Experiences of Public School Teachers in Grades 5-8 With Traditional Grading Practices:

A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Traditional single letter and percentage grading systems were created in the early 1900s in secondary schools in the United States. In the 21st century, college and university professors and K–12 teachers in the U.S. continue to depend upon outdated systems for grading and reporting. The problem is grading systems in most public schools in the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress. The problem is compounded by educational leaders who fail to include grading and reporting when considering changes to instruction and assessment. The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices in a large suburban school in Connecticut. More qualitative studies investigating teachers' decision-making and teachers' perceptions associated with grading practices were an identified gap in the literature. Research questions were used to explore the teachers' experiences and perceptions of traditional grading practices. A sample size of 16 certified teachers in Grades 5-8 with 10 or more years of experience were interviewed. Transformational leadership theory and Fullan's change theory provided the theoretical framework for the study. Interviews were conducted, recorded, and analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. Key themes from the findings showed participant dissatisfaction with traditional grades, inaccuracies, issues with communication, and the need for change. Based on the study's results, it is recommended that educational leaders act by including those involved with grading and reporting student achievement for effective change implementation.

Keywords: grading systems, grading practices, grade reform, transformational leadership theory, change theory, sustainable educational change

Dedication

To my husband, Richard Fazzino, who encouraged me to pursue my doctoral degree the minute he learned it was a lifelong dream of mine. His love, support, encouragement, and confidence in my ability to succeed never wavered. Nor did he once doubt my ability to survive the dissertation journey and emerge as Dr. Amanda J. Smith.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Grading systems in public schools located in the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress (Guskey, 2015). Grades have been the primary measure of student achievement and are critical determining factors for future student mobility and success, such as promotion to the next grade level, college admission, and employment (Brookhart et al., 2016). Studying grading and grade reform may help to improve the understanding, purpose, communication, and meaning of grades. Some traditional grading systems combine academic and behavioral components to create one measure (Guskey, 2015). Combining cognitive with noncognitive elements in a single grade results in an inaccurate, imprecise, and unreliable hodgepodge lacking meaning and purpose (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2020; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020).

Despite differing opinions of grading and grading reform, literature gaps exist that focus on contemporary studies on grading students and evidence-based information on grading policies and practices (Anderson, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). A careful examination of teachers' insights on grading may result in a unified consensus on the purpose of grades (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). This qualitative phenomenological study of teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices may help fill the gaps identified in the literature and provide more empirical evidence on grading policies and procedures. These results could help further define the purpose and meaning of student grades and how best to calculate and report student achievement. The chapter includes the problem and the background of the problem. Purpose and significance of the study are explained, followed by an introduction to the research questions and the theoretical framework framing the study. Definitions of key terms, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations are addressed before the summary to finalize the chapter.

Background of the Problem

Grades are critical components of the student experience and have an incredible impact on future educational events, including promotion to the next grade level, attrition, graduation, financial aid, and college admissions (Brookhart et al., 2016; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Despite calls for grading reform in the United States since the early 20th century (Brookhart et al., 2016), grading practices have remained stuck in the past and are generally unchanged throughout the country (Kunnath, 2017). The widely used percentage systems are outdated and inaccurate misrepresentations of student achievement (Guskey, 2015). Surveys of teachers' grading practices revealed nearly 20% of a standard grade reported by a teacher were formulated on behavioral factors (Guskey & Link, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Another survey of secondary music teachers' grades discovered an average of 60% inclusion of behavioral factors (Guskey, 2020).

Letter grades are deceptive, biased, and ill-defined when addressing the grade's actual meaning (Feldman, 2019a; Townsley, 2019). Further research on grading practices and policies in the United States was identified as a gap in the literature. A need for new studies and more research on grading students, teachers' perceptions, teachers' grading decision-making practices, and additional qualitative empirical studies on grading policies and procedures represent additional gaps (Anderson, 2018; Brookhart et al., 2016; Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

The problem is grading systems in most public schools in the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress (Guskey, 2015). Despite calls for reform, grading practices throughout the United States have remained essentially unchanged for

over a century (Brookhart et al., 2016; Kunnath, 2017). A qualitative phenomenological study

was conducted to explore Connecticut teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices.

The relevance of the study was further supported by a review of the literature which revealed

gaps and the necessity for more up-to-date research on grading practices, policies, and teachers'

grading decision making (Anderson, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller,

2020).

An agreement emerged from the literature: traditional grades have disparately mixed

composition, there may be confusion in meaning, and grades may be ineffective and inequitable

(Anderson, 2018; Feldman, 2019a, 2019b; Guskey, 2020; Link & Guskey, 2019). A

recommended change was transitioning from a letter and percentage grading system to other

grading systems, such as systems centered around reporting academic components separately

from behavioral components (Feldman, 2019a, 2019b; Kunnath, 2017; Link & Guskey, 2019;

Shepard et al., 2018). Separating the cognitive from noncognitive skills has been recognized as

more equitable and meaningful (Feldman, 2019a, 2019b; Link & Guskey, 2019). Grading is

important to research by virtue of the core functionality grades represent in a student's

educational experience and the predictive power grades have in determining future successes or

failures (Brookhart et al., 2016). Throughout the literature, there was a consensus on the need for

sustainable educational change specifically focused on grade reform, a commonly ignored

professional obligation associated with instructional leadership (Guskey & Link, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore Grades 5-8

teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices and their perspectives on the efficacy of

methods used to measure and report student achievement. Two research questions guided the

open-ended interviews with 16 certified teachers in Grades 5-8 with 10 or more years of experience. Examining the teachers' experiences in a suburban school in Connecticut with traditional grading practices may inform decision making and foster positive social change. Studying grading and grade reform is important to understanding and articulating a grade's purpose and meaning (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Data collected may add to scholarly research and encourage contemporary dialogue around a grade's meaning and purpose. Study results may further inform the suburban school in Connecticut and the district about the topic as the school moves forward with grade reform initiatives.

Significance of the Study

Teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices in a suburban school in Connecticut were explored. The results may provide new understandings and observations regarding grading practices and grade reform to scholars and researchers. Studying teachers' experiences with grading may expand the evidence-based body of knowledge on grading in the United States. Issues of equity, accountability, and validity associated with grading were revealed in the study and may prove to be an additional catalyst to concrete social change (Feldman, 2019a, 2019b; Fullan, 2002; Lehman et al., 2018).

The leadership team at the large suburban school in Connecticut has been engaged in grade reform discussions. Results of the study may enlighten and assist leadership's efforts to change the grading system. Improved understanding of calculating grades, a grade's meaning and purpose, teachers' decision making, leadership's role, and the efficacy of current practice may result from this phenomenological study of teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices. Educational leaders, teachers, parents, students, researchers, and scholars may benefit from more reliable, data-driven research on grading and grade reform in the United States

(Anderson, 2018).

Insights gleaned from this phenomenological study contributed new data to the literature on grading and grade reform in the United States. Further dialogue and more information may be needed to help fill identified gaps associated with grading students in schools and teachers' decision making associated with grading. Studying teachers' experiences provided information to better understand the lack of grade reform initiatives in the United States and the dependency on traditional practices (Kunnath, 2017). Questions surrounding the purpose of grades, the meaning of grades, and how grades are calculated were answered from the new perspectives captured by the study. Ultimately, the results of the study may influence grading policy change and create new understandings by providing research-based information for researchers, scholars, educational leaders, and teachers on the topic of grading in the United States.

Research Questions

Despite scholarly recommendations urging a change in grading practices, very little has changed about the ways teachers calculate and report student achievement throughout the United States (Kunnath, 2017). Research questions help guide a study and establish how data are to be collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Two research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What are the school teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut?

Research Question 2: What are the Grades 5-8 teachers' perspectives concerning the efficacy of the methods to measure and report student achievement?

Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework was built on transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1990) and Fullan's (2006) change theory. Both theories provided lenses to examine and

understand teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices and perceptions of procedures

in place (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each theoretical perspective is change-oriented,

motivational, and positively transformative (Bass, 1990; Fullan, 2002, 2006).

Transformational leaders generate excitement in the workplace by educating and

inspiring followers to embrace the targeted mission and goals by abandoning their sights on

personal gain and agreeing to work for the good of the community (Bass, 1990). Motivation is

intricately connected to transformational leadership theory, change theory, and effective change

knowledge (Fullan, 2006). Guskey (2015) stated grading reform in the United States demands

change, requiring courageous and inspirational leadership to achieve results. The

interconnectivity of transformational leadership and change theories to the study's problem and

purpose are further discussed in the literature review.

Definitions of Terms

Defining key language establishes universal comprehension of terms and clarity around

exact meaning relative to a study. Key terms emerged from the study's literature review, and

peer-reviewed sources were used to identify definitions. Definitions of terms provided meaning

specifically associated with the study's problem and purpose.

Grading is the practice of assigning a student's progress in school to an established

measurement system based on a combination of data, observations, and judgments (Anderson,

2018).

Grading reform is the adoption of alternate grading practices different from traditional

points-based systems (Percell, 2019).

Hodgepodge is the imprecise result of calculating a student's grades based on a

combination of academic and nonacademic components (Guskey, 2015).

Institutional bias is the practice of mixing behavior, content mastery, and judgmental subjectivity to calculate a student's single letter or number grade (Feldman, 2019a).

Traditional grading systems are the method of assigning a single grade based on a 100-point scale or percentages to each student for each content area or course (Guskey, 2020; Percell, 2019).

Assumptions

Qualitative research is based on various assumptions, raising questions associated with internal validity and reliability, requiring an explanation and clarification of any assumptions essential to the study's significance and design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One assumption was participants answered honestly during the interview about experiences with grading practices. A second assumption was participants had adequate knowledge of the study's topic and represented the larger population. The third assumption was the participants were willing to participate in the study.

To address honesty, participants were ensured confidentiality and secured data storage during and post study (Office for Human Research Protections, 2016). Attending to the assumption of participant knowledge base, a demographic questionnaire was sent via email to determine eligibility. Teachers' willingness to participate was evidenced by their signing an informed consent before engaging in the study (see Appendix A). The consent form outlined the study, purpose, rights, protections, and advantages to participation.

Scope and Delimitations

Scope and delimitations represent the confines of the study that help render the study realistically achievable (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The scope of the study was teachers in Grades 5-8 who had taught at least 10 years and had experience with grading students.

Instructional coaches, administrators, guidance counselors, or teachers with less than 10 years of teaching experience were excluded. Studying teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices was the aim of the study.

Delimitations set for the study included the participant sample size, research questions, objectives, and theoretical framework (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Due to time constraints, a smaller sample size was used to expedite data collection and analysis. For ease of accessibility, the research site was a suburban school in Connecticut. A qualitative method and phenomenological design are effective with a smaller participant size, are focused on research questions, and seek to capture participants' lived experiences through interviews with the phenomenon under scrutiny (Burch-Bynum, 2016; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Groenewald, 2004). The research questions were broad questions used to focus the interview questions for the teachers. Using two theories for the theoretical framework ensured theory triangulation and further solidified reliability and validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transformational leadership and change theories provided the theoretical lenses to understand leadership's role in grade reform and explore sustainable change for the school and the district.

Limitations

Unlike delimitations, limitations are frequently not within the control of the research design and represent potential weaknesses in a study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated limitations are commonly associated with the study's methods. The relatively small sample size of 16 Grades 5-8 teachers in a suburban town in Connecticut was not a comprehensive representation of the general teaching population in the district, state, or the United States, which perhaps jeopardized transferability and generalizability. The practical limitation of time and deadlines warranted the small sample size. An insider conducting the

interview process may cause participants to answer differently than if an outside person conducted interviews (Anderson, 2010). An inside person as the interviewer, data collector, and data analyzer can lead to personal bias and experiences (Anderson, 2010). To address the possible impact of personal bias and experiences, member checking, incorporating the participants' own words from the interview transcripts, bracketing, and reflexive memo taking were used to secure the study's reliability and transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Chapter Summary

Themes of grading, grading reform, and sustainable educational change emerged from the problem that grading systems in most public schools in the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress (Guskey, 2015). The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to encourage educational leaders, teachers, and parents to understand teachers' grading practices better and reflect upon the efficacy of methods used to measure and report student achievement. This qualitative phenomenological study examined teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices in a suburban Connecticut school. Chapter 1 revealed the need to clarify the purpose and meaning of a student's grade and identified gaps in the literature supporting qualitative studies on grading practices in the United States. The background of the problem and the statement of the problem were addressed, followed by the purpose and significance of the study. Research questions and the two theoretical frameworks used to investigate and understand the research problem were introduced. Before discussing assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations, a section defining key terms was presented. A comprehensive review of the literature connected to the study's problem, purpose, and theoretical framework is discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Traditional grading systems using letter grades and percentage systems were conceived over a century ago in higher education settings in the United States (Brookhart et al., 2016). In the 21st century, these same traditional grading practices continue to dominate the way teachers report student achievement in the United States (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). A conventional letter or percentage grade includes cognitive and noncognitive elements, rendering the single grade reporting measure an inadequate hodgepodge devoid of clarity and meaning (Guskey, 2020).

The problem is grading systems in most public schools in the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress (Guskey, 2015). Despite investigations and calls for reform, U.S. grading practices have not changed significantly in the last century (Brookhart et al., 2016; Kunnath, 2017). Educational leaders have consistently neglected to include grading and reporting as components of teaching and learning (Guskey & Link, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Instructional leaders have focused primarily on curriculum, instruction, and assessment and have not considered grading practices as an attribute to instructional leadership (Guskey & Link, 2019).

This qualitative phenomenological study explored teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices in a suburban school in Connecticut. Comprehending teacher perceptions toward grading is vital to establishing agreement on the purpose of grades (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Examining teachers' lived experiences may help answer questions about the purpose of grades, what grades represent, calculating grades, and what factors enter the teachers' decision-making process associated with grading. Capturing a new perspective from studying teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices may help other researchers, scholars,

educational leaders, and teachers make research-based decisions on changing grading systems.

Grades are a requisite component of any U.S. student's educational experience (Brookhart et al., 2016). The achievement reflected in a student's grade impacts important milestones, such as promotion to the next grade, scholarships and grants, admission to higher education institutions, and job attainment (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019a; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Guskey (2020) demonstrated the need to more carefully examine the purpose and meaning of a grade and how a grade is calculated and reported. Fullan (2002, 2006) described how to execute sustainable educational change effectively. If the purpose of a grade is to improve student learning a change has been encouraged by scholars as was the move away from traditional grading practices (Feldman, 2019a; Guskey, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley, 2019).

One gap in the literature included the lack of empirical data on grading policies and practices and the need for more meaningful discourse (Anderson, 2018). Anderson (2018) commented on the lack of substantial research in grading policies and procedures. Another gap indicated the need to target perceptual constructs such as meaning, attitudes, and beliefs in future studies on teachers' grading practices (Brookhart et al., 2016). Additional investigation into teachers' decision making, predominantly qualitative, was recognized as an under-researched area and one of critical value (Kunnath, 2017).

The strategy used to search for and gather literature for the review is explained in Chapter 2, followed by a discussion on the supporting theoretical framework. A comprehensive review of the literature connected to the theoretical framework is discussed in detail. A summary highlighting recurring themes concludes the literature review chapter.

Literature Search Strategy

The search for scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles to understand and support the problem and purpose of the study was a time-consuming exercise of trial, error, and extreme patience. American College of Education's library search, using OpenAthens and the EBSCO research database, led to many relevant peer-reviewed journal articles. Google, Google Scholar, and ERIC databases were used with consistently positive results.

