

When asked if there was any additional guidance, Susie said only that administration wanted teachers to have a certain number of grades in the gradebook. However, Susie explained "but again, if you didn't keep up with it or you weren't that concerned with it...you know, the principals not coming to your room to look at your physical gradebook."

Theme 4: Several Teachers Described Pervasive School or District Grading Cultures, Guidelines, and Policies Dissuasive of Failure and the Perceived Negative Effects on Students

Theme four also relates to the second research question. When discussing their school or district's grading cultures, guidelines, and policies, five of the participants shared that there was a pervasive focus on failure. In some situations, participants described specific policies related to failing students, and in others, participants described school cultures dissuasive of failure. When discussing these cultures, guidelines, and policies, participants were quick to describe the perceived negative effects they had on students.

Daisy explained "we're pretty much told you can't give an 'F.'" Daisy's school had a similar policy to that of several of the participant's where teachers had to give students a

minimum final grade of 50. They explained, “at the middle school, they were working towards a policy of you can’t put zero’s in... You had to put a 50 in.” Daisy described the school’s make up policy as lenient on students and overwhelming for teachers. They also felt that it was inequitable for students to automatically get a 50, explaining “how was that fair to the kid sitting next to you? This kid did nothing, those 50’s should not equate... I just personally struggled with the 0 being a 50.” When asked how grading was discussed by administration in the school, Daisy said “I don’t know what goes on with administrators. All I know is, this is what we’re told to do, and I follow it.”

Amy described a similar situation to Daisy at their school. When asked about the grading culture, Amy explained:

I think that is a culture where no one gets zeroes. I think that’s a culture itself. No one gets a zero. Everyone’s a winner here. Everyone gets a trophy. I think that is a culture.

It’s taboo to talk about, you know, this kid should not be going to the next grade. This kid needs to repeat sixth grade or seventh grade. Maybe it’s a culture of, like I said,

everyone’s a winner, and it’s a culture of just a hush, hush culture.

Amy described “walking on eggshells” when talking about failing grades. Like Daisy, Amy’s school also had a minimum 50% grading policy for students. They also described lenient make-up policies and multiple opportunities for students to retake assessments. When describing how grading was discussed by teachers in the school, Amy said “the only thing I heard was just frustration from teachers. How they did not agree with giving a 50 or 0 and accepting extremely late assignments or assessments.” Amy felt that these policies encouraged grade inflation and, as a result, lowered expectations, demotivated students, and inadequately prepared them for high school, saying “it feels like the grades are not a true reflection of the student’s work.” When

asked if they felt teachers tended to inflate student grades, Amy explained “they had no choice. It’s really coming from administration and higher up.”

Victor’s experience was a little different. While they did describe a focus on failing students at their school, it was not as significant as the work the school was doing to create more common practices around grading. When asked if there was a focus on grading at their school, Victor said “there is a focus on grades, yes. We are focused on grades because we’re stressed about the number of students failing.” When asked how grading was discussed by teachers and school administrators, Victor explained “by administrators, there’s a great emphasis on how can we reduce the number of kids failing. By Teachers, there’s a large discussion on how we could engage the students and get more work completion.” Victor did not describe any forceful policy of reducing the number of failing students. However, unlike Amy and Daisy, who described a greater degree of administrative pressure, Victor only felt that administration was concerned about the high number of failures and focused on identifying strategies for mitigation.

When discussing school and district policies related to failing students, Craig was the only participant to bring up the lingering effects of COVID guidelines. Craig explained:

Covid has been a gigantic disservice for so many of our students, and it’s still haunting them to this day. And when I say some kids don’t care about grades, and part of that is because of the COVID process and them going through COVID and they didn’t have to do anything. They didn’t even have to show up, and they just miraculously went on to the next grade. And our district hasn’t changed that policy. So, since they haven’t changed that policy, grades aren’t necessarily all that important to some, and they know they’re going to get through it.

Craig discussed their school's policy of not giving any student less than a 50. While less critical of this policy than some of the other participants, Craig did explain that traditional grading is "antiquated." They spoke positively of the minimum 50% policy, however, explaining that they "cut it off into the 50% margin so that they have a chance."

Susie's experience was similar. Though their school had switched to standards-based grading, they explained that, when it was traditional grading, teachers were encouraged to reduce the number of students failing. Susie said "they urged us to grade up. They really wanted to see more passing than failing. Even if the kids were struggling in certain areas." When asked if grading was discussed by school administration, Susie said "no, I mean, no. We had, like, you know, 'oh, so many kids failed every year. We're trying to get that up.'" Susie felt that the grade up policies led to inaccurate grading and described student performance on state assessments, explaining "the only real data came from the state tests. Because then we were able to see how many are proficient and not." They described the discrepancy between grades and performance on assessments, saying "that was very telling. Because if you're giving everybody 'A's,' you know, only 20% passed reading, where are these 'A's' coming from right now?" Susie felt that, before the switch to standards-based grading, there was a higher tendency for teachers to inflate grades.

Of the eight participants, Penny, Richard, and Neil were the only ones not to discuss school or district policies dissuasive of failing students. Neil did briefly discuss his perception that there are some inconsistencies in grading as a result of some teachers grading more leniently. They explained "I feel as if there are some teachers who just want their gradebooks to look good." Neil said that "I think it's just based on the opportunities that are given, or the lack thereof, or the way in which it's graded, or the way the students are assessed." They felt that,

even though their school had done considerable work on the grading policy, policy did not set teacher practice. Neil explained “I think that’s a huge piece that you can’t necessarily change a teacher’s...style of teaching just because you put a grading policy in to place. And so there’s still a lot of variables that can affect...the way a teacher assigns things that are graded.” Similarly, Richard also did not describe any specific policy of failing students. Their focus was more on the work the department had done towards establishing common grading practices.

Penny’s description of their school’s grading policy was so undefined that there was little description about any policy related to failing students. When asked, Penny said “you can’t fail any kid that’s special education and I’m not supposed to give any kid below a 50 as their average for the term.” Outside of this, there was no additional discussion of any specific policy dissuasive of giving failing grades. Penny explained that the school was less focused on grading and more focused on shifting instruction. Additionally, they felt that the goal of the current administration was to make school more accessible to dual-language students. Despite this, Penny still talked about their experiences as a student with grading, saying “I think that as a student, grades were more influential. If you fail, you failed, and you were staying back.” They further explained their belief that education had changed and now simply pushed students along. Penny said:

We want to let them keep going, and then we’re failing them in the fact that they’re not mastering the content. They’re not getting these skills, but we’re giving them grades that say they’re getting the skills. So, then I have these kids that are coming to me in seventh and eighth grade, and I’m supposed to be teaching them about genetics and all sorts of complicated science with complicated vocabulary, and they’re still reading on a second-

grade level. So, I think that our grading has become less of really showing what kids are mastering and what they're able to do.

Theme 5: Teachers Described how School or District Grading Cultures, Guidelines, and Policies Diminished the Value of Grading

Theme five relates to the final research question on how participants described the influence of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading. When asked, seven of the eight participants described a negative influence. Only Neil spoke positively about the recent work their school was doing to provide more guidance and bring more continuity to grading practices. Most participants described how school and district policies diminished the value of grading. While some of the participants described their school or district's grading policy or guidelines as directly influential on their practice, others felt the influence was more impactful on their perceptions about the purpose.