Key search words and terminology included *grading in the United States, grade reform in the United States, traditional grading practices, grading practices in education, traditional grading systems, history of grading in the United States, leadership styles, transformational leadership style, change theory, theories of change, sustainable educational reform,* and *organizational change*. Reference lists from scholarly articles provided specific author names and article titles that were searched in available databases, although many sources dated back more than 5 years. While searching, the focus was to ensure more than 76% of all scholarly sources were peer-reviewed and less than 5 years old.

Theoretical Framework

Transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1990) and Fullan's (2006) change theory comprised the theoretical framework for the study. Both theories were important to the study and helped clarify the study's problem and purpose. The focal problem of the research was that grading systems in most public schools in the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress (Guskey, 2015). The study's goal was to explore Grades 5-8 teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices and their perspectives on the efficacy of methods used to measure and report student achievement. Change and transformational leadership theories provided the lenses through which teachers' experiences with conventional grading were examined. Both theoretical lenses are change-oriented,

motivational, and positively transformative (Bass, 1990; Fullan, 2002, 2006).

Transformational leaders stimulate the interests of their followers by raising awareness and acceptance of the goals and mission of the group and inspiring followers to put aside their self-interests to work for the greater good (Bass, 1990). Motivation is intrinsically linked to transformational leadership theory, change theory, and effective change knowledge (Fullan, 2006). Grading reform in the United States requires change and the necessity for courageous and inspiring leadership to make it happen (Guskey, 2015).

Latham (2014) enlightened readers on the agreement among scholars and professionals of leadership's importance and ability to make a difference. Scholars have recognized transformational leadership as an effective leadership style (Bass, 1990). Guskey and Link (2019) urged educational leaders to stop ignoring grading policies and practices when implementing changes to improve student learning. One of the most challenging steps to implementing change is changing people's beliefs (Burner, 2018; Fullan, 2002). Transformational leadership has been characterized as a change-oriented leadership style deeply rooted in motivation and the ability to influence opinions and behavior and unite followers to work together toward a shared mission (Yasir et al., 2016).

Change Theory

Change theory and theories of action resulted in change knowledge, and seven main premises provide the basis for effective use of change knowledge (Fullan, 2006). Fullan (2006) presented the following premises: (a) motivation, (b) results-oriented capacity building, (c) learning in context, (d) changing in context, (e) reflective action, (f) commitment across multiple levels (community, district, and state), and (g) perseverance. Change knowledge related to this study on grade reform due to the need to understand the change process and effective change

leadership to effectuate transformative, sustainable change (Fullan, 2002). Reforming the way educators grade students' learning represents a significant educational change initiative.

Although the first premise for successful implementation of change knowledge expresses a specific focus on motivation, Fullan (2006) explained motivation is the foundational element of all seven premises. Without motivation and employee engagement, targeted changes may not occur. Developing new capacities for employees, a crucial step in expanding knowledge and understanding, rendering employees more effective and motivated is the second premise (Fullan, 2006). Fullan stressed people developing new abilities is critical to creating long-lasting, effective change. The third premise includes the necessity for teachers to learn and grow in the workplace, and the fourth stresses learning to change in context for successful school improvement (Fullan, 2006). Reflection and purposeful thinking on the part of leadership are at the core of the fifth premise. Greater comprehension will occur by doing the action with intentional forethought, questioning, and a consideration of the evidence, then by simply completing the action alone represents the philosophical foundation (Fullan, 2006). Tri-level engagement is the critical sixth premise for system reform at the school, district, and state levels. Educational leaders should actively engage in strategies to promote change across all three levels (Fullan, 2006). Fullan (2006) referred to this as "permeable connectivity" (p. 11). Finally, the premise of how important it is to remember flexibility and determination in the face of change.

Implementing the theory of action using change knowledge requires applying all seven premises with leaders who understand change (Fullan, 2006). Fullan described the process as calculated, reflective, and slowly evolving. Using change theory and transformational leadership theory to explore the meaning in teachers' lived experiences with traditional grading practices may provide insight into the school environment, leadership, and existing conditions for change

(Fullan, 2002).

Transformational Leadership Theory

Motivation is central to transformational leadership theory, just as it is to change theory (Fullan, 2006; Thiers, 2017). A significant element of transformational leadership is inspirational motivation (Bojović & Stojadinović Jovanović, 2020). Transformational leadership encourages people to undertake improvement initiatives related to current practices (Leithwood, 1992). Bass (1990) equated transformational leadership to superior leadership due to the ability of transformational leaders to inspire and generate the adoption of new action dedicated to improvement for the greater good. Yasir et al. (2016) examined leadership style and discussed the importance of leadership for successful organizational change and the effective establishment of organizational cultures dedicated to change.

Bass (1990), the founding father of transformational leadership theory, established four theoretical components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized appreciation (Barbinta et al., 2017). In an educational organization, transformational leaders motivate others to exceed expectations, put aside self-interests, and work harder toward organizational goals (Barbinta et al., 2017). True transformational leaders help others grow and are committed to providing feedback and support in a trusting and respectful environment (Bojović & Stojadinović Jovanović, 2020). Transformational leadership theory was essential to this study because its ideas can be applied to teachers as leaders in the classroom making decisions about grading students in the school's current climate and culture. The theory additionally has implications for leadership and change leaders (Fullan, 2002).

Sustainable change is necessary when considering educational and grading reform (Fullan, 2002; Meyer-Looze et al., 2019). Lasting educational reform depends upon a change

leader and the leader's ability to create an environment for change (Fullan, 2002). The tenets of transformational leadership align with Fullan's change theory and effective implementation of change knowledge through the shared emphasis of establishing meaningful relationships and motivating significant change (Bass, 1990; Bojović & Stojadinović Jovanović, 2020; Fullan, 2002; Leithwood, 1992). Bojović and Stojadinović Jovanović (2020) stated transformational leaders provide prime learning settings, engage in ongoing feedback, and cultivate a collaborative culture built on trust and respect.

The transformational leadership style can be applied to teachers in the classroom creating similar learning environments for students, rendering the theory essential for this study. Transformational leaders are competent and positively influential coaches (Bojović & Stojadinović Jovanović, 2020). This study examined teachers' experiences with grading practices through transformational leadership theory by considering teachers as leaders and through change theory when considering conditions for change.

Research Literature Review

Grading is a critical professional responsibility and one of the more complicated tasks educators regularly perform (Lehman et al., 2018). Feldman (2019b) and Olsen and Buchanan (2019) reported the lack of training teachers received on effective grading. The following review of the literature discusses principal themes associated with the problem and purpose of the completed study.

Purpose of Grading

The lack of clarity around the purpose of grading has been widely corroborated (Guskey, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley, 2019). Guskey (2020) declared the purpose of grading has been and continues to be unclear. When interviewed,

teachers agreed on many reasons for grades but rarely agreed on their most critical purpose (Guskey, 2015). Olsen and Buchanan (2019) collected data on 15 teachers in an inductive, multiple case study and noted consistent confusion around grading purposes from most teachers. Teachers changed beliefs and opinions about grading purposes during conversations with the researchers (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Teachers' shifting views were due to the poorly articulated definition of grading and teachers' abundance of reasons for why grades exist (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). The confusion surrounding the purpose of grading supports the need for further studies involving teachers' experiences with grading.

Guskey (2015) reported teachers rarely agree on the primary purpose of grading and reporting. The purpose of attributing grades to student learning differs from teacher to teacher (Lehman et al., 2018). In the absence of purpose, validity is compromised, as is the grade's utility (Lehman et al., 2018). Brookhart (1994, as cited in Brookhart et al., 2016) referenced a review of 19 empirical studies on teachers' grading practices, opinions, and beliefs. Five themes emerged during the analysis. The first theme revealed teachers predominantly rely on tests as significant factors for determining grades. Second, fairness in grading is vital to teachers, explaining why effort and classwork are included in many teachers' grading practices. Third, in 12 out of the 19 studies, teachers calculated noncognitive factors into grades such as ability, effort, improvement, and work completion. Next, inconsistent grading practices among teachers were revealed either because of lack of clarity around purpose or teachers reflecting their values and beliefs into student grades. The fifth and final theme revealed differing grading practices per grade level (Brookhart et al., 2016).

Motivation was recognized as a purpose of and for grading (Anderson, 2018; Brookhart et al., 2016; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Faculty in higher education use grades to motivate

students (Lin, 2019), as do teachers in K–12 education who weave effort into grades as a motivational practice (Kunnath, 2017). Lehman et al. (2018) found traditional grading practices in the United States were based mainly on instructional and motivational beliefs responsible for setting students up for failure more often than for success. An alternative approach to using grades as incentives was proposed by Shepard et al. (2018). These scholars called for creating a classroom culture dedicated to harnessing the power of internal rewards students experience when gaining new knowledge and skills associated with real-world applications.

Blodgett (2017) experimented with *specifications grading* with higher education students at the Lexington Theological Seminary. Specifications grading is outcome-focused, rubric-aligned, contractual, and uses pass/fail options. The contractual element allows students to choose the grade they want to earn and follow the teacher-designated specifications associated with each grade range to achieve the desired grade by the end of the semester (Blodgett, 2017). Nilson and Stanny (2015) and Blodgett (2017) attributed specifications grading to increased motivation and improved quality of work among college students.

Once the purpose of grades is clearly defined and agreed upon, teachers can work to align the relevant components of teaching and learning to the purpose of grading (Guskey, 2015). Guskey (2015) and Guskey and Link (2019) explained establishing a schoolwide purpose is needed before engaging in any reform efforts. Olsen and Buchanan's (2019) study supported Guskey's thinking and determined the necessity of support from the entire school community for grade reform change to take effect. Anderson (2018) established the primary purpose of grading is communication; more specifically, the public communication of student achievement to various people. Studying teachers' lived experiences with grading at a suburban public school can clarify the purpose for the school community before embarking on reform efforts.

Traditional Grading Practices

Widely acknowledged in the literature is how grades lie at the heart of a student's educational experience and predict students' future endeavors and successes (Brookhart et al., 2016). This acknowledgment among scholars supports why grading is important to study. Brookhart et al. (2016) synthesized findings from five different types of grading studies. This research focused on: (a) reliability, (b) K–12 report cards and student outcomes, (c) teachers' perceptions of grading practices, (d) standards-based grading and the connection between report card grades and grand-scale accountability tests, and (e) grading in higher education. Inherent in all the studies was the question: What do grades mean? (Brookhart et al., 2016).

When the purpose of grading is unclear, and when one single grade is used to report student achievement, the meaning of a grade is questioned (Guskey, 2020; Lehman et al., 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Teachers in the United States continue to use grading systems dating back more than one century (Lehman et al., 2018). The old letter grade system and the 100-point scale for grading students are the prevailing methods for reporting student achievement on most report cards and transcripts (Guskey, 2015; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Brookhart et al. (2016) found letter grades inaccurately measured student learning due to combining academic and behavioral components into a student's single grade. Although grades are intended to communicate academic achievement (Anderson, 2018), the reality is grades are not a pure measure of student academic progress (Brookhart et al., 2016).

Letter grades comprise a medley of criteria reflecting academic and behavioral elements (Guskey, 2020; Lehman et al., 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Combining cognitive with noncognitive tasks such as class participation, arriving prepared and on time, completing work by the due date, effort, and classroom behavior creates a combination

rarely representative of student academic progress and achievement (Guskey, 2015). Further

clouding purpose, meaning, and practice is teachers' concern for fairness, motivation, self-

esteem, and the social repercussions of grading and inclusion of such nonacademic factors based

on individual student circumstances (Link & Guskey, 2019).

A common theme detected in the literature confounding the purpose and meaning of

grades was the lack of teacher preparation and training on creating grading systems (Olsen &

Buchanan, 2019). Guskey and Link (2019) mentioned a lack of teacher training, and Guskey

(2015) stated teachers' lack of knowledge of grading practices was well documented. Teacher

preparation programs and district professional development have not focused on training

teachers in effective grading practices (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Link, 2019; Olsen &

Buchanan, 2019). Considerable variation among teachers happens when teachers rely on

personal experiences with grading and the districts' computerized grading systems (Guskey,

2015, 2020).

Reliability of Grades

Brookhart et al. (2016) explored a century of research on grading and discovered

researchers criticized teacher-assigned grades for being subjective and unreliable indicators of

student achievement. Including nonacademic aspects, such as behavior, is a primary reason

teachers' grades are unreliable (Link & Guskey, 2019). Shepard et al. (2018) acknowledged the

existence of numerous surveys of teacher grading practices documenting the inclusion of

noncognitive factors such as effort, work habits, and participation when calculating a single

grade.

Not all teachers include the same criteria when grading, which leads to variability among

teachers and lack of clarity, ultimately creating unreliable academic achievement measures

(Shepard et al., 2018). Comparably, teachers do not assign the same weight to similar categories when calculating grades, creating a valid concern for reliability (Shepard et al., 2018). Brookhart et al. (2016) discovered in the examination of 100 years of grading research the confirmation of significant variation between teachers in the validity and reliability of grades and the meaning and reporting grades.

Olsen and Buchanan (2019) described grades as a source of power for teachers, which further complicates the reliability and purpose of grading and what grades mean to whom and why. Link and Guskey (2019) acknowledged the stressful working conditions and frequent mental strain teachers regularly experience at school as reasons teachers use grades to control student conduct. Shepard et al. (2018) wrote about teachers' use of points to manage classroom behavior or encourage better behavior which teachers believed to be a positive, motivating use of points. However, this behavior can have the opposite impact and not motivate students because the rewards are mechanisms for control.

A negative connotation exists when using points or grades to threaten students (Shepard et al., 2018). Shepard et al. (2018) reported teachers believed in using points to motivate and control student behavior. Teachers' practice of using grades to manage student behavior directly connects to racial and gender inequalities in grading (Link & Guskey, 2019). Multiple authors revealed the confusion of purpose, presence of subjectivity, and many inequities embedded in traditional grading practices in the United States, putting the reliability of a student's single letter or percentage grade into question (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019; Link & Guskey, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley, 2019).

Including noncognitive factors in grading—such as effort, participation, attendance, preparedness, and homework completion—allows for implicit and institutional biases to infiltrate

students' grades (Feldman, 2019a, 2019b; Link & Guskey, 2019). Historically, this common practice rewards the more privileged and punishes the less fortunate (Feldman, 2019a). It also perpetuates racial and gender biases implicit in teachers and institutions (Link & Guskey, 2019). Link and Guskey (2019) referred to the research confirming teachers treat students differently based on race and gender and discussed the effect the inequalities have on individual student grades. Teachers subjectively assess student behavior, and such judgments bring bias into teachers' grading practices (Feldman, 2019a). Equitable grading excludes subjective and judgmental elements about student behavior (Feldman, 2019b; Kunnath, 2017; Link & Guskey, 2019; Shepard et al., 2018). Reporting behaviors separately from academic components, as is the case with the standards-based grading approach, is more equitable (Link & Guskey, 2019).

Lin (2019) reviewed existing literature on grade inflation—a problem in higher education in the United States since the 1960s. Comparable to U.S. schools' antiquated K–12 grading landscape, U.S. colleges and universities use largely unregulated grading systems (Lin, 2019). As a result, considerable variability from one higher education institution to another exists, as does significant variability in grading among fields of study (Lin, 2019). Nilson and Stanny (2015) referred to the propensity of grade inflation in higher education as a well-recognized and concerning fact. The need to further study the reasons behind grade inflation connects to teachers' decision making around reporting student progress, inequities in grading, the purpose of grades, and how leadership is critical to transforming practice (Guskey, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019; Kunnath, 2017; Thiers, 2017). Lin (2019) did not discover any correlation between the phenomenon of rising grades in higher education and increased student achievement.

Wiliam (2020) cautioned to pay attention to the consequences of grading practices; the effects are as significant as the meaning and often more critical. Consequences of equity, bias,

and accuracy exist when the focus is not solely on assessing and reporting student academic

achievement (Link & Guskey, 2019). The reliance on grades as determining factors for many

aspects of a student's future makes understanding the consequences of how to calculate and

report grades vital to any grade reform effort (Wiliam, 2020).

Complexity of Grading

Many compromises are made when engaging in any change associated with the grading

process (Wiliam, 2020). Wiliam (2020) acknowledged the complexity of the process by stating a

perfect grading system would never exist and discussed the reality of the many trade-offs

involved with changing the grading process. Debates around meaning, accuracy, and grading

implications may forever persist (Wiliam, 2020). Arguments about what to grade and how to

grade cloud the true significance of a student's grade, which is why teachers need the knowledge

and support to grade students more accurately and less subjectively (Guskey, 2015; Link &

Guskey, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Shepard et al., 2018). Knight and Cooper (2019) noted

when teachers converted to standards-based grading practices, teacher compromise entered the

process, which led to inconsistencies in implementation across departments. Through clear

communication of purpose and expectations, grading systems can become more accurate and

equitable; this is an educational leader's responsibility (Fullan, 2002; Guskey & Link, 2019).

Brookhart et al. (2016) discussed how grades mattered and were accurate predictors of

K–12 student determination, educational accomplishment, and the passage to higher education

from high school, despite the consensus of over 100 years of literature recognizing teacher-

assigned grades as unreliable and subjective indicators of student academic performance.

Blodgett (2017) confirmed grading systems matter significantly to teaching and learning more

than many educators may perceive. As an educator, Blodgett reflected upon her pedagogical

practices in the classroom (in context) and ultimately made changes to improve the student learning experience. The changes in grading procedures resulted in improvements in both the teaching and learning processes.

Adding another layer of complexity to grade reform, Brookhart et al. (2016) noted students' grades were more accurate indicators of future student achievement than standardized assessment scores despite the blend of cognitive and noncognitive elements. An argument for including multiple components in a grade arose in support of the inclusion of nonacademic components to grading in some shape or form as better indicators of student future success (Brookhart et al., 2016). Adopting a more descriptive approach to reporting student progress in school, allows teachers to continue to report factors such as effort, participation, attendance, and homework separately from the academic achievement grade (Guskey, 2020). Reporting multiple grades along with a teacher narrative acknowledges the multidimensional nature of grading and communicating student progress (Brookhart et al., 2016). Preserving the behavioral element in teachers' grade reports validates the argument for reporting students' nonacademic factors and supports teachers' need for motivational power in the classroom (Kunnath, 2017).

Grading Reform

Wiliam (2020) supported British author G. K. Chesterton's advice, who in 1929 advocated for understanding the reasoning behind policies before making any changes. Chesterton (1990) encouraged a reflective and thoughtful manner of engaging in reform (Wiliam, 2020). Before rejecting customary grading practices, understanding why the practices are so universally accepted can generate smarter decisions with grading and in education in general (Wiliam, 2020). Grading is deeply connected to teaching and learning and carries far-reaching consequences for students' livelihood in school and beyond (Brookhart et al., 2016;

Feldman, 2019a; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). The challenges with grading reform connect to the

lack of clarity around the purpose of grading and reporting (Guskey, 2015). Guskey (2015)

emphasized leadership responsibility and stated, "when leaders charge ahead, changing the form

and structure of the report card without reaching consensus about the purpose of grades, their

efforts lack direction because what they want to accomplish remains unclear" (p. 15). An ill-

defined purpose coupled with a lack of understanding of policies in place may lead to change

disaster (Fullan, 2006; Guskey, 2015; Wiliam, 2020).

Separating the academic measures from the behavioral elements when assigning grades

and reporting student progress was strongly recommended (Feldman, 2019a, 2019b; Guskey,

2020; Link & Guskey, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley, 2019; Townsley &

Buckmiller, 2020). Townsley (2019) advocated for excluding factors such as homework, effort,

and participation from a student's grade to provide more clarity and more explicit

communication about grades' meaning. Guskey (2020) proposed employing a descriptive

"dashboard" (p. 40) summarizing different criteria associated with student performance. A

student's report card is more valid and precise by providing differentiated grades for each subject

area; teachers should not confound academic achievement with behavior reporting (Feldman,

2019a, 2019b; Guskey, 2020; Link & Guskey, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley, 2019;

Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Adopting a multigrade report is critically essential to meaningful

grade reform and represents a step in the right direction (Guskey, 2020).

The purpose of grading is communication (Anderson, 2018). Questions emerged about

what is explicitly communicated in a grade and how and why it is communicated (Anderson,

2018; Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2015, 2020; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley, 2019).

Standards-based grading has been recognized as a solution to more accurately reporting student

achievement due to the philosophy of reporting content mastery separately from any behavioral

components (Feldman, 2019a; Lehman et al., 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley &

Buckmiller, 2020). Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) noted scholars and consultants favored the

philosophy and practice of standards-based grading, the redesign of homework as practice, and a

focus on final learning outcomes versus averaging learning attempts over time. Effective

implementation of standards-based grading practices requires system-wide change and may well

be worth it, for teachers with experience with standards-based grading reported positive effects

to planning, teaching, classroom management, communication, and learning outcomes (Knight &

Cooper, 2019).

The practice of averaging a student's progress over time is an example of institutional

bias putting a population of students at a disadvantage (Feldman, 2019a). Equitable grading

practices rely upon final content mastery, not the path to content mastery (Feldman, 2019a).

Feldman (2019a) discussed how students who lack prior knowledge and access to tutors or other

assistance frequently earn lower grades at the start of new units, making a recovery more

challenging than their counterparts with more advantages. By eliminating the average and

focusing on final mastery, a more accurate and equitable picture of student academic progress

results (Feldman, 2019a). Formative feedback loses its power when given in conjunction with a

grade, and how best to remedy this dichotomy has not been determined (Shepard et al., 2018).

Removing points or grades from the formative process allows students to focus on feedback and

stay more committed to learning and understanding content (Shepard et al., 2018).

Feldman (2019b) studied cohorts of teachers from two districts in California dedicated to

more equitable grading practices such as using a 0 to 4-point scale instead of the 100% system,

encouraging retakes and redoing assignments, and removing behavioral elements from grade

calculations. Teachers engaged in planned action research cycles and ultimately reported

increased effectiveness, greater student motivation, and transformation of the learning process

(Feldman, 2019b). A connection between transformational leadership theory and change theory

is evident in the success Feldman (2019b) reported. Commitment to teacher professional

development, in-context and lateral capacity building, reflective practices, and peer and

leadership support were all prioritized by district leadership in the implementation of grading

reform (Fullan, 2006).

Anderson (2018) wrote a critique of grading policies and practices and discussed many

different recommendations dating back more than half a century to reform public education in

the United States. Efforts such as integrating technology, strengthening curriculum through

added rigor, and increased personalized learning opportunities for students were given the most

attention (Anderson, 2018). Anderson emphasized how grading practices in schools continued to

be a neglected component of educational reform. According to Burner (2018), a justification for

educational change needs to occur for those leading change to see the significance. To justify a

change, not only do the problem and purpose need defining, but there is a critical need for

educational leaders with vision and courage to lead change and transform thinking and practice

(Guskey, 2015).

Teacher's Role

Kunnath (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate teacher grading decision

making. He used a theoretical decision-making framework and engaged teachers in surveys and

focus group interviews in a large urban California school district. Kunnath recognized how

grading had remained virtually unchanged in U.S. schools despite calls for reform. The findings

demonstrated teachers' grading practices relied on a heavily personalized and subjective

decision-making process, leading to inaccurate and inflated grades (Kunnath, 2017). Lin (2019) and Nilson and Stanny (2015) identified grade inflation as an issue of concern in higher education.

Feldman (2019b) emphasized the power grades have on a student's future; yet, the teachers he studied received little to no training on how to grade effectively. As a result, teachers were uninformed by research and depended heavily on ingrained beliefs and past experiences (Guskey, 2015; Kunnath, 2017). Teachers tend to depend on personal experiences and opinions when determining classroom grading systems without prior training on effective grading practices (Guskey & Link, 2019). According to Leithwood (1992), a need for transformational leadership to transform teachers' decision making can be argued for, because transformational leadership inspires people to embrace improvement in their practices. Transformational leadership theory suggests the transformational leader recognizes the need to address grading practices and commits to change and teacher training (Bass, 1990).

Brookhart et al. (2016) gleaned from a review of over 100 years of grading that teachers habitually decide how and what to grade with little to no guidance from school or district leadership. According to Brookhart et al., studies about teachers' grading practices vastly outnumber studies focused on grading perceptions. This identified gap highlights the necessity for further research on teachers' experiences with grading, which supported the purpose of the completed study.

Leader's Role

Effective school leaders are essential to comprehensive, sustainable educational reform (Fullan, 2002). Yasir et al. (2016) examined leadership styles and employees' trust toward organizational change capacity. Results demonstrated a positive and substantial relationship

between transformational leadership and employee trust. Yasir et al. reported transformational leaders are more successful than other types of leaders in promoting effective change in an organization due to the transformational leader's motivational and supportive characteristics. The present need is for leaders to inspire the transformation of teaching and learning in schools (Fullan, 2002).

Bass (1990) recognized the differing personal styles of transformational leaders, yet confirmed specific, common behavioral characteristics the transformational leader exhibits:

> These leaders succeed through such transformational factors as charisma and the ability and willingness to treat different subordinates differently, as well as by providing intellectual stimulation for the employees. They frequently raise standards, take calculated risks, and get others to join them in the vision of the future. (p. 23)

Transformational leaders can present research-based decisions regarding grading reform to the community and rally support for engagement in the change process (Bass, 1990). Involving all stakeholders, accepting the slow and steady pace associated with change, educating the community, and providing training and support for teachers can drive effective change initiatives focused on the shared goal of more accurately communicating student achievement (Bass, 1990; Fullan, 2002).

Burner (2018) reported one of the most challenging dimensions of educational change to implement is changing people's convictions and opinions surrounding specific policies or practices. Leaders need to establish a legitimate reason for the change and motivate others to engage in the change process (Burner, 2018; Fullan, 2002, 2006; Yasir et al., 2016). Through a shared understanding of the intended change, the change process is more successful (Meyer-Looze et al., 2019). Guskey (2020) cautioned trying to change people's beliefs without

persuasive evidence is seldom successful.

Transformational leaders are known to establish a shared vision and foster individualized understanding and the motivation to want to change. The positive impact of collaboration and the idea of power in numbers were attributed to a transformational leader's core beliefs and a successful change process (Fullan, 2002; Leithwood, 1992; Meyer-Looze et al., 2019; Thiers, 2017). An effective transformational leader dedicated to change believes working together with staff produces better outcomes than leadership operating solo (Leithwood, 1992; Meyer-Looze et al., 2019).

Transformational leadership's positive influence encourages community members to attain outstanding results in a climate undergoing substantial change (Bojović & Stojadinović Jovanović, 2020). Grading reform represents such a context, requiring immense innovation and tangible change. Guskey (2015) called for educational leaders to be bold, courageous, and determined while pushing for meaningful change for more effective grading policies and practices. Change theory emphasizes capacity building as essential to effective change (Fullan, 2006). Educational leaders dedicated to meaningful change to improve student outcomes would do well to prioritize capacity building as an additional uniting motivational force when seeking reform (Fullan, 2006).

Sustainable Change

Both change theory and transformational leadership theory focus on motivation for sustainability (Bass, 1990; Fullan, 2002). Motivation produces positive emotions and provides reasons to act in specific ways (Bojović & Stojadinović Jovanović, 2020; Fullan, 2006; Leithwood, 1992; Yasir et al., 2016). Keeping the motivation alive during the change process is imperative for sustainability (Fullan, 2006). Sustaining extensive and far-reaching change is one

of the biggest challenges when engaging in change initiatives (Burner, 2018).

Change is complicated, so flexibility, building relationships, and perseverance are critical to achieving long-term and sustainable results (Fullan, 2002; Meyer-Looze et al., 2019). Burner (2018) emphasized understanding change is complex and necessitates multistakeholder inclusion. Fullan (2006) credited the success with district-wide reform in the York Region District School Board outside of Toronto, Ontario, largely thanks to leadership actions and the emphasis leadership took in maintaining a long-term perspective and a nonjudgmental stance on slow or limited progress. Meyer-Looze et al. (2019) stated effective, sustainable change in K–12 education demands precision in planning, patience, purposeful thinking, ongoing communication, steadfast effort over time, and strict adherence to a guiding theory of change.

Since the 1960s, many attempts at educational change have occurred, though they have been mainly unsuccessful in executing and sustaining the change necessary for local and global educational needs (Burner, 2018). Educational leaders are responsible for transforming the school culture, including how people work together by improving relationships and promoting an understanding of common goals (Fullan, 2002). Cultivating a school culture where professional learning and growth for teachers is valued and engrained in the climate is a hallmark of transformational leadership behavior (Barbinta et al., 2017; Bass, 1990). Teachers need training and the opportunity to learn in context (Fullan, 2006). Active engagement in learning in the environment where teachers teach, grade, and assess is paramount to successful learning, understanding, and change efforts (Fullan, 2002, 2006; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020).

Like the effective change process, the professional development of teachers on grading beliefs and practices occurs continuously and over a prolonged period (Guskey, 2020). Sustainable change occurs when leaders foster learning for both the adults and the children in the

organization (Meyer-Looze et al., 2019). Burner (2018) reported one factor critical to supporting

sustainable educational change is ongoing collaborative professional learning for teachers

embedded in the teachers' daily schedules. The concept of learning in context is essential to

Fullan's (2006) change theory. Teachers receive little to no preservice training on grading (Olsen

& Buchanan, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020), strengthening the necessity to provide in-

service professional learning opportunities to help teachers learn and grow.

In change theory, capacity building and developing new capacities are critical to

successful change because of the motivating factor acquiring new knowledge and skills has on

community members (Fullan, 2006). Capacity building focuses on closing the gap in student

learning by developing knowledge, skills, resources, and motivation, rendering the community

members more effective and able to effectuate improvements (Fullan, 2006). School leadership

focused on capacity building internally and laterally, across other schools and districts, is the

fourth premise in Fullan's (2006) change theory. The ability to see beyond the walls of one

school and demonstrate an interest in other schools and districts is a way of working to change

and improve the larger context (Fullan, 2002; Thiers, 2017). As described previously, capacity

building is collaborative and focused on meaningful change, as is the transformational leader

who is motivational, promotes collaboration, and fosters teacher development (Leithwood,

1992).

Counterargument

Despite consensus from over a century of research and literature labeling teacher-

assigned grades unreliable measures of academic achievement, many argue the utility grades

have as indicators of future scholastic events (Brookhart et al., 2016). Blending cognitive and

noncognitive components in teacher-assigned grades is recognized by some as helpful in

foreseeing students' academic and behavioral challenges (Brookhart et al., 2016). The

multifaceted nature of a traditional grade is the reason why grades are better indicators of a

students' academic success than standardized test scores (Brookhart et al., 2016; Shepard et al.,

2018). A counterargument points to the usefulness of teachers including academic and

behavioral elements when calculating and reporting students' progress in school.