Daisy felt that the school's dissuasive policy of failing students was most influential on their perception about the purpose of grading. Daisy explained "I think it diminishes the purpose of grading when you can't give zeros. You got to up scores just so everyone can pass and get good grades." Daisy also talked about how their school's policy negatively affected students. They described a certain level of complacency and indifference students had towards engaging in their work. Daisy said:

They've been playing this game. Some of them, I mean, this is a minority of them, but some of them, they know they can do nothing and they get passed along. So, you wonder like, what's the point? Why do I have to work so hard trying to get this kid to do stuff and

contact parents and do all this, because, you know, in the end, they're going to pass and they're going to move on.

Daisy's belief that grading lacked value was heavily influenced by this policy and by the perceived impact it had on students. Daisy talked briefly about their own experience as a student and how students were allowed to fail.

Penny felt that grading was devalued by their school's grading policy. While Penny's perception about the purpose of grading was similar to Daisy's, Penny described the lack of guidance as the primary reason why they felt grading was not of high importance. Penny said, "I think the fact that it's not encouraged or supported makes it feel like it's something you can maybe not take as seriously," explaining, "it's not always on the top of my to do list." Though Penny understood the value and importance of grading, they explained that time constraints and a lack of concern over grading in their school limited their motivation to grade. Penny's perception that grading lacked value may also have been the result of the school's culture. When asked to describe the culture of grading in the school, they explained:

You'll hear the jokes about like, oh, that one went in the filing cabinet, and they mean the trashcan kind of thing. "Oh, you did a good job, 100 for everybody," and participation grades as opposed to like content related grades.

Lastly, when asked if grading was ever discussed by school administration, Penny said occasionally, however, most of the focus was on assessment scores from the school's virtual reading and math program.

When asked how they felt their school or district's grading policies or guidelines influenced their perception about the purpose of grading, Amy explained "to be honest, not very clear." Amy felt particularly bound by the school's grading policy, saying "it kind of feels like

our hands are tied.” Similar to Daisy, Amy talked extensively about how their school’s policies were dissuasive of failing kids. They said, “we want to put in the true reflection of a student’s learning or growth and we can’t.” Though Amy didn’t directly say it, their description of their school’s policies and the purpose of grading conveyed a lack of value. When describing the need to give students at least a 50 on assignments, Amy said “it’s kind of discouraging in a way, really is. Like, why even continue looking at this, you know what I mean when they’re getting a 50 anyway.” Amy felt that there was a need for more teacher input about school grading policies. They also felt that policies that did not allow students to fail were a disservice because they did not accurately communicate learning.

When asked how school or district grading guidelines and policies influenced their perceptions of grading, Victor said “other than our propensity to talk about how many students are failing, it doesn’t influence it much.” Victor stated, “there is an undercurrent of student failing all the time and sometimes that adds a level of stress.” Victor’s perception was that their school viewed teachers as inadequately engaging failing students. Victor did not specifically talk about the impact of the school’s policy on their grading practices but did describe how it influences the types of assignments teachers give to students. Victor explained:

I think it influences along the lines of you have to create work that students will do to meet a minimum bar rather than excel. Sometimes, instead of doing a challenging assignment that maybe not everybody will nail, you’ll do an easier assignment so you could add more passing grades into the grade book.

Though they did not say it directly, Victor’s description of this policy communicated a diminished value of grading where teachers set a “minimum bar” simply to add “more passing grades” for students. Like Daisy and Amy, Victor explained that they believed their perceptions

about the purpose of grading were influenced by their school's grading policies because there was a fear of failure.

Craig's description of the influence of their school's policy was similar to Penny's. Craig felt that a lack of guidance on grading limited its value. They explained "I think, since there's such a laissez faire idea about grading, especially in my department, it leads me to not have strong feelings towards grading." Craig elaborated a bit on this saying "if we had some sort of guideline, I think it might make me look at it a little bit differently, but since we don't, you know, how important are they really?" While Craig described the influence the school's policy had on their perceptions of grading, they were quick to point out the lack of influence it had on their grading practice. Students were the primary influence in the way Craig graded, explaining "it's not necessarily a district policy that's going to influence me. It's not necessarily my colleagues that are going to influence me but my students and their lives." Craig, as an experienced teacher, stated "I'm not bound to any traditional system." Craig said, "very rarely is somebody going to tell me how to do things." Because they were a veteran teacher, Craig's experience as an educator proved more influential than school or district policies.

Susie spoke positively about their school's transition to standards-based grading. However, when asked how the school's grading policies and guidelines influenced their perceptions prior to the change, they shared a similar view that, due to the lack of guidance, grading was not very important. Susie explained "it was very much an afterthought, you know, it wasn't at the forefront." Susie talked about how traditional grading provided no real motivation for students to learn. They felt that it was not until they began using feedback that the students showed an increased interest in their work and grades.

Richard described a unique situation about how the school and district's grading policies influenced their perception of the purpose. Part of Richard's perception was influenced by the fact that, in the science department, they and their colleagues had already been using standards-based grading practices. However, the school and district Richard taught in still utilized a traditional grading system. Richard explained that they felt held back by the school and district's policy. Richard said:

I'm wondering why we have been getting training, you know, on sort of the evolution of it, and where we need to go, and why we're not there yet. So why haven't the two matched up? So that's what I'm wondering. I'm wondering why we're still in the old model of traditional based yet we're talking standard based. We're trying to do that within a traditional based, overarching model. I'm questioning that. It's a bit convoluted for me.

Richard described frustration about the inability for students to show growth due to the district's use of traditional report cards utilizing letter grades. When asked what they believed might be holding the district back from making a change to the grading system, Richard was unsure but felt that it might not be a high priority for such a successful district. Richard said, "it's not really a high priority for us," explaining, "nationally, you see our scores are high, so why fix something that's not broken?" Richard did not see much value in the traditional grading model that they were forced to use, sharing that "ultimately, everything has to translate into that letter grade." Richard talked about the steps the department was taking to ensure students understood their grades and said, "so I think within that we pride ourselves on them understanding, through all that, even though they still get a letter grade in the end."

Neil was the only participant to speak more positively about their school's recent efforts to provide more guidance and uniformity around grading practices. Part of this likely stemmed from Neil's work on their school's grading committee. Neil said "well, I do see their desire to be more uniform. To have the grading be meaningful. To have it reflect learning. It's a culture shift." Despite the positive view, Neil did describe how a vague policy around grading in the past created an idiosyncratic system. They explained that this was part of the impetus for their school's recent effort at grading reform, saying "we've kind of really been on our own." Of the eight participants, Neil was the only one who did not describe their school or district's policy as diminishing the value of grading.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine Connecticut public middle school teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. The results indicate that all the participants believed that the purpose of grading was to measure and communicate student understanding and mastery of content, application of knowledge, academic growth and progress, and ability to perform skills and standards. Additionally, some participants also felt that grading should measure and communicate non-achievement factors such as student effort and participation. Despite their descriptions of the purpose of grading, participants expressed that traditional grading was at least partially ineffective. Several participants felt that traditional grading was an inaccurate measure of student learning and harmful to students. Others felt that traditional grading lowered expectations. Some talked about how idiosyncratic grading practices within their schools' created issues of validity.

When describing their school or district's grading policies, participants shared that, while there was some guidance on grading, it was limited and mostly related to common categories, weights, and number of assignments. There was limited guidance by schools and districts when it came to grading practices. This lack of structure and limited guidance resulted in open-ended policies and idiosyncratic grading practices within each of the participants' schools. While there was some continuity within departments, as a whole, there was no comprehensive or systemic policy in place in any of the participants' schools or districts. In addition, some teachers described pervasive school or district grading guidelines, policies, and cultures dissuasive of failure. Some of these policies were more formal, as in the inability to give students a grade below 50%, and others were more cultural, not explicitly expressed but implicitly implied. The degree to which these policies influenced participants' perceptions and practices varied. However, these cultures, guidelines, and policies were a shared experience by several of the participants in this study.

Teachers believed that their school or district's grading cultures, guidelines, and policies devalued grading. For some participants, the influential aspect was the inability to fail students or hold them accountable by giving grades lower than a 50%. For others, the lack of a clear structure or guidance was the most influential factor influencing their perceptions. Regardless of the influencing factor, most of the participants agreed that the purpose of traditional grading was negatively influenced by school or district policies and guidelines.

The following chapter will be the conclusion of this study. The importance of the findings, implications, and recommendations for actions will be discussed in Chapter 5 as they relate to the research questions. This study will conclude with recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe Connecticut public middle school teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. Traditional grading practices, which utilize cognitive and non-cognitive factors such as effort, participation, and work completion, are an inaccurate and confusing indicator of student learning (Brookhart et al., 2016; Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a; McMillan, 2019). However, traditional grading practices have remained a mainstay in K-12 education due to teachers' grading perceptions (Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Nowruzzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Kunnath (2017) argued that teachers' grading practices are influenced by a variety of factors, including their knowledge and beliefs about grading. Woodbury and Gess-Newsome (2002) showed that teachers' thinking, which directly effects their practice, is influenced by personal contextual factors as well as structural and cultural contextual factors at the national, state, district, school, department, and classroom levels.

This study focused on three research questions. These research questions were designed to elicit responses related to teachers' beliefs about the purpose of grading, their description of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies, and the perceived influence their school or district's grading cultures, guidelines, and policies had on their beliefs about the purpose of grading:

Research Question 1: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Research Question 2: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their school or districts' grading culture, guidelines, and policies?

Research Question 3: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe the influence of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Teachers are a central component of the reform process (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). Their thinking, influenced by personal, cultural, and structural factors, guides their practice and contributes to idiosyncratic grading and validity issues (Feldman, 2018; Kagan, 1992; Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). McMillan (2019) argued that teachers' beliefs about grading need to be clearly articulated and discussed collaboratively in order to provide shared insights and experiences and strengthen the validity of grading.

Qualitative data for this study was gathered through individual, semi-structured interviews with eight participants. Each participant had at least three years of experience as a public middle school teacher in Connecticut and had utilized a traditional alpha-numeric grading system. After each interview, transcripts were downloaded and analyzed. Data analysis followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral. Codes generated from each database were combined to form five themes related to each of the three research questions. The five themes that were identified are: (1) teachers primarily described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning, (2) teachers believed that traditional grading was partially ineffective, (3) school and district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies remain open-ended and idiosyncratic with limited guidance by leadership, (4) several teachers described pervasive school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies dissuasive of failure and the perceived

negative effects on students, and (5) teachers described how school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies diminished the value of grading.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

Data for this research study was collected from eight participants through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were designed to allow participants to describe their experiences related to each of the three research questions. The first set of interview questions focused on participants' perceptions about the purpose of grading. The second set of questions focused on participants' description of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies. Finally, the last set of interview questions focused on participants' descriptions of the influence of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading. Interview questions related to each of the three research questions encouraged participants to share additional details and information related to their experiences with grading.

Research Question 1

The first research question, "how do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading," was designed to explore participants' experiences and beliefs about grading, which is a key component of their practice (Kunnath, 2017; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). All eight participants described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning. Participants had slightly different ways of describing what they meant by student learning, but all agreed that this was the primary reason for grading. Some of the participants talked about the importance of grading as a means of measuring student progress and understanding of content. Others talked more about the importance of skills, standards, and the application of knowledge. A couple of participants

discussed grading as a way for students to self-assess and reflect. A small handful of participants also discussed the purpose of grading as a way to measure and encourage student participation and effort.

When discussing their perceptions about the purpose of grading, participants primarily drew from their own experiences with grading as students as well as their classroom teaching experience. The theoretical framework used to guide this study is constructivist learning theory which states that individuals actively construct knowledge, and that prior knowledge and experiences play an important role in how individuals formulate meaning (Narayan et al., 2012). Some of the participants talked more favorably about their experiences with grading as students, and this influenced their perceptions about the purpose of grading as a teacher. For example, both Daisy and Amy felt that expectations were higher when they were students. Daisy referenced having to earn a grade and Amy felt that teachers were more rigid and had higher expectations when they were in school. Neither Daisy or Amy agreed with policies that encouraged grade inflation and lowered student expectations.

Other participants had a different perspective. Victor, Craig, Susie, and Richard talked negatively about their experiences with grading as students. These experiences proved influential in their perceptions about the purpose of grading as teachers. Victor said, "I think my experience as a teacher is reflected by my experience as a student and I know that I just suffered such anxiety about grades when I was a student that I tend to minimize them as a teacher." Richard shared a similar experience, describing the negative impact of grading on an individual's self-worth and confidence. These experiences shaped the way each of these participants viewed the purpose of grading and influenced the way they graded their students as teachers. For example, both Victor and Craig talked about minimizing the importance of grading. Richard focused

heavily on student self-reflection and growth around standards and skills. Susie talked about the lack of feedback and motivation they received when they were a student and, as a result, discussed the importance of providing their students feedback now as a teacher.

In addition to their experiences with grading as students, classroom teaching experience also proved influential for all eight participants when they discussed the factors that they believed shaped their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading. Some of the participants, like Daisy and Amy, described their perceptions about the purpose of grading being influenced by school policies and guidelines. Others, like Craig, Penny, Susie, Richard, and Neil talked about their perceptions being influenced by their students. Kunnath's (2017) Teacher Grading Decision-Making Framework identifies teacher knowledge, beliefs, expectations, and values as one of three driving factors influencing teachers' grading decision-making and their practice. Each of the eight participants' perceptions about the purpose of grading were guided by their knowledge and beliefs. This was shaped heavily by their experiences with grading, both as students and as classroom teachers. Kagan (1992) argued that teacher-thinking is a construct of their beliefs and that this forms the foundation of their knowledge and influences their perceptions, judgements, and behaviors.

There was a consensus among all eight participants that grading should measure student learning. Though participants described different indicators of student learning, such as content, skills, standards, and learning progressions, all agreed that this was the primary goal. Only a couple of participants talked about the use of non-academic factors like effort, participation, and work completion. Even when participants discussed the importance of non-academic factors in grading, none agreed with grading practices that might intentionally inflate or invalidate students' grades. The use of non-academic factors and grade inflation were grading practices

described by some of the participants in this study. However, because this study was focused on teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading and not their grading practices, it was discovered that, while grade inflation practices did exist in some of the participants' schools, teachers generally did not agree with it because of the harmful effects it had on students. This is significant because studies have shown teachers often use a variety of non-academic factors when grading students (Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a). However, the results of this study found that, while some of the participants were okay with using non-academic factors to pull for students, none agreed with policies or factors that inflated students' grades to the extent that grading became inaccurate and student learning was misrepresented. Cross and Frary (1999) found that, in a study concerning teachers' grading practices, there was a variation between what teachers considered ideal versus their actual practice. For the participants in this study, their actual practice was the result of knowledge, experience, and beliefs as well as external factors including administrative pressure and the needs of their students.