Gap in the Literature

A common gap in the literature pointed to the need for more research associated with

grading students and how teachers make decisions about grading students (Anderson, 2018;

Kunnath, 2017). Anderson (2018) reported grading policies and practices were highly

underresearched and called for additional empirical documentation and purposeful dialogue.

Kunnath (2017) specifically encouraged more qualitative studies to illuminate grading decision

making. Brookhart et al. (2016) emphasized a limited number of studies focused on teachers'

grading practices and perceptions of grading. Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) recognized how

comprehending teachers' perceptions of grading may help solidify the purpose of grades. This

qualitative phenomenological study addressed the gap in the literature and added to the existing

body of research on teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices.

Chapter Summary

Traditional grading systems in the United States have remained virtually unchanged for

over a century (Brookhart et al., 2016). Although there are many opinions regarding grading and

grading reform, the need exists for more research and empirical evidence surrounding grading

policies and practices (Anderson, 2018). Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) called for creating a

unified vision of the purpose of grades through a closer examination of teacher understandings of

grading. Olsen and Buchanan (2019) identified a need for more research and stated despite the

universality and complexity of grading, few recent research studies exist on grading students in schools.

This qualitative phenomenological study examined public school teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices in a suburban school in Connecticut. Both the literature review and theoretical framework supported the study's problem and purpose. Foundational to the study was the problem with the traditional grading systems in most public schools in the United States and the ineffective and inaccurate communication of student progress (Guskey, 2015). The purpose of the study was to explore Grades 5-8 teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices and their perspectives on the efficacy of the methods used to measure and report student achievement. New insights regarding grading practices and grade reform emerged from the study. Studying teachers' experiences with conventional grading may extend the empirical knowledge base for anyone interested in grading in the United States.

Through the theoretical lenses of transformational leadership theory and Fullan's (2006) change theory, the purpose of grading, traditional grading practices, teachers' decision making, reliability of grades, grading reform, educational leadership, and sustainable change have been explored in the supporting literature and thematically organized for clarity around the topic. Prevalent in the literature was the fundamental problem of a traditional grade's blended constitution, which is not meaningful, helpful, or equitable (Guskey, 2020). The need to change and move away from the letter and percentage grading and adopt other forms of grading has been supported; specifically, the adoption of grading systems dedicated to reporting academic components separately from behavioral components (Feldman, 2019a, 2019b; Kunnath, 2017; Link & Guskey, 2019; Shepard et al., 2018). Although no true consensus resulted regarding the

best method, several more equitable and meaningful grading systems than the old, traditional system emerged from the literature (Feldman, 2019a, 2019b; Link & Guskey, 2019). Authors concurred on the need for sustainable educational change, specifically targeting grading policies and practices, a commonly ignored responsibility of instructional leadership (Guskey & Link, 2019).

Change theory and transformational leadership theory are both built on concepts related to motivation, collaboration, and capacity building. Transformational leaders can lead change effectively and navigate its complexities through the ability to motivate people to improve methods and policies (Leithwood, 1992). A transformational educational leader supports professional teacher learning in the context of intended outcomes, an essential concept associated with change theory and achieving sustainable change (Fullan, 2006).

The results of the phenomenological study of teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices provided answers to questions on grading. Deeper philosophical underpinnings connected to grading policies and procedures surfaced. Change can be better informed by listening to more lived experiences on the topic of grading. Research results integrated with the literature review and provided relevant contemporary findings to scholarly discussions on grading. Central to the review of the literature was the theme of change. A call for change and the need for change for the sake of improved student learning were echoed throughout the literature.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology and design for this qualitative phenomenological study that explored teachers' experiences and perceptions of traditional grading practices. The researcher's role, research procedures, data analysis, reliability and validity, and ethical procedures are discussed. Appendices referenced in Chapter 3 include the

invitation to participate, the informed consent, the signed site approval letter, the subject matter

expert's validation of the interview research instrument's field testing, and the interview

protocol.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Grades are important to the student experience. The essential function of grading and reporting by teachers is to reflect and communicate student achievement accurately, and the current percentage systems are imprecise and inaccurate (Guskey, 2015). Despite calls for grading reform since the early 20th century (Brookhart et al., 2016), grading practices have changed very little throughout the United States (Kunnath, 2017). Letter grades have been misleading, subjective, and unclear when articulating the grade's true meaning (Townsley, 2019). The site for the study was a suburban school in Connecticut undergoing grade reform and exploring alternate methods to communicate student progress.

The problem is grading systems in most public schools in the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress (Guskey, 2015). Despite expert recommendations calling for grade reform, grading practices throughout the United States have not changed significantly (Kunnath, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore Grades 5-8 teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices and teachers' perspectives on the efficacy of methods used to measure and report student achievement.

The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are the school teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut?

Research Question 2: What are the Grades 5-8 teachers' perspectives concerning the efficacy of the methods to measure and report student achievement?

The research design and rationale are explained in Chapter 3. The researcher's role, research procedure, data analysis, reliability, and validity are discussed in detail. Ethical considerations

and a summary conclude this methodology chapter.

<div align="center">**Research Design and Rationale**</div>

Because qualitative research focuses on the richness of the meaning of words, the study methods were qualitative (Babbie, 2010). This methodology was a good match for the research purpose and questions due to a reliance on a small number of participants and the natural environment where the experiences occurred (Burch-Bynum, 2016; Creswell, 2014). The study's goals involved understanding human experiences and making sense of experiences in a defined context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researcher-created instruments and self-engagement in conducting and analyzing data are qualitative research characteristics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The phenomenological design of this study focused on teachers' lived experiences with the research topic (Groenewald, 2004). A phenomenological design allowed lived experiences to give meaning to grading and grade reform. Extracting meaning, examining shared experiences, and identifying common themes in verbal non-numeric data are characteristics of a phenomenological study (Burch-Bynum, 2016). Data were gathered from open-ended interviews to encourage dialogue and freedom of expression (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interview questions were written to collect teacher experiences with traditional grading practices throughout a school year and at the end of trimesters. Open-ended questions tend to encourage participants to speak and share perceptions and experiences freely. Phenomenological research often relies on interviews to collect data and extract significance from the participants' words. A qualitative phenomenological approach is an appropriate design to derive meaning from the lived experiences of a small sample population (Burch-Bynum, 2016; Creswell, 2014).

Due to time constraints and limited resources, a qualitative research design involving

interviewing a small sample population of teachers was feasible. Engaging in a quantitative, experimental process to examine the association between letter grades and standardized test scores would have been more involved, more time-consuming, and would not have provided insights about teachers' lived experiences and perceptions. A phenomenological design was practical due to the professional connection to the research site and participants. Conducting interviews and recording reflexive memos did not require expenditures of any kind. The research site's convenience and working with a small participant pool allowed the research study to occur under minimal constraints. Extracting meaning from teachers' experiences with grading can benefit the building principal's grade reform efforts.

Advantages of a qualitative phenomenological design are numerous and far-reaching. The design encourages learning from the lived experiences of others to better understand a particular phenomenon. Educational leaders, teachers, parents, and students stand to benefit from the research results due to the data providing new meaning and clarity to the pursuit of grading reform. Phenomenological studies open minds, sharpen the understanding of the phenomenon, and enable visionary change (Qutoshi, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher's role may necessitate various involvement levels, depending on the situation, and the study needs careful crafting around sound methodology and ethical conditions (Babbie, 2010). The role assumed in this study was that of an observer. Assuming an observer's role was appropriate in this case due to previous professional involvement with the school's teachers, leadership team, and grade reform efforts where the teacher participants were colleagues in a shared workplace. Participants were directly observed during the interviews, and the data were studied solely by the researcher. I interviewed,

observed, collected data, and analyzed data. Researching in situations of possible conflict of interest requires recognizing the importance of connections to the participants and the site. Equally vital is acknowledging potentially shared experiences with the participants as fellow educators. Reflexive memos were used to recognize past experiences, biases, gender, and any prior relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The previous relationship to the teachers in the study was collegial having worked with each teacher over the previous 13 years (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Depth of relationships varied, but none were supervisory. As a former school leadership team member involved with school leaders on grading reform, the research study may support the principal's efforts. My involvement in the research included creating the study design, designing the data collection instrument, interviewing participants, analyzing data, and reporting the findings. The researcher's role was one of active engagement in the participant's experiences while removing preconceived notions (Smith & Osborn, n.d.). Bracketing and noting personal thoughts or biases were completed during the interviews and immediately after solidifying reliability.

Due to this study being held at the workplace and including fellow teachers' experiences and perceptions, my role as a researcher needed to be observational, not to become part of the phenomena under study. Conducting ethical research is paramount to the researcher's role. Participants were told about confidentiality, coding data, and data security in the informed consent form (see Appendix B). The Belmont Report's principles—respect for persons, beneficence, and justice—were upheld (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). All interviews were in person or via Zoom on devices not connected to the school district's technology. To ensure a higher probability of authenticity and honesty no incentives were offered to participants (Zutlevics, 2016).

To further address the reliability and validity of the research study, strategies used in addition to reflexive memo writing were member checking, bracketing, and applying two theoretical frameworks for theory triangulation. Using participants' quotes and including information from the reflexive memos helped establish believability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data will be kept on secure devices and in spaces external to the research site for 3 years post study.

Research Procedures

This qualitative phenomenological research study involved gathering teachers' lived experiences with traditional grading practices in a suburban school in Connecticut. This study depended on the interpretation of words and language, so the process was rooted in exploring emerging patterns and themes and inductive meaning-making (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Procedures of identifying and selecting population, sample selection, recruitment, participation, instrumentation, data collection, and data preparation are explained in this section.

Population and Sample Selection

Ninety certified public school teachers from a suburban school in Connecticut were the target population. The total sample size for the study was 16 teachers. Teachers from Grades 5-8 shared experiences with grading practices to gather different perspectives for the research study. Varied experiences and perceptions were needed to answer the research questions of this study. Van Rijnsoever (2017) explained a small and purposively sampled population is used in qualitative research to attain theoretical saturation and a deep understanding of the data.

A sample size of 15–20 teachers for a qualitative phenomenological research study is recommended because qualitative data analysis, specifically data transcription and coding, are lengthy and time consuming. When conducting qualitative research, coding is used to extract

different themes and look for relationships between the themes. Codes connect to the study's

research questions, and an essential step in coding is ensuring all the codes associated with the

research questions are addressed (van Rijnsoever, 2017). A study sample size of 16 teachers was

manageable and allowed for careful coding and in-depth analysis.

Any sample size is arguable in qualitative research (Boddy, 2016). The 16 participants

provided a suitable sample size due to the instrumentation approach and homogeneity of the

population. Evidence exists to support in the case of in-depth interviews; a number greater than

30 is potentially deemed too large and would need to be defended and explained (Boddy, 2016).

Creswell (1998) advised 5–25 participants in a phenomenological study. Having a sample of 16

individuals allowed for attrition, should participants leave the study.

A purposeful sampling method was used to select participants for the study. By

purposefully selecting the participants, certainty to the participants having had experiences with

the phenomenon under exploration was present. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated a

recommended strategy in qualitative research is a purposeful selection to help understand the

problem and research questions. The choice of teachers in a suburban school in Connecticut as

the sample population ensured the participants had experiences with traditional grading practices

associated with the site. Purposive sampling of the types of participants who most likely share

experiences about the phenomenon being studied provided improved alignment to the research's

purpose and goals, bringing greater precision to the data (Campbell et al., 2020).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria describe the participant recruitment process (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). The study's inclusion criteria were the following: Participants must be teachers

at the suburban school in Connecticut, have a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience, and

have experience with grades and reporting grades at the research site. Exclusion criteria included

teachers who held other positions such as instructional coaches and liaisons, teachers with less than 10 years of teaching experience, and new teachers to the district.

Before engaging in the research study, permissions were granted by the managing authorities of the desired site (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Site approval and consent to conduct research in this school district were obtained pending proof of Institutional Review Board approval by fulfilling the district requirements and guidelines for obtaining permission through written communication (see Appendix B). On January 28, 2021, an emailed letter outlining the study's purpose, participants, logistics, instrumentation, ethical considerations, and consequences was submitted to the superintendent and assistant superintendent. A review committee was convened on February 8, 2021, to review the request, and a few days later, a telephone conversation with one of the committee members occurred to answer and provide clarification for the committee. Four weeks after submitting the initial request, an official letter securing site permission arrived in the mail dated February 23, 2021.

Recruitment strategies of participants are widely varied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In-person and email (see Appendix C) were the two modes of communication used to contact and recruit participants in the research study after receiving the American College of Education's Institutional Review Board's approval. Brief preliminary informal in-person conversations with teachers to determine interest in participation occurred before sending an email explaining the research study more in-depth. A demographic questionnaire was emailed to determine eligibility.

The informed consent process was sent by email, and follow-up conversations for questions and clarification subsequently occurred (see Appendix A). Participants needed time to read, comprehend, and reflect after having received the informed consent form. Information about the research study (e.g., purpose, level of participation, rights and protections, persons

involved, and advantages to participating) were outlined in the form (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). One to 2 weeks was estimated to complete the informed consent process.

Instrumentation

Subject matter experts (SMEs) were the school principal, a district world language instructional coach, and a Grades 6-8 instructional math coach. As a field test, each reviewed the questions created for the teacher interviews. All three SMEs completed a varied and deliberate examination of the primary research instrument. SMEs helped ensure the interview questions were directly connected to the study's research questions to capture the participant's experiences and perceptions. Employing SMEs helped improve the questions and confirm the validity of the content (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Interview

Teachers' experiences and perceptions on traditional grading practices were explored through interviews aligned to the study's research questions. An interview protocol is an instrument designed to ask questions directly tied to the study's goals; it is a tool to elicit dialogue about a particular subject (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The interview questions were open-ended, and the interview approach was semi structured, following a predetermined set of questions. With participant permission before starting, the interviews were audio-recorded.

Castillo-Montoya's (2016) interview protocol refinement framework was used during the construction of the interview instrument (see Appendix D). The interview protocol refinement framework includes four phases used as a guiding framework for the study's interview instrument. The first phase involves confirming the alignment between the interview questions and research questions. The next phase emphasizes writing questions to promote conversation. Phase 3 requires gathering feedback on the interview protocol, and Phase 4 involves a pilot of

the interview protocol with subjects of similar nature to the study's participants (Castillo-

Montoya, 2016).

Field Test

SMEs with experience in education accepted the invitation to offer feedback via email

and validate the self-designed research instrument (see Appendix D). Having three experts not

affiliated with the American College of Education test the interview questions strengthened the

instrument's validity, as did incorporating the experts' feedback. Field-testing secured added

validity to the instrument and improved the questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). One round of

review yielded one immediate approval and some questions and suggestions from both

instructional coach SMEs. Field testing resulted in the incorporation of an additional question,

elimination of redundancy, and a clarifying stakeholder element.

Data Collection and Preparation

The data collection process is the act of inquiring, observing, and examining (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). After obtaining the Institutional Review Board approval, teachers at the study site

were recruited through email. Once recruitment was completed, the sampling procedures began.

A demographic questionnaire was used to determine the eligibility of prospective participants.