The second theme to emerge from this study related to the first research question is that teachers believed traditional grading is partially ineffective. Several participants described traditional grading as an inaccurate indicator of student learning and discussed a perceived difference between what the purpose of grading should be (a measurement of student learning), and what they believed the purpose of grading was (a tool to increase motivation, track students, and encourage work completion.) Daisy, Penny, and Amy felt that traditional grading was ineffective due to school and district policies that were dissuasive of teachers failing students. They felt this resulted in inequitable grading practices, grade inflation, and lowering student expectations and motivation. Penny also talked about external factors including parental pressure but also a lack of parental support. Others felt that traditional grading was ineffective because it

was too vague. Craig, Susie, and Richard described their experiences with traditional grading and believed that it lacked specificity and rationale. Susie talked about how traditional grading incorporated a variety of factors into a single indicator of student performance and, as a result, their inability to accurately communicate where students were succeeding or struggling. Victor described grading as a tool for compliance, believing that traditional grading did not reflect what students know.

These results are significant because research had indicated that one of the challenges associated with grading reform is teachers' grading perceptions (Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Nowruzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). This study found that, among the eight participants, there was consensus about the purpose of grading. While each of the participants' perceptions were based on their knowledge and beliefs and influenced by their experiences as students and classroom teachers, they all agreed that the purpose of grading was to measure student learning. Despite some variation in how participants described student learning, it generally included similar indicators such as standards, skills, and content knowledge. Link and Guskey (2022) succinctly described the goal of grading reform as removing non-achievement factors and communicating what students know and can do. The findings from this study related to the first research question indicate that all eight participants agree with the importance of measuring student learning, in line with the primary goal of grading reform. It should be noted that, while a few of the participants did describe the use of non-achievement factors such as effort and participation in grading, it was not the primary purpose. Daisy, who when asked to describe the purpose of grading, shared the most about the use of effort and participation. They explained "I'd have participation, it would be like 10% of your overall grade." Daisy felt that this component of

grading was important because it provided “wiggle room” to help boost a student’s grade. Daisy’s explanation for including participation in their grading aligns with research which shows that teachers often utilize non-academic factors as a way to help support their students and promote their success (Arrafii, 2020; Feldman, 2018; Kunnath, 2017).

In describing the ineffectiveness of traditional grading, two of the participants, Susie and Richard, talked openly about their affirmation for standards-based grading. Susie was the only one of the eight participants whose school had switched from traditional to standards-based grading. Susie talked favorably about this change and felt it was a much more accurate and reliable method of grading students. Richard, whose school and district were still using a traditional grading system, felt held back by the lack of progress. They described the work they and their colleagues had done to prioritize standards and were unsure why the district had not made the switch to standards-based grading.

While all eight participants in this research study had different experiences, knowledge, and ideas about grading, there was a higher degree of alignment than anticipated. Participants described a similar understanding about the purpose of grading. While some placed more value on content, standards, or skills, all agreed that grading should measure and communicate learning. Additionally, while there were a few participants who believed that grading should also include and measure non-achievement factors, this was not described as the primary purpose. Experience as both students and teachers were influential in shaping each of the participants’ beliefs about grading and, ultimately, their practice.

Research Question 2

The second research question addressed in this study was “how do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their school or districts’ grading culture, guidelines, and

policies?” This question allowed participants to explore their experiences with grading in their schools and districts. It also allowed them to describe how grading was discussed by teachers and school leaders and whether or not they perceived a focus or emphasis placed on grading by the school or district. Participants generally had a negative view towards their school and district’s grading guidelines and policies. While participants described some focus on grading and some cohesion around grading guidelines, most felt that their school and district’s policies were open-ended and allowed for idiosyncratic practices. Additionally, most participants described limited guidance on grading by school or district leadership.

Of the eight participants, Neil was the only one to speak more positively about the work their school had done on creating more continuity with grading. Even still, Neil felt that there were many inconsistencies between teachers. Most of the participants in this study felt that the majority of grading guidance came from their respective departments. Daisy, Amy, Victor, Craig, Richard, and Neil all discussed the work they had done with their department-level colleagues and, in some cases, their department leaders around common grading practices. The only two who did not describe this type of guidance or collaboration were Penny and Susie. Penny was the only science teacher in their school and described feeling isolated and unsure about grading. However, even though most participants described some common grading practices and guidelines, it was mostly limited to the types of grading categories, assignment weights, and number of assignments. Even within departments, participants described varying levels of cohesion. For example, Craig explained that their category weights were not the same as the other social studies teachers they worked with. Neil described a similar situation. They explained that, while teachers in the same department were required to have the same categories and weights, each department was allowed to determine what percentage each category weighed.

McMillan (2019) argued that teachers' grading practices are often idiosyncratic and isolated, even within the same school, and suggested a collaborative approach to grading.

Most of the participants, when describing the common grading practices within their departments, appreciated the guidance and talked positively about the opportunity for collaboration. For instance, when asked if they would appreciate more guidance on grading, Craig said they would love to have common guidelines and weights. Daisy also liked having some guidance on grading and, when they were part of a department, appreciated opportunities for collaboration with peers. Penny and Susie, who both had limited opportunities for collaboration with other teachers, talked about grading as open-ended. Susie explained that grades were up to a teacher's discretion and described idiosyncratic grading practices between classrooms. Penny felt frustrated by the lack of guidance and spoke negatively about the vague policies and high level of autonomy teachers were given when it came to grading. They felt this lack of support made it hard to compare students grades with other teachers in the district and expressed a desire for more guidance. Guskey (2009) speculated that a common cause of idiosyncratic grading practices within schools may be the lack of guidance, policy, or training. For several of the participants in this study, this was true.

When asked to describe what training or professional development they had received on grading, most participants felt that it was limited or nonexistent. Olsen and Buchanan (2019) argued that a lack of formal training on grading makes it commonplace, something that teachers must do but without always seeing its value. Teachers, they argued, tend to rely on their experiences and learn from peers. This view was shared by a couple of participants who described a lack of concern over grades. Penny explained that, in their school, teachers tend to grade for participation and work completion. Even though Penny explained that they knew

grading was important, it was not a priority. Susie had a similar experience, explaining that grading was not always on the top of their to-do list. In the absence of systemic policies and formal training, the participants in this study relied on their experience as both students and teachers to guide their practice. Additionally, as will be discussed in greater detail for research question three, several participants felt that a lack of policy devalued grading.

Several of the participants also described pervasive school and district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies that dissuaded failure and the negative effects this had on students. Research has shown that one of the factors associated with grade inflation is administrative pressure (Arrafii, 2020; Nowruzi, 2021). Of the eight participants, Daisy, Amy, Victor, Craig, and Susie all described policies that encouraged or, in some cases, even required teachers to pass students. Daisy and Amy both described a high level of administrative pressure to ensure that students passed. Victor, Craig, and Susie did not necessarily describe this same level of pressure but did describe their school's focus on reducing the number of failing students. Craig felt that grades do not matter at the middle school level. They explained that students can fail all their subjects and still move on to the next grade. Susie described a policy encouraged by school leadership to grade up. These teachers felt that these policies led to inequitable grading and inaccurately reflected student performance. These types of policies that contribute to grade inflation pose a challenge because grades become an invalid measure of student learning which can adversely impact student success (Arrafii, 2020; Buckmiller & Peters, 2018; Griffin & Townsley, 2021). Both Amy and Penny shared this view, explaining that grades do not necessarily reflect students' ability. Penny felt that teachers were failing students by passing them along, even though they were not mastering the skills or content. Amy perceived that these policies were primarily coming from school administration. Susie also talked about the

discrepancies in their school between students' grades and scores on standardized assessments, explaining that two do not always align as students are performing below grade-level but receiving passing grades in class.