An informed consent form was emailed to each selected participant. All participants' questions

and concerns were addressed before collecting the signed informed consent forms.

The interviews were scheduled via email with the prospective participants. Interviews

took place either in person at a site convenient to the participant or via Zoom. In-person sessions

were audio-recorded using voice memos on a private iPhone and the Zoom audio-recording

feature on a personal laptop.

Each interview followed the interview protocol (see Appendix D) and used the same

field-tested interview questions for each participant. Each interview required approximately 45

minutes. No district-owned technology was used to collect data. In case of technological

difficulties, a small digital voice recorder was used as a backup.

All data are stored on a private, password-protected laptop. Zip drives for extra security,

transcriptions, reflexive memo journals, and any hard copies are locked in a home office. Family

members do not have access to the locked box containing the data. Data will be held securely for

a minimum of 3 years post study and then appropriately destroyed (Office for Human Research

Protections, 2016). At that time, paper copies will be shredded, and computer files, zip drives,

and voice memos will be erased.

At the end of the study, sending a thank-you email recognized the participants' value and

involvement. Participants have been given the option to receive a copy of the final research study

when available and an invitation to discuss it in person (Morrison et al., 2012). The teachers

dedicated time and shared words, experiences, and opinions during the interview process. A

thoughtful closure demonstrates respect and gratitude.

Transcribing the interviews was the first step to preparing the bits of nonnumerical data

for analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The next step required immersion in the data by

relistening to the entire interview, rereading transcriptions, and then chunking to extract further

meaning (Finlay, 2014). Applying the strategy of listening to each interview and beginning the

labeling and chunking by words and themes occurred after the recordings were complete.

Data Analysis

Per Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research is an interactive process during

which data collection and analysis coincide with the first interview. A simultaneous collection

and analysis method helps form credible and reliable findings because data discoveries naturally

emerge as the study unfolds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Otter.ai was used to help with transcribing the interviews. Data were manually prepared for analysis. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the evidence-based model for analysis. IPA focuses on meaning, requiring a careful interpretation of the participants' words through continuous engagement with the transcripts (Smith & Osborn, n.d.).

IPA involves immersion in the data, engaging with the phenomenon, chunking meaningful text, and fine-tuning the meaning found in the participants' words (Finlay, 2014). The first step in IPA was to thoroughly read each transcript one at a time and make notes in the side margin of all emerging themes. Next, the themes were connected and listed on a separate document, grouped by the most prominent themes. These were then matched with the coinciding words in the participants' transcripts. A table of themes per participant was made featuring the significant themes, the location in the transcript, and direct quotes from each participant. Phenomenological analysis involves capturing something meaningful, connecting to the phenomenon under study, reflecting on the meaning, and narrating the story to share the meaning of the lived experiences (Finlay, 2014). Data analysis ceased once no new significance—related to the research questions—emerged from the participants' words.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability in qualitative research is determined by the detailed and meticulous description of the research process, including recognizing possible bias and subjectivity (Cypress, 2017). Carefully describing how the study was conducted from beginning to end, including how the data were analyzed, establishes reliability. Reliability and validity require revealing all the information related to the study, articulating the rationale for the study's processes, and presenting sufficient evidence to render the study trustworthy to outsiders

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). IPA requires awareness of implicit and explicit biases, and by bracketing personal experiences from the participants' experiences, the study gains moral strength (Alase, 2017).

Researcher reflexive memo writing was used during or immediately following each interview. Qualitative research confirms the researcher as an instrument with influence on the results (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). The reflexive memos acknowledge awareness of how personal experiences and connections could taint the study's validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Bracketing presumptions and bias was another strategy used to secure reliability and involved consciously putting aside any common understandings, experiences, thoughts, and attitudes to comprehend the participants' words and consciously experience the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Exploring ones' own experiences associated with the studied phenomenon raises awareness of personal biases, preconceived notions, and presumptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Credibility and Dependability

Credibility is referred to as internal validity and depends on the study's truthfulness (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). General strategies to establish credibility are prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Member checking was used to validate the content of the transcriptions by asking the participants to double-check them for accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). Theory triangulation was present due to the application of two theoretical frameworks in the study.

This study involved researcher reflexive memo writing, which provided the foundation for an audit trail safeguarding truthful reporting. Reflexive memos contained the record of any conflicts, questions, reflections, or problems occurring during and after the interviews, providing

transparency and dependability. Reflexivity demonstrated an understanding of how one's

position, experiences, attitudes, and status could affect the research process (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the concept of the applicability of findings to other contexts and

settings. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed: (a) employing a "rich, thick description" (p. 256)

of the site and results and (b) selecting a variety of participants as two strategies to increase the

opportunities for transferability. In this study, the application of thick descriptions and variation

of participant selection increased transferability. Detailed stories and narratives, or thick

explanations, of the phenomena under scrutiny were contextualized and supported with evidence

directly quoted from the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A purposeful selection of

teachers of different genders and content areas from four different grades fulfilled the variation

of participant selection.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in a qualitative research study depends upon different criteria being met.

The requirements include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell

et al., 2017). When the four criteria are met, a study is recognized as rigorous (i.e., trustworthy).

Bias and subjectivity related to personal and professional experiences with grading, reporting,

with the teacher participants, and with the research site were recognized throughout the research

process through bracketing and reflexivity. Signed informed consent forms, member checking,

and theory triangulation also strengthened the study and provided trustworthiness. Recognition

of how implicit and explicit biases may influence data interpretation was evident.

Ethical Procedures

A credible research study upholds ethical standards from beginning to end (Wester,

2011). Bias needs to be recognized publicly or eliminated. Research is to remain neutral and

allow the data to tell the story. Protecting human subjects' rights in research and exercising fair

and equal treatment of all participants (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017) is

critical. Arrangements and procedures to protect human participants in this study included full

transparency regarding the research study, informed consent, confidentiality, personal

technology use, and secure data storage in a private residence.

Upholding The Belmont Report's principles was paramount due to the involvement of

human participants in this research study. Created to protect human research subjects, The

Belmont Report provides three guiding principles: respect to persons, beneficence, and justice

(Office for Human Research Protections, 2016). Respect to persons requires treating participants

in a confidential manner. This study provided detailed information, informed consent, and the

choice to volunteer (Office for Human Research Protections, 2016). Anonymity, confidentiality,

and not using district devices for data collection or analysis ensured no harm to participants and

minimized participation risks. Justice demands fairness, equal treatment of all people, and an

equally distributed benefit of the research.

To protect the human participants' rights, each participant received an informed consent

document (see Appendix B) that detailed all aspects of the study, including the methodology, and

explained participants' rights associated with voluntary participation. The informed consent form

was sent via email, signed by all participants, and collected from each participant before any data

collection began. Confidentiality of participants was assured by not using real names or other

identifiers.

Documents necessary for IRB approval have been included in the appendices. The IRB

required copies of all subject recruitment materials (see Appendix C) and informed consent

forms (see Appendix A). Site permission, signed and written on district letterhead, has been

included (see Appendix B), as are the SME emails documenting field testing (see Appendix E)

and the interview protocol (see Appendix D).

Risks of harm to the participants were minimized by ensuring confidentiality, not using

district technology, providing transparency, and choosing where and how to be interviewed. A

personal laptop and iPhone were used during data collection and analysis, and the recorded

interviews and transcriptions were kept private. Data were kept under lock and key in a home

office throughout the life of the study and will be saved for a minimum of 3 years, then

appropriately destroyed (Office for Human Research Protections, 2016). When the time comes to

destroy the data, paper copies will be shredded, and computer files, zip drives, and voice memos

will be erased.

Ethical issues regarding research at the workplace with colleagues need to be recognized.

Privacy should be protected, and no harm should come to the participants or the organization

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Recognition of potential bias and removal of bias are essential to

neutral reporting during and after data collection. Before engaging in the research study and

during and after data collection, an honest self-examination of any preconceived notions and

prejudices about the studied phenomenon were acknowledged through reflexive memos to self

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Chapter Summary

The educational leadership at this suburban school in Connecticut was interested in

grading, reporting, and grade reform. The problem is grading systems in most public schools in

the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress

(Guskey, 2015). Grades have been the predominant reporting measure for all students. They are

relied upon for making important decisions such as promotion to the next level, college

admissions, and achievement in higher education (Brookhart et al., 2016). Studying grading and

grade reform is essential to understanding and articulating a grade's purpose and meaning.

This study involved a qualitative phenomenological design used to explore teachers' experiences

and perceptions of traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut. The

researcher's role, research procedures, data analysis, reliability and validity, and ethical

procedures have been discussed. Accompanying appendices include the invitation to participate,

informed consent, signed site approval letter, SME validation of the interview research

instrument's field testing, and the interview protocol. The study's research findings and data

analysis results are discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results

Grades have been a core component to students' educational experiences and can have a life-altering influence on many future educational outcomes such as grade-level advancement, graduation, attrition, postsecondary admissions, and financial aid (Brookhart et al., 2016; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Grading practices in the United States are outdated and resistant to calls for reform (Brookhart et al., 2016; Kunnath, 2017). The widespread use of the traditional 0–100 percentage system is an outdated practice and inaccurately represents student achievement (Guskey, 2015). Traditional letter grades are misleading, biased, and poorly defined when translating a grade's true meaning (Feldman, 2019a; Townsley, 2019). Gaps in the literature have called for more studies on grading practices and policies in the United States examined through the lens of teachers' experiences with grading students and making decisions associated with grading (Anderson, 2018; Brookhart et al., 2016; Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

The problem explored was that grading systems in most public schools in the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress (Guskey, 2015). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore Grades 5-8 teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices and their perspectives on the efficacy of the methods used to measure and report student achievement. Data collection procedures are presented in the following section, including how informed consent was collected, the number of participants, location and time frames for data collection and return of signed informed consent documents, and any deviation from the original plan. The analysis is described in detail with an explanation of the data analysis process, identification of themes to answer the research questions, and presentation of examples of data to support findings. Strategies to ensure reliability and validity are explained, followed by a summary of research findings and data

analysis results.

Data Collection

A demographic survey to determine eligibility was emailed to 90 certified public-school

teachers in Grades 5-8 from a suburban school in Connecticut. The Google Form explained the

survey was needed to determine eligibility for participants interested in participating in the study

and specifically asked for consent to answer the questions on the survey. All participants clicked

"yes" to give consent. Interested participants answered the survey questions, and eligible

participants were contacted via email with the informed consent document (see Appendix A) and

instructions to carefully read, print, and sign if still interested in participating. Participants were

asked to either interoffice mail the consent form or arrange for pick up. Upon receipt of the

informed consent document, emails were sent to schedule in-person or Zoom interviews. A total

of 29 teachers expressed interest in participating in the research study and 20 of the 29 met the

eligibility requirements. Out of the 20 eligible, 16 returned the signed informed consent

document. Two teachers declined to participate due to lack of time, and two others never

returned the informed consent document. Table 1 categorizes the teacher participants by subject

area and years of teaching experience. Participants are identified by numbers to ensure

confidentiality, eliminating any possible identifiers.

Table 1

Participants' Subject Area and Years of Teaching Experience

Participant	Subject area	Years of experience
Participant 1	Language Arts	10
Participant 2	Language Arts	13
Participant 3	Science	14
Participant 4	Math	15
Participant 5	Spanish	16
Participant 6	Art	17

Participant	Subject area	Years of experience
Participant 7	Math	18
Participant 8	Spanish	20
Participant 9	Language Arts	20
Participant 10	History	20
Participant 11	Science	21
Participant 12	Spanish	22
Participant 13	History	23
Participant 14	Language Arts	23
Participant 15	Math	26
Participant 16	Science	28

Note. This table presents the study's participants by the assigned identification

number, subject area taught, and years of teaching experience.

The 16 interviews took 3 weeks to complete. Each interview took approximately 45

minutes. Interviews were conducted either in person after school hours or via Zoom on weekends

or during evening hours. Two interviews were done via telephone on weekdays per participant

requests due to poor internet connection in their homes. When originally planning, phone

interviews had not been considered as a possibility. For this reason, the two telephone interviews

represent a slight deviation from the original interview plan. After gaining participants' verbal

consent to record the session, all interviews were recorded on a small, private, handheld

recording device. Scheduling conflicts occurred, and several sessions required rescheduling;

other than that, no other significant events arose during data collection.

Data Analysis and Results

The open-ended interviews adhered to the interview protocol described in the study (see

Appendix D). Each participant gave verbal permission to record the interview, and they were

told recording could stop at any time if they desired. None of the participants declined recording

or asked to stop recording. Throughout the data collection period and while transcribing and

searching for themes, reflexive memos were recorded to ensure a neutral, nonbiased stance as

researcher–observer and record researcher thoughts and impressions. The reflexive memo thought process was recorded on a pink legal pad and was developed throughout the data collection and analysis process. Reflexivity through memo writing heightened an understanding of how one's experiences, relationships, and opinions could impact the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of the interview process was to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the school teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut?

Research Question 2: What are the Grades 5-8 teachers' perspectives concerning the efficacy of the methods to measure and report student achievement?

At first, the recordings were manually transcribed, which proved to be extremely time-consuming and slow-paced. Thanks to the discovery of an online transcription application called Otter.ai, the remaining transcription process was completed more efficiently. Rereading the transcripts signaled the necessity to edit typos and double-check participants' recorded words to ensure accuracy of meaning. The exercise of relistening and rereading resulted in a deeper connection to the data.

Transcripts were emailed to the participants so they could conduct a member check for any inaccuracies or researcher bias. Not one participant detected or reported any researcher bias, and transcription accuracy was confirmed. The exercise of having the participants check the transcriptions solidified confidence in the data being used for analysis. Validation of the participants' words from the participants themselves strengthened the study's authenticity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Coding was the next step. NVivo helped with the organization of codes and the

classification of transcript excerpts. The research questions were used as headers under which

codes and subcodes were listed. Reading each transcript line by line and highlighting

participants' words transformed the lived experiences into codes from which several

commonalities and connecting themes emerged. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)

provided the evidence-based model followed for data analysis. IPA methodology required

sustained immersion with the transcripts to carefully extract meaning from the data (Smith &

Osborn, n.d.). Following IPA protocol, emerging themes were noted, grouped, and connected to

the participants' words to facilitate the narration of the lived experiences (Finlay, 2014).

Identified themes were listed in alignment with the study's research questions (see Table 2).

Table 2

Themes Categorized by Research Question and Accompanying Codes

Research question	Codes	Themes
Research Question 1: What are the school teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut?	Grades Participation Traditional grading system Letter grades 0–100 Rubrics Training	Traditional grading system Current grading practices Rubrics and rubric conversion Why currently grading and reporting in this manner? What needs to change?
Research Question 2: What are the Grades 5-8 teachers' perspectives concerning the efficacy of the methods to measure and report student achievement?	Student learning Behavior Effective Accurate Calculate Report Evidence Data	Calculating student achievement Reporting student achievement Student learning Communication What needs to change?

Note. Themes and accompanying codes are categorized and in alignment with the study's

research questions.

The phenomenological method focuses on lived experiences associated with the research topic, which guided the coding and thematic investigation (Groenewald, 2004). Quotes from participants supported and exemplified themes and narrated the story the data told to answer the research questions. Studying the participants' involvement with grading practices provided added insight to existing research.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 examined the teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut. The open-ended interview questions enabled the participants to talk about experiences with grading and share opinions and perceptions on grading practices at the school site. Data analysis revealed five themes, all interrelated to the participants' experiences and traditional grading practices.