While there were varying levels of guidance on grading, participants generally described their school and district's grading policies as limited. Where guidelines and policies did exist, they were often general, related to categories, weights, and assignments. Policies that required teachers to give a minimum grade of 50 to students, while used differently, were generally viewed negatively. Those participants who described strong administrative pressure to pass students saw these informal grading policies as inequitable and harmful. Participants generally spoke positively about the guidance they received and opportunities for collaboration and discussion on grading. There was a general sentiment among participants that more guidance on grading would be appreciated. The lack of guidance was a contributing factor to the idiosyncratic grading practices several of the participants described in their schools.

Research Question 3

The third and final research question addressed in this study was "how do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe the influence of their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading." Woodbury and Gess-Newsome (2002) argued that teacher thinking is influenced by larger structural and cultural contextual factors. Participants generally described how their school and district's grading policies and guidelines diminished the value of grading. Of the eight participants in this study, only Neil spoke positively about their school's grading guidance and the work they had done to increase continuity and reduce idiosyncratic practices.

Two primary reasons emerged as the cause for this perceived diminished value of grading. The first was school and district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies that focused on reducing the number of failing students. The second was school and district policies, or a lack thereof, that offered limited guidance or support to teachers. Of the eight participants, Daisy, Amy, and Victor talked about the influence of school policies and cultures focused on reducing the number of failing students. Daisy and Amy believed policies dissuasive of failure reduced student effort and limited not only the utility of grading, but the value of grades as well. Both Amy and Victor also described a culture dissuasive of failure. Amy explained that discussions about failing students in their school was like walking on “eggshells.” Amy felt that their school and district diminished the value of grading because they allowed everyone pass. Victor also described their school’s preponderance to focus on failing students and ways they could work to reduce this number. Victor felt that this created stress and explained that it led to teachers lowering the bar by assigning easier work to ensure a higher number of students were passing. All three participants described some level of administrative pressure to keep grades up when discussing the influence of their school and district’s grading policies. Researchers have noted that external factors such as administrative pressure are a reason why teachers inflate grades (Arraffi, 2020; Kunnath, 2017; Nowruzi, 2021).

Penny, Craig, Susie, and Richard all held a similar view that their school and district’s grading cultures, guidelines, and policies diminished the value of grading. However, unlike Daisy, Amy, and Victor, the primary factor for these four participants was the lack of guidance their schools or districts provided to teachers on grading. Penny and Craig both described very similar situations in their respective schools. Both perceived a limited value to grading due to a lack of focus or guidance. While Craig did describe some basic grading guidelines and some

department collaboration within their school, Penny felt that they were completely alone. Penny described feeling frustrated, acknowledging the importance of grading but not necessarily seeing its value. As the only science teacher in their school, Penny did not have a lot of opportunity for collaboration and described a considerable amount of teacher discretion. Penny expressed a desire for more guidance.

Similarly, Craig felt that, if there were more of an emphasis on grading, they might take it more seriously. Craig described being more heavily influenced by their students than their school's policies. Susie described a similar situation. Though their school was using standards-based grading, before the switch, Susie explained that, due to a lack of guidance or focus on grading by the school or administration, grading did not seem very important. Richard's description was a bit different. They described a high level of collaboration within their department and explained that, even though their district was still using traditional grading, they and their colleagues had adopted many of the elements of standards-based grading. Richard also described some level of guidance on grading but felt that the lack of grading reform was frustrating. Richard believed that they and their colleagues were ready to make the switch but were unable due to their district's continued use of traditional grading practices.

All eight participants described being influenced by their school or district's grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. While these guidelines and policies did not always result in a change to participants' practice, as was the case with Craig who clearly indicated their practice would not be influenced by school policies or administrative pressure, they did influence their perceptions about the purpose of grading. Kunnath (2017) found that, of 13 different factors influencing teachers' grading practices, formal and informal policies, and school administrators ranked relatively low. It is important to note, however, that Kunnath's (2017) study focused

specifically on teachers' grading practices, not necessarily teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading. The results of this study indicate that teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading were influenced by school and district policies. Additionally, for some, administrative pressure proved an influential factor on practice whereas others did not describe this administrative pressure or felt it was not influential enough to change the way they graded.

The findings associated with research question three indicate that the participants in this study did perceive their school and district's grading cultures, guidelines, and policies as influential on their perceptions about the purpose of grading. Even Neil, who was the only participant to speak positively about their school's grading policies and guidelines, was influenced by their work on their school's grading committee. School guidelines and administrative pressure to keep grades up were viewed negatively by the three participants who described these types of policies in their districts. For these participants, traditional grading was inaccurate and inequitable and reduced student motivation and effort. As a result, they saw a diminished value to grading. Cox (2011) found that district policies which set a minimum score of 50% were met by teacher resistance. Participants who worked in schools or districts that had vague policies or minimal guidelines also saw a diminished value to grading. For these participants, grading was not a priority. They questioned the value versus the time and effort needed to grade.

Based on the results of this study, school and district policies are influential on teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading. There is no specific research that exists on the influence school or district grading policies have on teachers' perceptions about grading in Connecticut. As a local control state, policies such as this are left to local and regional boards of education (Mooney, 2018). As a result, there was variation in school and district policies and

guidelines described by the participants. The results of this research confirm both Feldman's (2018) and Guskey's (2009) argument that open-ended policies, limited guidance, and a lack of training reinforces teachers' reliance of experience and contributes to idiosyncratic grading practices.

Implications

The results of this study may benefit teachers, instructional leaders, and school and district administrators interested in grading and grading reform. Traditional grading practices, which are idiosyncratic and rely on a variety of non-academic factors, have remained largely unchanged for the last 100 years (Brookhart et al., 2016; Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a). Reformers have recently called for grading reform to ensure more accurate, reliable, and equitable grading methods (Alex, 2022; Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020). However, grading reform remains a challenge (Feldman, 2018; Guskey, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Percell & Meyer, 2021). Teachers' beliefs and knowledge about grading contribute to idiosyncratic practices and validity issues (Feldman, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). However, this study found that participants all believed that the primary purpose of grading was to measure student learning. While there was some variation in how participants described student learning, it was generally identified as mastery of content, skills, and standards. School administrators and district leaders interested in grading reform may find that teachers already share a common understanding about the purpose of grading. This is important because Guskey (2020) argued that educational leaders looking to implement grading reform need to first understand teachers' desires so that they may better align the goals of the reform to stakeholders' interests. Additionally, the majority of participants in this study found grading to be at least partially ineffective. In describing the purpose of grading, most of the participants spoke idealistically

about what they felt the purpose of grading should be versus what it currently is, meaning that educational leaders and reformers may be able to capitalize on these ill-feelings that teachers may have towards traditional grading. Additionally, Kagan (1992) suggested that new ideas already aligned to teachers' current beliefs will better facilitate learning.

Beyond teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading, this study also found that participants generally described their school and district's grading cultures, guidelines, and policies as open-ended and idiosyncratic with limited guidance by leadership. This may be especially helpful to school and district leaders. Teachers felt a lack of guidance and, in some cases, described school or district policies they felt were inequitable. While some of the participants in this study held more traditional views about grading, particularly the importance of effort and participation and the ability for students to fail an assignment, term, or grade, many appreciated guidance and opportunity for collaboration. Some even wished that their schools or districts would provide more guidance on grading.

Woodbury and Gess-Newsome (2002) argued that educational leaders and reformers need to consider their influence on teachers' thinking as well as the cultural and structural changes needed to support second-order change. This study found that all participants felt their perceptions about the purpose of grading were influenced by their school or district's grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. Of the eight participants, seven perceived a negative influence, describing a diminished value to grading. Educational leaders and reformers may note the influence school and district policies have on teachers' perceptions about grading. This is especially important as teachers' thinking directly influences their practice (Kunnath, 2017; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand Connecticut public middle school teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. Educators and educational leaders interested in grading reform should first understand the experiences, knowledge, and perceptions teachers have about the purpose of grading so that they can align the goals of the reform to teachers' beliefs and clearly define the purpose and vision (Guskey, 2020, 2021). Teacher thinking influences their practice, and teacher-thinking and knowledge is heavily influenced by their experience (Kagan, 1992; Kunnath, 2017; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). Based on the findings from this research study, there are three recommendations for action related to teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading, school and district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies, and the influence these cultures, guidelines, and policies have on teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading.

Define and Communicate the Purpose of Grading

All eight participants in this study described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning. However, while these descriptions primarily focused on content, standards, and skills, there was some variation between the participants. In addition, several of the participants felt that traditional grading practices were at least partially ineffective at communicating student learning. Despite these shared perceptions, participants still described idiosyncratic grading practices within their schools and districts. Several of the participants in this study felt that their school or district's policies around grading were vague or ill-defined and believed that, as a result, grading lacked value or importance. Others felt that certain policies, such as being forced to pass students, detracted from the value and importance of grading. McMillan (2019) argued

that teachers' beliefs about grading need to be clearly articulated and discussed in order to help strengthen the validity and purpose of grading. Several of the participants in this study spoke positively about their experiences collaborating with colleagues around grading. School and district leaders should create opportunities or establish structures that allow for more frequent teacher collaboration and discussion on the purpose of grading and should work to establish and communicate a clear definition or vision for grading. Townsley et al. (2019) suggested that school administrators engage in collaborative conversations around the purpose of grading and how grades and assessments help student academic development.

Make Grading a School and District Focus

Several of the participants in this study described their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies as open-ended with limited guidance by leadership. Participants described idiosyncratic grading practices resulting from these open-ended or vague policies. Some of the participants felt frustrated by the lack of guidance and expressed a desire for more guidelines and policies. Lacking clear guidance, participants described a high degree of autonomy. Kagan (1992) argued that, due to the ambiguous and isolating nature of teaching, teachers' construct their knowledge and beliefs from their individual classroom experiences which leads to personal pedagogical beliefs that influence their perceptions, judgements, and behaviors. All of the participants in this study, when describing the purpose of grading, drew from their experiences as students and classroom teachers. There should be an increased focus on grading at the school and district levels. While the results of this study indicate that there was some continuity around grading within departments, there was still considerable variation within the larger school context. School and district leaders should provide more guidance and professional learning and should work to create opportunities that allow teachers to regularly

discuss and collaborate on grading. In the absence of training, guidance, or collaboration, teachers may utilize experience, knowledge, and beliefs to construct their grading policies (Feldman, 2018; McMillan, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Focusing on grading at the school and district level may help reduce idiosyncratic practices and bring more continuity and value to the purpose of grading.

Elicit Teachers' Perceptions to Evaluate the Influence of School and District Grading Cultures, Guidelines, and Policies and Guide Future Work

Educators and educational leaders interested in grading reform should elicit teachers' perceptions to evaluate the influence of their school or district's grading cultures, guidelines, and policies on their teachers' beliefs and to help guide future work. One of the participants in this study felt that administrators should take more time to listen to teachers' ideas and suggestions. Hinnant-Crawford (2016) argued that teachers often feel a lack of efficacy in the policy-making process. Additionally, Townsley et al. (2019) suggested educational leaders solicit feedback and input from teachers on professional development around grading. They argued that school and district administrators interested in grading reform must give teachers time to think about the purpose of alternative grading (Townsley et al., 2019). Seven of the eight participants who took part in this study felt that their school or district's grading guidelines and policies diminished the value of grading. These perceptions primarily resulted from either a lack of clear guidance on grading or forceful policies that dissuaded giving students a failing grade as a result of administrative pressure to keep grades up. Woodbury and Gess-Newsome (2002) argued that a key component of educational reform is teacher-thinking. They suggested that, in order for reform, especially second-order change, to be successful, reformers need to focus on teacher thinking due to the direct influence this has on their practice. A significant component of

Woodbury and Gess-Newsome's (2002) Teacher-Centered Systemic Reform Model focuses on the influence of structural and cultural contextual factors. They argued that educational leaders need to consider the policies and procedures that shape teacher thinking and any necessary changes to this structure that would support school reform (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

The findings from this study indicate that teacher-thinking was influenced by school or district policies. While some the participants felt that school or district policies were not necessarily influential on their practice, all agreed that it was influential on their perceptions about the purpose of grading. School and district leaders interested in grading reform should ask teachers to share their perceptions about the school or district's policies and the influence they believe it has on their thinking and their practice. This can allow reformers to evaluate the policies and procedures, or potentially the absence of such policies, that will need to be considered and changed for grading reform to be successful (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

Recommendations for Further Study

The scope of this study was purposefully limited to Connecticut public middle school teachers. It is recognized that there are other key stakeholders whose perceptions about grading are also relevant. These may include school and district leaders, parents and families, students, and community members. Additionally, the perceptions of teachers at the elementary and high school levels should also be considered. Connecticut is a local-control state. Many decisions about school and district policies are up to local and regional boards of education (Mooney, 2018). As such, there is no formal state-wide policy on grading (Connecticut Department of Education, 2020). There is no specific research on the influence of school or district grading policies on teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading in Connecticut. In addition to

these delimitations, this study was limited to eight middle school teachers in Connecticut. As a result, the transferability of the findings is limited.

Recommendation for Qualitative Study #1

The research in this study was limited to public middle school teachers in Connecticut. To better understand teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies, it is necessary to explore the experiences of teachers at the elementary and high school levels. Teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading may vary depending on the grade-level they teach. Future qualitative studies regarding elementary and high school teachers' perceptions about grading and the influence of school and district grading policies will add to the research on grading and grading reform and provide additional insights as well as differences between teachers' perceptions at different grade-levels. Since there is no specific research on the influence of school or district grading policies on teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading in Connecticut, additional research into this area can strengthen the understanding educators and leaders have about the influence of policy on teacher-thinking. Future studies may expand to teachers beyond Connecticut as well.

Recommendation for Qualitative Study #2

This research study focused only on teachers' perceptions of the influence of traditional grading. Part of the criteria for participation in this research was that teachers had experience utilizing a traditional grading system. One of the participants in this study had recently begun using standards-based grading. Their perceptions about grading differed based on the grading model they were discussing. A qualitative study that explores teachers' perceptions about the purpose of standards-based grading would add to the body of research on grading and could be

useful in comparing whether there are differences in teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading depending on the type of grading model they have experience using.