Theme 1: Traditional Grading System

Eleven out of 16 participants classified the grading practices at the research site as traditional, using the 0–100-point scale and the A–F letter system. Participant 12 stated, "Right now we're still in a traditional system. . . I would label what we're doing now fairly traditional." Participant 3 remarked, "Right now, we have a standard grading system of the A through F." Participant 13 stated, "We use a 100-point system, the classic ABCDF." Several participants indicated a certain familiarity and comprehensibility with the letter grading system as indicated by Participant 4, "I think the grading system is traditional. I'm comfortable with it, the kids are comfortable with it, and parents are comfortable with it." Participant 11 concurred, "It's what the students are familiar with so they're more comfortable knowing what their grades are."

Many voiced concerns about the traditional methods used at the site. Participant 5 remarked, "Zero to 100 does not make sense. It doesn't show what the kids know. There's a

better way to do what we're doing . . . Zero to 100 is not the way to do it." Participant 11 stated,

"So, percentage is very difficult. And that's what doesn't work. You really don't know how

much the kids know." Participant 3 pointed out a positive attribute, "and I think that's a benefit

for what we currently do with the traditional grading system of being able to quickly grasp what

students are capable of." Participant 1 also expressed support, "But I do think traditional grading,

I think that it works, and I wonder how kids will be motivated without that." Participant 1 was

not the only participant to discuss motivation and the link to traditional grading systems.

Theme 2: Current Grading Practices

Many of the participant interviews revealed inconsistencies with current grading

practices. Practices differed among teachers across disciplines, grade level, and department.

Participant 11 remarked:

> Okay, so I feel that it definitely needs to be revamped in a lot of ways, because it's not
>
> consistent. And it's not that I feel like everybody has to have the same percentages.
>
> An A in one class should be equal to an A in another class. And so, there's a discrepancy
>
> that needs to be changed so it's a little bit more uniform.

When talking about current grading practices, Participant 12 commented:

> I feel like we're all pretty inconsistent. Like, I still think we all pretty much do things the
>
> way we're used to doing them and the way that we'd like to do them. You know, I think
>
> even department to department. You know, math, like for eighth grade math doesn't take
>
> any late work like zero, zero, zero. Whereas I think other departments see that it's okay to
>
> turn in late work and give some credit for late work. So even grading policies, we're not
>
> all on the same page. I don't see it being any closer to being aligned than it was 5–10
>
> years ago.

The lack of consistency frustrated parents, according to Participant 14, who also revealed, "There's no consistency within our own department about grading."

Theme 3: Rubric and Rubric Conversion

The topic of rubrics was mentioned by 11 out of 16 participants. Experiences with rubrics further amplified the inconsistencies with grading and revealed challenges converting rubric scores to traditional grades. Participant 14 addressed both issues:

For example, with our rubrics, we are always trying to convert that four to a number. And even with our own department, we can never agree. You know, is the four 100; is the four a 95? Is the three an 85? We've never been able to agree on those number conversions. So, I think there's no consistency within our own department about grading.

Frustration was expressed with rubric conversion to traditional grades by Participant 12, who said:

Because like for me, if the rubric is divided into four components, and you're trying to translate that into a traditional grade, like to me, a kid who gets a three that's not like an 80% or, you know, I think that's where I struggle the most is incorporating rubrics into a fairly traditional grading system.

Inconsistencies associated with using rubrics and issues with communication were expressed by Participant 16:

So, the grading in my content is, it is a mix, there's still a little bit of traditional 100 points on some things. There's more rubric kind of grading. I think it has been quite inconsistent, not well communicated to the teachers in terms of expectations. I don't think it has been truly reflective of a student or student's ability even . . . it might be. I don't think at our school, it has been very well communicated. I don't think it has been

fair to the teachers and to the students. Because there's a large inconsistency between one team to the next team, for example.

Theme 4: Why Currently Grading and Reporting in This Manner

Eleven out of 16 participants stated the grading and reporting systems and methods were created by others and decided for them. Participants do what they are expected or told to do. Participant 1 stated they grade and report the way they do, "Because I was told to." Identical verbiage was expressed by Participant 14 who said, "Because I'm told to." Participant 15 offered, "We're being asked to do it this way. Like I don't know if I would be grading this way." Participant 2 echoed a similar sentiment, proclaiming they graded the way they did, "Because I've been told to grade this way." In addition to the majority response of being told to do so, some participants discussed the familiarity and historical background linked to their practices; Participant 4 shared:

> Because we've been doing it for 100 years? Definitely. It is. It's the facility that we use with the resource application, you know, the online piece that organizes it in that way. And we've always done it and I was graded that way. And my parents were probably graded that way and it's comfortable.

Participant 8 combined both perceptions, stating, "It's just what I've always done. It's the way I was graded when I was a student. And it's the way I've always graded. And it's the way the administration has always told us to grade."

Theme 5: What Needs to Change?

Participants were asked to share thoughts about how they would change the grading system. Similar responses resonated and many focused on the measuring and reporting aspect discussed under Research Question 2, Theme 5. Theme 5 developed into a connecting theme,

ultimately, aligning both research questions to the teachers' experiences, opinions, and

perceptions and allowing data analysis to come full circle. Regarding Research Question 1 and

the focus on experiences with traditional grading practices, the 0–100-point scale surfaced as a

significant topic (see Table 3).

Table 3

Theme 5: What Needs Changed About Traditional Grading Practices

Participant number	Quote
5	"I think we definitely need to get away from zero to 100. It should just be meets standard. Like exceed standard, like meet standard, making progress towards the end, or like it should be something like that."
3	"I think as far as what we're doing right now, I think one positive thing that we could do is take away that rolling average, so the parents have access just to seeing the students' individual assignments for each class, rather than what their overall average is. I think that would help parents focus on what needs to be done, rather than immediately going to the teacher and saying, why did my child have this grade? You know, because a lot of times a parent asks me, why does my child have this grade? So, I think immediately, that's one thing that could change."
7	"I would try to make it truly represent the student and not because there was pressure from anyone to, you know? Right now, I don't know if anyone would disagree that there's pressure that everyone has to be above a certain level period. So, whatever that would look like to be truly accurate. Yeah, I think would be the first step. And whatever that means, whatever, but finding some way to truly reflect where that student is. And even for someone to say, what does that look like? I don't even know if there's an agreement on what it looks like. You know, what are we looking for? And how do we show that?"
12	"So, I feel like if we create a more detailed kind of comprehensive grading system, and reporting system, then we actually are making our jobs easier. You have to do that to move towards a grading system that everyone believes in. We haven't even addressed everyone's individual philosophies and how we're going to merge those."

Note. Participant quotes related to Theme 5 under Research Question 1: What Needs to Change?

Minimizing the focus on the numerical average grade, questions around accuracy, and a focus on the larger picture associated with personal philosophies around grading resonated in this theme.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 aimed to explore the Grades 5-8 teachers' perspectives concerning the efficacy of the methods to measure and report student achievement. The interviews uncovered the perspectives and opinions through the participants' lived experiences. Five central themes emerged from the data. Four of the five themes are specifically connected to Research Question 2; yet, the fifth theme aligned to both research questions. Essentially, both research questions aligned and connected to the same theme of what needs to change.

Theme 1: Calculating Student Achievement

Some conflicting opinions arose, and uncertainties were expressed when participants were asked to talk about how accurately student academic achievement was calculated. Positively commenting on accuracy was Participant 14, who said:

> I think it's pretty accurate. I do think it's pretty accurate, I think, because we're looking, you know, we have the same priority standards that we're looking for in all of our units all year long. And because we use different programs and tools, I do think that their academic achievement is pretty accurate to their grade. I think it's good.

Conversely, Participant 7 stated:

> It's probably not very accurate. I mean, I think, to a degree, but if you have a student who does all of their work, I think we're all kind of inclined to help that student really succeed when maybe truly academically, they're not there. Because if it was just about the right answer, I don't know if that's reflected accurately.

Regarding rubrics and translation to letter grades, Participant 9 declared:

> I think it's pretty accurate on the rubric. I hate to have a numeric part to it. Because I
>
> think that that's, that skews it a little bit . . . I think the rubric is pretty accurate. But when
>
> you put a numerical grade to it, that's when it gets tricky, because I feel like the kid
>
> who's trying really hard might not get an A, but they're really trying, but they might have
>
> a B minus, but that's okay because they're approaching wherever we're asking them to
>
> be. So that's where the gray calculation gets tricky.

Similar thoughts were shared by Participant 2, "I'm going to say not accurately. And I think a

large portion of it has to do in language arts anyway with our rubrics." Several participants

mentioned providing multiple and varied methods to demonstrate learning as expressed by

Participant 8, "I try to make it as accurate as possible. I try to give my students a whole bunch of

different ways to show what they've learned."

Theme 2: Reporting Student Achievement

When asked how effectively student achievement was reported, most teachers spoke to

the ineffectiveness of the reporting system. Participant 12 asserted:

> I don't know, I think if we look at our report card system, again, because we're not
>
> aligned necessarily, on what goes into the grade. So, like, an A for me, and an A for
>
> [name of grade-level partner] might not be the same performance, like that student might
>
> look different in my class, or my student might look different in his class. And I think the
>
> fact that some teachers still do, you know, use homework as a grade, I feel like our report
>
> cards, you couldn't be certain that if you took two teachers that teach the same thing, that
>
> that grade means the same thing. So, I feel like our report card is lacking.

Participant 8 mentioned a sentiment shared by other participants, saying:

I don't know that it's 100% effective because again, sometimes I just have, I have kids

who are very good on paper, but they don't participate at all. I have kids who are very,

very good on paper, but they disrupt the learning environment of others. They're not

focused in class. And then I have students who seem to be achieving and participate and

work really hard, but they just don't do well on paper. So, I have students who have As

and A pluses, and I don't necessarily feel that those are deserved, but that's what it looks

like on paper, and then I'll have kids who have Cs, but they try so hard and they're doing

the best they can.

Theme 3: Student Learning

During the interviews, most participants said they felt the grades they assigned were

reflective of student learning. Most teachers who directly answered the question about student

learning agreed the grades assigned somewhat or totally reflected students' learning. Many

teachers emphasized the higher assessment weight in calculating student grades as indicative of

what students have learned. Participant 13 commented:

Okay, so learning. Like I said, before, you know, since assessments are a big part, I try to

put in the important stuff in the assessments, I try to prep them, I gave them a chance to

fix it if they messed up the first time. So, I think I'm pretty, I think I'm pretty good at

that. I think my grades pretty accurately measure student learning.

Most teachers felt student behavior was either minimally or not included, allowing a student's

grade to predominantly reflect their learning. "It's all about student learning. It doesn't have

much to do with behavior," said Participant 8. In agreement, Participant 7 stated, "It's all

academic based." Supporting the same sentiment was Participant 9, who stated, "There is really

no behavior in there. It's all what they can do academically. So, that behavior part is really out of

it."

Theme 4: Communication

The topic of effective communication of grades to all stakeholders led participants to speak more about the online grading tool Infinite Campus, report cards, progress reports, and communication, most specifically with parents. Several participants expressed confusion regarding current reporting methods. Participant 11 acknowledged mixed emotions on effective communication, saying:

> I have mixed feelings about that because it seems like a great system. However, to be a great system, you have to have the receiving end actually take part. And I'm noticing that there's a lot of parents that do not check Infinite Campus. So, it's as effective as the receiving end uses it. And the how the teacher, if the teacher keeps up with it, it's not always updated.

Participant 12 provided a more systemically focused comment, expressing:

> I feel like we need to do something more to make parents aware like it's the halfway point, or there's 2 weeks. I just feel like all of a sudden, the grading period is over, and parents are emailing you like, what can I do to bring up their grade? Like, I feel like that's the communication piece that's gotten lost the last couple years is that we just assume that parents are checking routinely and not doing something that forcibly makes them check.

Student achievement entered the discussion when Participant 8 stated:

> I'm not really sure that what we're doing right now is an effective way to communicate grades. Giving a letter and then just putting a brief comment doesn't really tell much about student achievement. Some kids, you know, they're just, they're disruptive in class

and may disrupt the learning of others, but they're really good at getting their work done. And then some kids work really hard. And they try really hard. And that doesn't always show on paper.

Several participants felt the online gradebook was effective in communicating the grade. However, they agreed on a lack of clarity around the grades, as indicated by Participant 4 who stated:

I think the grade itself is communicated great. I mean, you can see it at any time, any day, all the time. It is cumulative, so you can see where a child's status is halfway through or a quarter of the way through as far as a letter grade, which they like. I am not sure that we really communicate what it's measuring. I guess the measurement, but not the explanation.

Several participants voiced concerns about a change in parental behavior regarding reporting through the online gradebook. Participant 12, among others, wondered:

I don't know if it's the pandemic, but I feel like when grades were posted, when we used to post grades, we would get very quick feedback or response from parents . . . I'm finding that's not the case anymore. So, I don't know if this online grading system is working anymore like for that reason, or are parents just inundated or saturated with notifications and stuff from school that they're not looking at it? But I'm finding that it used to be you would get responses quickly from parents, and I'm just not finding that anymore.

Theme 5: What Needs to Change?

Having the ability to report and comment on behavioral aspects of a students' progress in school resonated loudly as a desire among participants. Making changes to the online grading

and reporting system to somehow report behavior aspects with student performance

overwhelmingly emerged from the data. Concerns were voiced about the emphasis on grades and

their competitive nature. Additionally, humanizing the reporting system to focus on the whole

child and integrating reflection were heard from the voices of the participants (see Table 4).

Table 4

Theme 5: What Needs to Change About the Methods to Measure and Report Student

Achievement

Participant number	Quote
1	"Adding a work habits piece to the grade."
8	"I think, if we're going to stick with the ABCD letter grades, there's got to be something more. There's got to be either a specific set of comments that you choose from to let parents know about the alternate things that aren't covered on ABCD on the report card. I don't really know; you can't give a grade to behavior, and you can't really give a grade to participation. But that's, that's a big part of what the students are doing. It should focus on the whole child, not just what they can do on paper."
9	"I would definitely like to see parents becoming less grade conscious, and kids becoming less grade conscious, and less competitive over it. I do wish that there was some kind of effort, we were able to put some kind of effort in there. And I think the behavior part is important. So, like what's not working is too much emphasis on the grade. And not enough of how do we add effort in there? How do we add behavior in there in a way that's not so subjective in a way that's really meaningful for kids? Because I think that comment part is when I always put the behavior in, but parents don't really care about the comment. They want to know the grade."
13	"Teachers should have a reporting system that allows them to make their students', and their students' work, and their students' practices, a little bit more student-based and human for the benefit of the students and their parents. I don't think that we have that in place today. And that's kind of like my biggest reason for being very interested in exploring different options for grading in the future."
6	"First of all, everybody needs to reflect on their own practice."
10	"I like the fact that you know, some of the questions you asked made me think about especially why do you give the grade you do? And do the parents understand what they need to? Give me pause the fact that I couldn't answer that question other than no. Something to think about anyways, I'm not sure exactly what I would do to

Participant number	Quote
	change that."

Note. Participant quotes related to Theme 5 under Research Question 2: What Needs to Change?

Reliability and Validity

Careful and detailed description of the research methods, including recognition of possible bias and subjectivity, help to secure reliability in qualitative research (Cypress, 2017). This research study followed necessary steps to ensure reliability, validity, credibility, and transferability. Through careful and honest description from participant recruitment to thematic analysis, the research study presents substantial evidence for trustworthiness in the eyes of outsiders (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). IPA required recognition of any bias and bracketing any personal experiences from those of the participants; as a result, bringing moral soundness to the study (Alase, 2017).