Recommendation for Qualitative Study #3

As was noted in the delimitations, this study only focused on teachers' perceptions of the purpose of grading. Other stakeholders' views about grading are also important to consider. Among these are educational leaders, students, parents, and community leaders. Of particular interest would be future qualitative studies that explore the perceptions of school or district leaders' beliefs about the purpose of grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. This may provide additional insight on the purpose of grading and allow for a comparison between teachers' and administrators' perceptions on grading and the influence of policy.

Conclusion

A century of research has shown grading to be a complex phenomenon in education due to the multifaceted and complex nature of what teachers grade and how they grade it (Brookhart et al., 2016; Cross & Frary, 1999; Feldman, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Traditional grading practices, that originated more than a century ago, remain largely unchanged today (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2018) and are often subjective (Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a; McMillan, 2019). There is a high degree of variability in how teachers' grade, and these idiosyncratic practices create questions about the reliability of traditional grading (Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019). Traditional grading practices are inequitable and can be harmful to students (Arrafii, 2020; Berg et al., 2020; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Hardré, 2014; Quinn, 2023). Despite these issues, standards-based grading reform remains a significant challenge to effectively implement and traditional grading practices

remain largely entrenched in K-12 education as the result of teachers' grading perceptions (Feldman, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019a; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019; McMillan et al., 2002; Nowruzi, 2021; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

A teacher's knowledge influences their practice (Kunnath, 2017; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). Research on teacher-thinking shows that their knowledge and beliefs are actively constructed through experience, and that this knowledge influences their perceptions, judgements, and behaviors (Kagan, 1992). Information on teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading can be helpful to educational leaders looking to implement grading reform so that they may not only understand the desires of their teachers as key stakeholders, but also work to align the goals of the reform to their teachers' interests (Guskey, 2020). Teacher thinking about grading, which is directly influential on their practice, is shaped by external factors, including structural and cultural contextual factors at the district, school, department, and classroom levels (Kunnath, 2017; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how Connecticut public middle school teachers described their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and how these perceptions were influenced by their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies. This study sought to answer the following three research questions:

Research Question 1: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

Research Question 2: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe their school or districts' grading culture, guidelines, and policies?

Research Question 3: How do Connecticut public middle school teachers describe the influence of their school or district’s grading culture, guidelines, and policies on their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading?

A review of the literature helped with the formation of the research questions as well as the conceptual and theoretical frameworks used to guide this study. The literature reviewed for this study focused on traditional grading and grading reform. Key components of the literature review included challenges associated with traditional grading practices, effects of traditional grading on students, including grade inflation, deflation, motivation, and grading bias, and standards-based grading reform. This included stakeholder perceptions, implementation, effectiveness, and reporting, and, lastly, grading reform challenges, including teachers’ beliefs and knowledge about grading, the role of school leadership and culture, and the role of policy.

Eight Connecticut public middle school teachers participated in this study. Data was collected through individual, semi-structured virtual interviews using Zoom. The interview questions developed for this study focused on each of the three research questions and allowed participants to share their perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading, describe their school or district’s grading culture, guidelines, and policies, and describe the perceived influence these guidelines and policies had on their perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading.

Constructivism served as the theoretical framework used to guide this study. Two conceptual frameworks, Woodbury and Gess-Newsome’s (2002) Teacher-Centered Systemic Reform Model and Kunnath’s (2017) Teacher Grading Decision-Making Framework were also used in conjunction with the theoretical framework to help develop the research and interview questions. Following the conclusion of each interview, audio was transcribed using Zoom’s transcription feature. Audio transcripts were downloaded and reviewed in conjunction with the

audio recordings. All interview transcripts were shared with participants as part of the member-checking process. Data was then analyzed following Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral which involved coding each of the transcripts, compiling and grouping codes into themes, and interpreting and representing the data. A total of five themes emerged from this study: (1) teachers described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning; (2) teachers believed that traditional grading is partially ineffective; (3) school and district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies remain open-ended and idiosyncratic with limited guidance by leadership; (4) several teachers described pervasive school or district cultures, guidelines, and policies dissuasive of failure and the perceived negative effects on students; and (5) teachers described how school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies diminished the value of grading.

The first theme, "teachers described the purpose of grading as a measurement of student learning," was a common description shared by all eight participants. Each participant had slightly varying ways of describing what they meant by student learning. When describing the purpose of grading, participants primarily focused on assessing content knowledge, skills, and standards. Three participants also shared their perceptions that non-academic factors such as effort and participation were an important part of grading as well.

The second theme, "teachers believed that traditional grading is partially ineffective," was shared by all the participants. There was a perceived difference between what grading should be and what it actually was. For example, all participants agreed that traditional grading should measure student learning. However, each felt that the ability for grading to accurately measure and communicate learning varied. All of the participants in this study felt that, due to

administrative pressure to inflate grades, a lack of guidance or policy, and idiosyncratic practices, grading was not the most effective indicator of student learning or success.

The third theme, “school and district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies remain open-ended and idiosyncratic with limited guidance by leadership,” indicated a lack of guidance on grading. While seven of the participants described some level of guidance, it was mostly limited to the types of categories, weights, and number of assignments teachers were expected to grade. In addition, the guidance on grading described by participants came from their respective departments and department leaders. While there was some collaboration within departments, practices at the school and district level were not uniform and grading varied. Of the eight participants, only one spoke more positively about the guidance their school had offered. However, they still felt that grading practices were inconsistent. Three of the participants even expressed frustration over their school’s policies, or lack thereof, and indicated a desire for more guidance, collaboration, and reform.

The fourth theme, “teachers described pervasive school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies dissuasive of failure and the perceived negative effects on students,” was an experience shared by five of the eight participants. Participants described varying levels of administrative pressure to keep grades up. These five participants felt that these policies were harmful to students and diminished the utility of grading by inaccurately communicating student learning. Even in three remaining participants’ schools where there was not a perceived policy dissuasive of failure, two described their perceptions that teachers still inflated students’ grades. Participants described this practice as harmful to students.

The fifth and final theme, “teachers described how school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies diminished the value of grading,” was described by seven of the eight

participants. The eighth participant, Neil, was the only participant not to talk negatively about their school's policy on their perceptions about the purpose of grading. This was likely due to the recent work Neil's school had undertaken on grading reform and their own participation as a member of the grading committee. For the other seven participants, two primary reasons emerged from the data as the result of these negative perceptions about the value of grading. The first was school and district policies that dissuaded failing students. Participants described administrative pressure to ensure students passed. They felt that, not only were these policies unfair, but that they inaccurately communicated learning and negatively impacted student success and motivation. For these participants, the value of grading was diminished by these policies. The second reason was the lack of clear guidance or policies. Participants explained that, in the absence of clearly defined policies or guidelines, teachers were left with a considerable amount of autonomy. While there were varying degrees of autonomy teachers had when it came to grading, participants felt that, as a result, the purpose of grading was limited. Two participants even explained that, though they understood the value of grading, it was not always a priority given the perceived lack of importance grading had in their schools.

The results of this study are significant to better understand teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. The results may be most useful to school and district leaders looking to implement grading reform. Insight into teachers' beliefs about grading can help leaders understand their perceptions which can help in developing reform goals that are aligned to these beliefs. Understanding teachers' perceptions about the influence of established school or district policies can provide insight on the most influential factors that shape teachers' thinking and, ultimately, their practice.