Reflexive memo writing occurred prior to and during data collection and analysis. The reflexive memos demonstrated knowledge of the researcher as an instrument capable of influencing results (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Data analysis incorporated additional strategies to secure dependability, credibility, and transparency, such as member checks, detailed narratives, and direct quotes from the interviews as supporting evidence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking invited participants to confirm transcription accuracy and signal any researcher bias. A purposeful selection of teachers from four different grade levels, genders, and content areas represented variation of participant selection, which is important to the transferability of the study's results to other settings.

Chapter Summary

The phenomenological study explored experiences of public school teachers in Grades 5-

8 with traditional grading practices. The first research question sought to discover the school

teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut.

Research Question 2 gathered teachers' perspectives concerning the efficacy of the methods to

measure and report student achievement. Open-ended interviews of 16 participants revealed

experiences, perceptions, opinions, and comments about current grading practices, the traditional

grading system, student learning, calculating and reporting student achievement, communication,

and changes needed.

Data collection and analysis methods including coding, theme identification, and use of

IPA led to direct quotes as evidence to support the findings and align with the study's research

questions. Participants shared experiences with the traditional 0–100-point scale and the A–F

letter system. Many discussed the use of rubrics and the difficulty in transferring a rubric score to

a traditional grade. Perceptions concerning the efficacy of methods used to measure and report

student achievement were voiced, and overwhelmingly, many stated their dissatisfaction with

current systems. No discrepant cases were associated with the study. All participants agreed on

the need for change and the majority would like a meaningful way to report achievement and

behavior in a manner to reflect the whole child's progress and development. The discussion on

findings, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, and implications for leadership are

discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

A student's educational experience and growth opportunities revolve heavily around grades (Brookhart et al., 2016). Promotion to the next grade level, graduation, admission to postsecondary institutions, financial awards, and career opportunities depend upon a student's academic record and grade point average (Brookhart et al., 2016; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Grading practices in the United States are outdated and have historically resisted reform efforts (Brookhart et al., 2016; Kunnath, 2017). The prevailing traditional 0–100 percentage system is a traditional practice that inaccurately reports academic achievement (Guskey, 2015). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices and perspectives upon the efficacy of the methods used to measure and report student achievement. Additional qualitative studies examining teachers' decision making and teachers' perceptions directly related to teachers' grading practices are needed to reduce the gap in the literature (Anderson, 2018; Brookhart et al., 2016; Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

This study used a phenomenological method to capture the participants' lived experiences and perceptions through open-ended interviews. The following questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are the school teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut?

Research Question 2: What are the Grades 5-8 teachers' perspectives concerning the efficacy of the methods to measure and report student achievement?

A total of 16 Grades 5-8 teachers from various content areas were interviewed either in person, via Zoom, or over the phone. The interviews provided valuable information to help

answer the research questions. Data analysis involved coding that led to discovering common themes connected to each research question detailed in Chapter 4 and Table 2. Key findings included the overwhelming desire to change the current grading and reporting system at the school site. Participants expressed concerns about traditional methods and discussed inconsistencies with grading practices and converting rubric scores to a letter or percentage grade. Most participants categorized the reporting system as ineffective and wished to humanize the report card by deemphasizing the grade. Many of the participants would like to have the ability to report on behavioral components alongside the grade to provide parents with a clearer picture of the whole child. Findings, interpretations, and conclusions are further elaborated in this chapter. Limitations of the study are identified, recommendations and implications for leadership are discussed, and a conclusion completes the chapter.

Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions

Anderson (2018) identified a lack of significant research on grading policies and procedures. Information gathered from the current study led to more significant insights into teachers' experiences with traditional grading, measuring, and reporting student progress. The research study's results provided relevant empirical data associated with grading practices and policies (Anderson, 2018). A total of nine themes aligned to the study's research questions emerged from careful examination of the participants' lived experiences. Each theme was analyzed and interpreted within the context of the study's theoretical framework. Transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1990) and Fullan's (2006) change theory provided the theoretical lenses used to clarify the findings' significance and meaning.

Theme 1: Traditional Grading System

Brookhart et al. (2016), Kunnath (2017), and Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) revealed

teachers in the United States have continued to use grading systems established over a century ago. Eleven out of 16 participants described the grading system in place at the research site as traditional and largely dependent upon the 0–100-point scale and the A–F letter system. Many participants expressed concerns with the traditional grading system and admitted that 0–100 does not accurately reflect what students know. Guskey (2015) wrote about the rampant use of the outdated 0–100 percentage system and the inaccurate representation of student achievement associated with this practice. Twelve participants were convinced a better method existed, supporting the scholarly research on the confusion of using one grade to show student progress (Guskey, 2020; Lehman et al., 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Despite dissatisfaction and concerns, participants identified the 0–100 scale as motivating for students and worried about what might happen to student motivation in the absence of the percentage grades. Participant 4 said, "I'm not so sure how to get kids motivated without the grades." Previous studies reported how motivation emerged as a purpose for grading (Anderson, 2018; Brookhart et al., 2016; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Shepard et al. (2018) wrote about teachers, viewing points as motivating, using points to manage student behavior. Researchers cautioned the use of points does not motivate students; instead, the points reward system is a means to control student behavior (Shepard et al., 2018).

Motivation is a core element of transformational leadership theory and change theory (Fullan, 2006; Thiers, 2017). As indicated in the findings, teachers are leaders in the classroom and strive to motivate students to learn and grow. In educational communities, transformational leaders motivate others to go above and beyond, surpass expectations, and fully commit to organizational goals (Barbinta et al., 2017). Six participants in the study were concerned with student motivation and felt grades connected to student motivation. Controlling student behavior

did not emerge as a theme, indicating the teacher participants did not associate motivation with managing the classroom or student behavior. Findings related to this theme demonstrated teachers' dissatisfaction with the current traditional system, professional reflection on improving practice, and innovative ways to motivate students, indicating the participants' desire for change. Reflection is one of the core premises to change theory and effective implementation of change knowledge (Fullan, 2006).

Theme 2: Current Grading Practices

Current grading practices emerged as another theme connected to the study's first research question. Data analysis revealed all 16 teachers had little to no training or guidance on how to grade students, confirming findings from the peer-reviewed literature. Brookhart et al. (2016) discussed five themes from 19 empirical studies on teachers' grading practices. Brookhart et al.'s work revealed teachers decide what and how to grade with very little guidance from school leadership. Seven participants in the current study communicated inconsistencies with the current grading system. The data revealed grading practices differed among teachers across the content area, grade level, and department, which frustrated teachers and parents. Shepard et al. (2018) discussed how questions of validity and reliability have been raised due to the variability in how teachers assign grades, ultimately, rendering student achievement measures unreliable. Brookhart et al. (2016) examined 100 years of research on grading and confirmed significant variation between teachers impacted the validity and reliability in a grade's meaning and in the accuracy of reporting grades.

Theme 3: Rubrics and Rubric Conversion

The use of rubrics became the topic of conversations and was identified as another inconsistent component of the grading practices at the research site. Challenges with converting

rubric scores to traditional grades were a source of frustration and discord within departments, content areas, and grade levels. Participants expressed difficulties calibrating and agreeing on how to convert scores to a standard grade. Expectations regarding the use of rubrics and conversion to traditional grades were reportedly unclear and incohesive. Participants shared how ineffective communication and lack of alignment were reasons for the trouble with rubrics. Eight participants voiced skepticism over how accurately rubrics reflected student achievement due to the rampant inconsistencies with how the scores were converted to a percentage or letter grade. Shepard et al. (2018) discovered issues with the reliability of student grades when teachers were not aligned when calculating grades.

Theme 4: Why Grading and Reporting in This Manner?

The final theme aligned to Research Question 1 revealed why the participants graded and reported the way they did. Most participants stated they did what they were told to do. Lack of teachers' decision making became apparent. Participants also emphasized the historical connection: Past experiences with traditional grading practices influenced current practices. The traditional grading system provided teachers, parents, and students with a certain comfort level. Both discoveries supported the literature, which found teachers were largely dependent upon personal experiences and deep-rooted beliefs when determining classroom grading practices (Guskey, 2015; Kunnath, 2017). Further supporting the study's findings was Guskey (2015, 2020), who attributed the significant variation among teachers to the reliance on personal experiences with grading and the computerized grading programs used by school districts.

Theme 5: Calculating Student Achievement

Calculating student achievement is connected to Research Question 2. Conflicting statements emerged when participants talked about the calculation of student achievement. Some

participants felt the calculations were accurate, and some thought they were inaccurate. When asked how accurately student achievement was calculated, Participant 16 replied, "For my particular subject area, I don't think it's very accurate." Conflicting comments were expressed by Participant 10 who stated academic achievement is calculated "pretty effectively." Eight participants felt the raw rubric scores were accurate, but once translated to a traditional grade, they became less accurate indicators of student achievement. Six participants specifically expressed they provided varied and multiple ways for students to demonstrate learning to make grade calculation more accurate. The participants' conflicting feelings on how accurately student achievement was calculated aligns with Wiliam (2020), who emphasized understanding the consequences of calculating grades as a critical element of any grade reform effort due to the powerful impact grades have on a student's future.

Theme 6: Reporting Student Achievement

Antiquated letter grades and the 0–100-point system remain the predominant methods for reporting student progress on transcripts and report cards (Guskey, 2015; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Inconsistencies and variations from teacher to teacher and how grades are calculated led six participants to believe a clear picture of student achievement was not accurately reported. Seven participants discussed inadequate reporting capabilities. The findings associated with Theme 6 were consistent with Shepard et al. (2018), who reported issues with reliability when teachers used different weights and criteria when calculating and reporting grades. Participants expressed not all teachers included the same measures when reporting student progress and spoke of a lack of grading alignment and limitations with the report card system.

Theme 7: Student Learning

Seven participants stated students' grades effectively reflected student learning due to not including or minimally including student behavior in calculations. Higher weight on assessments and mostly excluding behavioral elements were why six participants felt confident the assigned grades reflected student learning. Feldman (2019a, 2019b), Guskey (2020), Link and Guskey (2019), Olsen and Buchanan (2019), Townsley (2019), and Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) strongly advocated for separating the academic elements from the behavioral components when grading and reporting student achievement. Excluding components such as homework, participation, and effort from a student's grade yielded a clearer and more precise understanding of the grade's meaning (Townsley, 2019). These seven participants' perceptions aligned with the recommendations from the literature. Participant 10 stated the following:

> And so there should be a couple of grades like what they've learned should be their assessment grade. And I think the final grade should be 100%, based upon their assessments. But I think of having a commentary about their behaviors and their work habits, their socialization, and their ability to work with others, in some sort of narrative would be a good way of doing it as well. So, if I were to, based on the system we have right now, I think the best way would be to have the final grade be based upon the assessment average. And teachers having the latitude to form a narrative to write a narrative to the parents or guardians, giving a broader picture of their child from a less academic perspective.

Theme 8: Communication

The final theme under Research Question 2 was communication. All the participants shared experiences and perceptions regarding how effectively grades were communicated to all stakeholders. Anderson (2018), Brookhart et al. (2016), Guskey (2015, 2020), Olsen and

Buchanan (2019), and Townsley (2019) raised questions regarding what is communicated

explicitly in a grade, how, and why. Concurring with the researchers, four participants expressed

confusion and uncertainty about how parents and students received grade reports. Eight

participants discussed communication with parents and felt the system was ineffective at

communicating with parents. Although the online grade book effectively communicated grades,

no explanation was provided, which raised concerns about understanding the grades' meaning.

Anderson (2018) wrote the most specific purpose of grading is to communicate student

achievement to multiple stakeholders. Aligned with the literature was the concern raised by four

participants regarding a decline in parental engagement with the online grade book, which some

blamed on a breakdown in school-to-parent communication.

Theme 9: What Needs to Change?

Theme 9 connected to both research questions. Discussions around change emerged from

all the participants' lived experiences and perceptions associated with changes in grading and

reporting. Upon close examination of the data connected to this theme, nine participants wanted

to adopt a more comprehensive grading system with the ability to separately report behavioral

and academic aspects to better represent the whole student. Successful change requires

courageous and motivational leadership. Transformational leaders are change-oriented and can

effectively unite communities to implement positive organizational change (Yasir et al., 2016).

Guskey (2020) recommended a more illustrative method for reporting student

achievement and suggested a dashboard design, allowing teachers to convey components such as

effort, participation, attendance, and homework alongside an academic progress grade. An

inclusive, yet separate, approach to grading supports the participants' perceptions of what needs

to change to improve current systems and practices. Kunnath (2017) wrote that safeguarding the

behavioral aspects of teachers' reporting abilities validates reporting noncognitive elements and supports teachers' desire for motivational influence in the classroom. Such findings are consistent with the participants' worries over student motivation and the need to express more about non-academic factors associated with the traditional grade. Participant 1 wondered, "I do think that traditional grading works, and I wonder how kids will be motivated without that."

Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework was built on transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1990) and Fullan's (2006) change theory and relates to the findings in several ways. Inconsistencies identified by the participants suggest leadership and teachers as leaders in the classroom should engage in reflective action (Fullan, 2006). One participant suggested the need for the school community to consider individual philosophies and beliefs to create a new grading system all community members can believe in. Reflecting upon practices before implementing any change is essential to moving forward with the change process in schools (Fullan, 2006). Understanding which inconsistencies exist and why should help align the vision and advance organizational change efforts.

Transformational leaders foster and maintain collaborative environments and actively help teachers solve problems more effectively (Leithwood, 1992). Unclear expectations reported by the participants indicated the need for a transformational and supportive leadership style to minimize frustration and clarify expectations. Successful change depends upon one main factor: improving relationships, which effective change leaders know how to do (Fullan, 2002). Transformational leaders are communicative, support followers, and encourage autonomy and independence (Barbinta et al., 2017). Participant 2 stated the change they would make to the grading system, "There'd be a lot more teacher autonomy."

Effective, lasting change reform depends upon educational leaders who can transform the learning cultures of educational institutions and the teaching profession (Fullan, 2002). Establishing purpose and shared goals around reporting student achievement represents transformational leadership style behavior (Bojović & Stojadinović Jovanović, 2020). The reported lack of alignment with grading calls for reflection on purpose, practices, policies, and organizational goals. Participant 12 recognized, "Even grading policies, we're not all on the same page." From school-wide reform to state-wide reform, continuous communication and the involvement of all stakeholders is critical (Fullan, 2002, 2006). Courageous and inspirational leadership are essential to grading reform in the United States (Guskey, 2015). Educational leadership and teachers as leaders in the classroom should engage collaboratively in the change process.

Limitations

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices and perspectives on the efficacy of the methods used to measure and report student achievement. One limitation was the small sample size of 16 teachers from a suburban town in Connecticut. A small size was potentially not representative of the teaching population in the district, state, or across the nation, which could threaten transferability and generalizability (Vasileiou et al., 2018). However, transferability and reliability were assured by incorporating direct quotes from the participant interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further increasing transferability, this study contains a complete description of the results and the use of a varied participant selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Detailed accounts and participant quotes ensured generalizability to other similar settings. Additionally, the sample size yielded data to the point of saturation, with nothing new having emerged from

the interviews.

Researcher bias represented the second limitation. Reliability in qualitative research depends upon thorough and exhaustive descriptions of the research process, including admission of potential bias and prejudices (Cypress, 2017). The study has been carefully detailed and described, and my involvement in the study was identified as an instrument that could influence results (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Reflexive memo writing occurred after each interview and during data analysis. Bracketing bias by putting aside any common experiences, perceptions, and attitudes with those of the participants additionally solidified reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking ensured the accuracy of the transcribed interviews and checked for evidence of researcher bias, representing another step to secure the study's reliability and transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Recommendations

This qualitative phenomenological study focused on the problem with grading systems in most public schools in the United States are antiquated and ineffective in accurately communicating student progress (Guskey, 2015). Results of the study should help fill gaps in the literature, calling for more contemporary research on grading practices and teachers' decision making associated with grading students in schools (Anderson, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Grades have a tremendous influence on a student's academic trajectory, making the topic necessary to research (Brookhart et al., 2016). Data connected with studying teachers' lived experiences with grading should increase the existing body of knowledge of grading practices and policies in the United States. All participants agreed on the need for change from the traditional grading system. Most expressed a desire for a more purposeful method to report achievement and behavior to holistically communicate student

progress and development.

      The research was limited to 16 participants in Grades 5-8 from one school in a public school district. Future studies should explore elementary and high school teachers' experiences with grading and reporting in the same public school district. Similar studies should also be done in different school districts, not solely public schools, to increase generalizability and opportunities for comparison. Expanding the participant population is also recommended if future researchers have the time and resources available. Increasing the number of participants and exploring experiences in other schools, districts, and at different grade levels would strengthen transferability and generalizability (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Parents and students should also be included in any future and related research studies.

      Burner (2018) recommended educational leaders, scholars, and educators reflect upon the need for educational change and the associated challenges to make change in schools more effective. Heeding this advice, further research in the form of a follow-up study should occur. Future follow-up research should include the original 16 participants and dig deeper into any emergent themes. A more targeted exploration of one or more specific themes could lead to more precise insight for scholars and leaders to promote targeted change and engage in the change process. Results from the study indicated a need for change in the grading and reporting of students in Grades 5-8 at the research site, confirming the findings in the literature.

Implications for Leadership

      Educational leaders at the district and school level should work to implement change in grading practices and policies by listening to the lived experiences and perspectives of the teacher participants. A desire for change was expressed, and leadership should include teachers in the decision-making process. Sustainable change needs to have a purpose, and this is often

identified as a problem of practice preventing an organization from moving forward and reaching

its goals (Meyer-Looze et al., 2019). This research study helped identify perception data, which

is essential to problem identification for an organization (Meyer-Looze et al., 2019).

Overwhelmingly, participants at the research site stated their dissatisfaction with traditional

grading practices and questioned the accuracy and efficacy of the methods. Effective school

leadership is key to wide-scale, sustainable educational reform (Fullan, 2002). Fullan (2002)

emphasized the goal should be focused on systemic improvement with not just one school but all

schools in the district. Moving the entire district forward with grading reform should be the goal

for school leadership.

Transformative leadership to transform culture, change beliefs, alter attitudes, and

motivate others to innovate change efforts is necessary for long-lasting, meaningful change

(Bojović & Stojadinović Jovanović, 2020; Fullan, 2002). Burner (2018) acknowledged teachers

need motivation and a justified reason to change. This study demonstrated participant motivation

to change the grading practices which school and district leaders should embrace and capitalize

upon to develop plans for a collaborative grade reform effort. Sharing knowledge and

experiences helps build relationships, a critical component to effective change leadership

(Fullan, 2002). District and school leaders can contextually learn from the participants' words,

experiences, and perceptions, which helps establish continuous and sustainable organizational

development (Fullan, 2002). Change is critically dependent upon educational leaders.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers'

experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices and perspectives on the efficacy of

the methods used to measure and report student achievement. Key findings revealed participant

dissatisfaction and concerns with the traditional grading system and policies at the research site. Inconsistencies and misalignment across grade levels, departments, and disciplines were identified. Participants raised questions around the accuracy of student achievement calculations. Many participants spoke to the ineffectiveness of the reporting system and identified issues with communication. Student learning was reflected in the participants' grades due to minimally or not including student behavior in grade calculations. An overwhelming desire for change emerged from the data. Most of the participants would prefer a more comprehensive report with the ability to comment on behavioral elements in addition to the academic on the report card.

New learning from the study supported the literature and the need for change from the old-fashioned traditional grading methods to which the United States has adhered for over a century. The data suggest teachers are ready for change and need district and building leadership support to cultivate the culture for sustainable change. Ultimately, systemic change should be the goal with sights set on far-reaching reform within a district, across districts, and regionally. School leaders should consider the results of this study when implementing changes in grading and reporting student achievement. Educational leaders and teachers should be dedicated to accurately and holistically communicating student achievement to all stakeholders, and if this necessitates a change in practice, courageous leadership will be required.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Prospective Research Participant: Please read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before deciding whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask any questions before, during, or after you participate in this research.

Project Information

Project Title: Experiences of Public School Teachers in Grades 5-8 with Traditional Grading Practices: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study
Researcher: Amanda J. Smith
Organization: American College of Education
Email: xxxxxxxxxx@gmail.com
Telephone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Researcher's Dissertation Chair: Dr. Sarah Everts
Organization and Position: Professor and Dissertation Chair, American College of Education
Email: xxxxx.xxxxxs@ace.edu
Introduction
My name is Amanda Smith, and I am a doctoral candidate at American College of Education. I am doing research under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Sarah Everts. I will give you some information about the project and invite you to be part of this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the study. This consent form may contain words you do not understand. Please ask me to explain anything you need me to. If you have questions, do not hesitate to contact me.

Purpose of the Research
The purpose of the research study is to explore teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices in a suburban school in Connecticut. You are being asked to participate in a research study that will assist with understanding your experiences with grading and reporting. Conducting this qualitative methods study will provide additional information that may help the district with grade reform.

Research Design and Procedures
The study will use a qualitative methodology and phenomenological research design. Face-to-face or virtual interviews will be conducted lasting approximately 45 minutes. The study will comprise of 20 participants, purposively selected, who will participate in interviews conducted at a site convenient for participants or via Zoom.

Participant Selection
You are invited to participate in this research because of your experience as a teacher who can contribute much to grading reform, which meets this study's criteria. Participant selection criteria:
- Participants must be teachers at the large suburban school in Connecticut

- Teachers must have a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience
- Teachers must have experience with traditional grading practices at the research site.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions, and you do not have to participate. If you choose to participate in this study, you may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

Procedures

We are inviting you to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked to participate in an interview. The type of questions asked will range from a demographical perspective to direct inquiries about the topics of grading, reporting, and grade reform. Before starting the interview, you will be asked permission to record the interview to help capture a transcription of the shared information.

Duration

The interview portion of the research study will require approximately 45 minutes to complete at a location or via Zoom at a time convenient for the participant.

Risks

The researcher will ask you to share personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or participate in the discussion if you do not wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

Benefits

Although there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation will likely help us learn more about grading, reporting, and grade reform. The potential benefits of this study will aid the district in grade reform.

Confidentiality

I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the researcher. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. The data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet or encrypted computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not have a direct correlation that directly identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your code number is, and I will secure your information.

Sharing the Results
At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
Participation is voluntary. If you wish to end your involvement in the research study, you may do so without repercussions by emailing me stating your desire to withdraw.

Questions About the Study
If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact me or the Dissertation Chair. This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions of this group, email IRB@ace.edu.

Certificate of Consent
I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant (Please use an authentic signature): _____

Date: _____

I confirm the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability. I confirm the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print or type name of lead researcher: _____

Signature of lead researcher: _____

Date: _____

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.

Appendix B

Site Permission

February 23, 2021

Amanda Smith

Dear Amanda,

Your request to conduct research as part of your doctoral candidacy has been reviewed by the District's ad hoc screening committee and has been approved.

Please note that approval is contingent upon you providing the following:

- Research proposal
- IRB approval
- Survey, interview questions, and any other data collection tools
- Final study report

The framework of your study aligns with   I look forward to reviewing your work.

Very truly yours,

Best of Luck!

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

Date:

Dear ------

I am a doctoral student at American College of Education. I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a dissertation research study.

Brief description of the study:

The study explores teachers' experiences with traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut.

Description of criteria for participation:

The inclusion criteria are the following:

- Participants must be teachers at the suburban school in Connecticut.

- Teachers must have a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience.

- Teachers must have experience with grades and reports at the research site.

Your participation in the study will be voluntary. If you wish to withdraw from the research at any time, you may do so by contacting me using the information below.

I may publish the results of this study; however, I will not use your name nor share the identifiable data you provided. Your information will remain confidential. If you would like additional information about the study, please contact the following

Candidate Contact Information:

Amanda J. Smith – xxx@gmail.com – xxx-xxx-xxxx

Chair Contact Information:

Dr. Sarah Everts xxxxx.xxxxxx@ace.edu – x-xxx-xxx-xxxx

If you meet the criteria above, are interested in participating in the study, and would like to be included in the potential participant pool, please email or call me. I will send a quick Google Form to confirm eligibility. Once eligibility is approved, I will email an informed consent form for your review and signature.

Thank you again for considering this dissertation research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Amanda J. Smith

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Hello _____!

I'd like to thank you again for agreeing to interview for my research study. As I have mentioned before, my research focuses on studying teachers' experiences and perceptions with grading, reporting, and grade reform. Our interview today will take approximately 45 minutes, during which I will be asking you questions that will ask you to talk about your experiences.

You have signed the Informed Consent form indicating I have your permission to record our conversation today. Do I still have your permission to record today's interview?

YES ____   NO ____

If YES: Thank you! Please let me know if you want me to stop recording at any time during the interview.

If NO: That's fine. I will not record. I will only take notes during the interview.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?
If questions come up at any time in this study, please feel free to ask me.

Research Question 1: What are the school teachers' experiences in Grades 5-8 with traditional grading practices at a suburban school in Connecticut?

Questions to ask the teachers:
What kind of grading system is used for your content area?
What sources of evidence/data are used to determine a student's grade?
How do you communicate grades to students? To parents?
How would you describe the meaning of a grade?
What is your opinion of the grading system at this school?
Why do you think we currently grade and report the way we do?
Do you think the way grades are communicated is effective for all stakeholders (students, parents, others)?

Research Question 2: What are the Grades 5-8 teachers' perspectives concerning the efficacy of the methods to measure and report student achievement?

For Teachers:
How would you change the grading system?
This concludes our interview. Thank you again for your time and participation.

Appendix E

Subject Matter Expert Validation

Amanda Smith   Sat, Feb 13, 7:45 AM ☆ ↰ ⋮

I have had to make revisions to my research study. Since parents will no longer be involved in my research, I am sending you the revised interview questions I will ask teachers. I need you to confirm the validity of the content.

The study's research questions appear first and the interview questions are the ones I need validated.

Research Question One: What are the teacher experiences with grading in a large suburban school district in Connecticut?

Questions to ask the teachers:
What kind of grading system is used for your content area?
What sources of evidence/data is used to determine a student's grade?
How do you communicate grades to students? To parents?
How would you describe the meaning of a grade?
What is your opinion of the grading system at this school?

Research Question Two: What are the teacher experiences with reporting in a large suburban school district in Connecticut?

Questions to ask the teachers:
How would you describe the way grades are communicated at this school?
What is your opinion of how grades are reported at this school?
In your opinion, what is the purpose of reporting grades?
Do you think the way grades are communicated is effective?

Research Question Three: What are the teacher perceptions on how to change the grading system?

For Teachers:
Can you describe any changes you would like to see happen to the grading process?

Thank you!
Amanda

                              Feb 15, 2021, 9:28 PM ☆ ↰ ⋮

These look aligned to what we are doing. On Wednesday, you may have some more insight as we dive into our books.

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Research Question Help ➤ Inbox ×

Amanda Smith   Thu, Mar 4, 10:39 AM

I am required to field test the questions that I will use in my research interviews with different experts in the field. I was wondering if you would be willing to take a look at them and provide feedback. Ultimately, I need you to confirm the validity of the content.

If so, I will email you more information and the questions.
Thank you,

Amanda

                                                         Thu, Mar 4, 1:23 PM

Of course!!!

Amanda Smith   Thu, Mar 11, 11:19 AM

No problem at all.

Here they are:

What kind of grading system is used for your content area?
What sources of evidence/data are used to determine a student's grade?
How do you communicate grades to students? To parents?
How would you describe the meaning of a grade?
What is your opinion of the grading system at this school?
Why do you think we currently grade and report the way we do?
What kind of grading system do you think would work best for your students?
How would you describe the way grades are communicated at this school?
Do you think the way grades are communicated is effective for all stakeholders (students, parents, others)?
Can you describe any changes you would like to see happen to the grading process?

Thank you!
Amanda

                                                         Thu, Mar 11, 3:16 PM
to Amanda ▾

They look good.   But I think you can consolidate a few because you might start getting repeat answers for some of the questions.
Like the what kind of grading system do you think will work best. And. The describe the changes you would make.

It could just be my interpretation of the questions.

Other than that. I think you are good to go :)

Amanda Smith   Feb 13, 2021, 9:13 AM   ☆   ↩   ⋮
to

Thank you so much, K____, for your willingness to help and for your feedback.

My research study is a qualitative phenomenological study on grade reform. I plan to interview teachers to learn from their experiences with grading, reporting, and grade reform. The questions should not be "yes" or "no" questions. They need to encourage participants to share their experiences in an open-ended fashion.

What I need from you is your feedback on the questions for the teachers, and I need you to confirm the validity of the content.

Please feel free to let me know of any changes and/or additions.

The study's research questions are there for you to refer to. The teacher interview questions are the ones I need you to look at.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Research Question One: What are the teacher experiences with grading in a large suburban school district in Connecticut?

Questions to ask the teachers:
What kind of grading system is used for your content area?
What sources of evidence/data is used to determine a student's grade?
How do you communicate grades to students? To parents?
How would you describe the meaning of a grade?
What is your opinion of the grading system at this school?

Research Question Two: What are the teacher experiences with reporting in a large suburban school district in Connecticut?

Questions to ask the teachers:
How would you describe the way grades are communicated at this school?
What is your opinion of how grades are reported at this school?
In your opinion, what is the purpose of reporting grades?
Do you think the way grades are communicated is effective?

Research Question Three: What are the teacher perceptions on how to change the grading system?

For Teachers:
Can you describe any changes you would like to see happen to the grading process?

Thank you!
Amanda

                                                                     Feb 16, 2021, 1:54 PM   ☆   ↩   ⋮
to me ▾

Amanda,
I really like your questions. I think they are clear, concise, and invite participants to share their experiences.

I wanted to wait to respond to this until I did more of my grading reading, as now it is fresh in my head. I was also thinking a good question for teachers could be something like - Why do you think we currently grade and report the way we do? Something like that. Or also what kind of grading system do you think would work best for your students? Not sure if either of those would support your work.

For research question 2 - Do you think the way grades are communicated is effective?
Maybe clarify: effective for all stakeholders? students? parents? other stakeholders? Not sure, but a teacher might think they are effective for parents, but maybe not as effective for middle school kids.

The last research question reminded me of pgs 65/66 in the Go set go book with the Ford example. I think the most important will be how you craft questions and take stakeholders desires into consideration.

Look forward to hearing more about your work!

"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart" – Nelson Mandela

•••