Based on the findings of this study, there are three recommendations. The first is that the purpose of grading should be clearly defined and communicated. Limited guidance or unclear policies force teachers to rely primarily on their experiences and the contexts in which they teach, such as their grade, subject, and students. If the purpose of grading is ambiguous, then teachers are left to define it themselves and determine their own policies. This lack of structure creates idiosyncratic practices. As the results of this research indicate, teachers may already share a common understanding about the purpose of grading that educational leaders can capitalize on as they prepare to undertake grading reform.

The second recommendation is that grading should be made a school and district focus. When grading is not prioritized, as in conversations by school leaders, professional learning, or opportunities for teachers to discuss and collaborate, the purpose of grading is diminished. Not only does this cause teachers' grading practices to become more idiosyncratic, but it decreases the value of grading when it is not something that teachers perceive as important, valuable, or accurate.

The third and final recommendation is to elicit teachers' perceptions to evaluate the influence school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies have on their thinking and to guide future work. Educational leaders may discover that there are school or district policies which teachers perceive as negatively affecting the way they think about the purpose of grading. Leaders may discover that vague guidelines or policies contribute to the idiosyncratic practices and diminish teachers' perceptions of the value of grading. If grading is not something that is regularly discussed or focused on, teachers will likely revert to their experience to guide their thinking about grading and, ultimately, their practice. Educational leaders can utilize teacher

feedback and input to help guide future work and professional development opportunities on grading and grading reform.

This study was purposefully limited to Connecticut public middle school teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies. The number of participants was limited to eight teachers. As a result of these limitations and delimitations, three recommendations for future qualitative research studies have been made. The first is to broaden the scope. It is acknowledged that teachers' perceptions at different levels, including elementary and high school, should also be considered. Connecticut was chosen due to the researcher's positionality and the fact that Connecticut is a local-control state lacking a unified grading policy. Similar qualitative studies in Connecticut and other states or regions would also be beneficial as they would add to the body of research not only on teachers' perceptions about grading, but also the influence of school or district policies on teachers' thinking, an area that lacks specific research in Connecticut. Additional qualitative studies that expand beyond middle school and Connecticut can also help strengthen the transferability and validity of this study's findings.

A second recommendation for future research is a study that focuses on teachers' perceptions about alternative grading methods, for example, standards-based grading. Understanding whether or not teachers' perceptions about the purpose of grading change as a result of the grading system they use would add valuable research to the field on grading and grading reform. Last, a qualitative research study similar in scope but focused on educational leaders or other stakeholders, such as students, families, or community members, would provide valuable insight. Educational leaders might hold different perceptions not only about the purpose of grading but how they perceive grading influences their teachers' perceptions.

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APPENDIX A

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PURPOSE OF TRADITIONAL GRADING AND THE INFLUENCE OF
ESTABLISHED SCHOOL OR DISTRICT GRADING CULTURES, GUIDELINES, AND POLICIES IN
CONNECTICUT PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOLS

MATTHEW PRUKALSKI

RECRUITMENT POST

Dear Connecticut Educator,

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled *Teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies in Connecticut public middle schools* for my dissertation. The purpose of this research study is to examine how public middle school teachers throughout the state of Connecticut describe their perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and how these perceptions are influenced by their school or district's grading culture, guidelines, and policies. I am seeking eight participants to participate in my doctoral research study.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are:

- Over 18 years old
- A current Connecticut public middle school teacher
- Use traditional alphanumeric grading to assess students
- Have three or more years of teaching experience

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of your convenience. If there are more than eight people who express interest, only the first eight will be selected to interview. All data will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, or staff, will be deidentified.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures.

If you are interested in sharing your experience with traditional grading, please contact me via email at mprukalski@une.edu and we can set up a time for an interview over Zoom.

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at the above listed email.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Matthew Prukalski

Doctoral Student
University of New England
mprukalski@une.edu

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Participant Information Sheet

Version Date:	10/22/2023
IRB Project #:	1023-13
Title of Project:	Teachers' perceptions of the purpose of traditional grading and the influence of established school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies in Connecticut public middle schools
Principal Investigator (PI):	Matthew Prukalski
PI Contact Information:	mprukalski@une.edu (203) 885-3871

INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word 'we' in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

The general purpose of this research project is to examine Connecticut public middle school teachers' perceptions about the purpose of traditional grading and how school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies influence these perceptions. Eight participants will be invited to participate in this research as part of the principal investigator's dissertation research.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you are age 18 or older and a current Connecticut public middle school teacher with at least three years of teaching experience who uses traditional grading to assess student learning.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

- You will be asked to participate in one semi structured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately 60 minutes over Zoom.
- You can choose a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.

- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.
- You will be emailed a copy of your interview transcript to review for accuracy. You will have five calendar days to respond or the PI will assume that you have no comments and the transcript will assumed to be accurate.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. You have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

Please see the ‘WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?’ section below for steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help us understand teachers’ perceptions about the purpose of grading and the influence of school or district grading cultures, guidelines, and policies and may help educational leaders and reformers looking to implement grading reform.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

- Data will only be collected during one on one participant interviews using Zoom, no information will be taken without your consent, and transcribed interviews will be checked by you for accuracy before they are added to the study.
- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.
- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within a master list.

- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.
- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- You will be given the option to turn off your camera during Zoom interview.
- After you have verified the accuracy of your transcribed interview the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all transcripts have been verified by the participants of this project, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.
- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.
- All data collected will be stored on a password protected personal laptop computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time until the Master List is destroyed without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

APPENDIX C

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PURPOSE OF TRADITIONAL GRADING AND THE INFLUENCE OF ESTABLISHED SCHOOL OR DISTRICT GRADING CULTURES, GUIDELINES, AND POLICIES IN CONNECTICUT PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Matthew Prukalski

Interview Question 1: What grade and subject do you currently teach?

Interview Question 2: How many years have you been teaching?

Interview Question 3: What experiences have shaped your understanding of grading?

Interview Question 4: What type of grading did you experience as a student?

Interview Question 5: What type of training or education, if any, did you receive on grading?

Interview Question 6: What do you believe is the purpose of grading?

Interview Question 7: What do you believe is the connection between grading and student learning?

Interview Question 8: How would you describe your school and/or district's grading policy?

Interview Question 9: Does your school or district have a specific grading policy?

Interview Question 10: Are there any grading guidelines that teachers are expected to follow?

Interview Question 11: How would you describe the culture of grading in your school? Is there a focus on grading? How?

Interview Question 12: How is grading discussed by school administrators/teachers in your school or district?

Interview Question 13: Is grading collaborative or independent?

Interview Question 14: Does your school or district ever provide professional development on the subject of grading, and how would you describe that professional learning?

Interview Question 15: How does your school or district's grading policy/guidelines/culture influence your perceptions about the purpose of grading?

Interview Question 16: Do you believe that your perception of the purpose of grading is influenced by your school or district's policies, guidelines, or culture? If so, how? If not, why not?

Interview Question 17: Are there any other influences at the school or district level that influence your perceptions of the purpose of grading?

APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: October 24, 2023

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Matthew Prukalski
FACULTY ADVISOR: Alyson Manion, Ed.D.

PROJECT NUMBER: 1023-13
RECORD NUMBER: 1023-13-01

PROJECT TITLE: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PURPOSE OF TRADITIONAL GRADING AND THE INFLUENCE OF ESTABLISHED DISTRICT GRADING CULTURES, GUIDELINES, AND POLICIES IN CONNECTICUT PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOLS

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
SUBMISSION DATE: October 23, 2023

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: October 24, 2023

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2(ii)

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Kennedy".

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director of Research Integrity