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Challenging Standard Grading Practices: A Qualitative Action Research Study

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CHALLENGING STANDARD GRADING PRACTICES:
A QUALITATIVE ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

by

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DEDICATION

I would not be here without the love, support, and encouragement of my wife, Martha, who frequently reminded me that I could do this even when I was ready to give in and give up. Thank you for everything. I love you.

I am also eternally grateful to my family, without whom none of this would be possible. My parents, the two most wonderful people I know, pushed me to do this from an early age, and my siblings have been nothing but supportive throughout this process. I hope I have made you proud. And yes, Chase, I am the first Dr. Timmons.

To my in-laws, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, not all of whom are here physically but all of whom inspired and pushed me, thank you for loving me and believing in me as well.

And to my daughter, Elise, who was born during this crazy process, I love you more than I can explain.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABSTRACT

The present qualitative Action Research study was conducted to determine students' perceptions of current teacher grading practices and how a standards-based grading (SBG) report card affected secondary students' perceptions and understanding of grade fairness and accuracy compared to a standard report card, which reports a single grade that often combines academic achievement with behaviors, attendance, homework completion, deadlines and the like. At the end of the first four-and-a-half week grading period of the fall 2016 semester, a group of tenth-grade English II Honors students were presented with two different report cards, one that utilized a single numerical average and one that disaggregated achievement by learning standard. Qualitative data was collected through the use of interviews and a Likert scale and was disaggregated by gender. The results showed that these honors students preferred standard grading practices and report cards. An analysis of the results showed no difference in responses based on gender but did suggest that the students' White, middle-class identities may have shaped their perceptions of school.   The results of this study were used to develop an Action Plan in conjunction with the student-participants that impacts policy and gives students a voice in their own assessment and enables teachers to design and implement effective grading practices.

Keywords: grades, grading practices, report cards, standards-based grading

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During my first year of teaching, desperate to modify my students' behavior and enable them to achieve higher grades, I offered extra credit to my English IV students if they brought in packs of my favorite style of pen. Of the nearly fifty students in my two sections of English IV, nearly one-third brought in pens. I sat in a desk with a list of students and accepted the pens, putting check marks beside the students' names as they dropped off pack after pack. Students who had been drowning were now swimming comfortably even though they did not understand the epic hero, the historical Shakespeare, the language of Wordsworth, or how to construct the research paper they had spent all semester trying to write. I sensed that something was amiss, but I put those feelings aside when I realized that other teachers were providing extra credit for cleaning desks, bringing in packs of paper, and having parents attend the school's open house. If others were providing extra credit for non-academic endeavors, then I could and would, too. These practices were particularly problematic because although my school serves students across the socioeconomic spectrum, many students were unable to afford supplies or had parents whose personal and/or financial situations may have made open-house attendance unfeasible. This meant that not only were grades diluted by the practice but also that opportunities to achieve high grades were disproportionately offered to students from the middle and upper class.

1

Though many of these practices were eventually curbed and then outright banned by administrators, I observed equally dubious practices persisting in classrooms at this school. For example, some teachers continued to award points for 'notebook organization' and/or 'signed syllabi.' Some awarded zeroes for late work or did not allow their students to "redo" or repeat a missed and/or failed assignments even if they knew that the student 'grew' in understanding and/or 'mastery' of specific subject-area content knowledge. Other teachers allowed students to turn work in at any point during the grading period and awarded full credit for completing or redoing a missed and/or failed assignment.

The literature is replete with information about grading practices. Urch (2012) argues that inconsistencies in enabling students to repeat tests and assignments have created a problematic educational environment in United States public schooling, noting, "consequently, the learning experience of the individualized student is frequently compromised. The educational experience has been driven more by teachers' grading practices than whether or not students have met the learning targets" (p. 2). Traditional grading, or what Iamarino (2014) calls "points-based grading" (p. 1), is flawed because it fails to truly report what students know or do not know. Rather than continuing to "[default] to previously recorded grades, and [calculate] a final grade from the resulting accumulation of points" (p. 2), schools have the possibility of considering alternative grading practices including standards-based grading (SBG), which allows grades to do what they are supposed to do: represent "a valid and undiluted indicator of mastery" (Wormeli, 2013a, p. 295).

2

Background of the Problem of Practice

Whether it is with a number, a letter, a checkmark, or a rubber stamp, grading is as ingrained in schools as desks and textbooks. Heflebower, Hoegh, and Warrick (2014) say, "Grading is the primary means of reporting feedback about a student's level of learning" (p. 3). Because grades are how we, as teachers, give feedback and because grades are one reason students strive to achieve, we must consider whether or not our grading practices are appropriate for students. Wormeli (2013a) says, "We think that using points and averaging mitigate our subjective opinion of students' achievement and are supposedly unbiased, when really, the reverse is true" (p. 297). Standards-based grading is what Heflewbower, Hoegh, and Warrick (2014) refer to as "the most appropriate method of grading" (p. 3). Standards-based grading differs from other systems such as norm-referenced grading practices, "which involve comparing one student's performance to other students' performance" and self-referenced grading, "which involves comparing a student's current performance to his or her past performance" (p. 3).

Problem of Practice

The identified problem of practice for the present qualitative action research involves the implementation of a new grading practice known as standards-based grading (SBG) at "Teasley High School" (THS) in an English II Honors classroom. At THS, student achievement on report cards is reported as a numerical average. Although teachers align instruction to clearly defined sets of standards, these numerical averages often include students' academic achievement in addition to other criteria such as attendance, organization, and behaviors. In the wake of the South Carolina Department

of Education's recent decision to implement a ten-point grading scale similar to one used by other states to replace its seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), THS aims to move to a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that is less about comparing students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The present Action Research was conducted by the participant-researcher who teaches ELA at the school and involves locating students' voices about these modifications to inform THS grading policy. I investigated my students' perceptions of SBG to determine how the report cards and grading practices at THS could more clearly reflect the principles of SBG in order to impact policy and give students a greater voice in assessments and grading practices. In addition, student-participants were invited to participate in the development of an action plan that invites input, discussion, and questions from all stakeholders, including parents/guardians, administrators, faculty, and students and encourages important conversations about grading reform that would benefit students of different academic, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Research Questions

In order to seek secondary ELA students' perceptions of standards-based grading (SBG), the following research questions framed the present study:

RQ1 What are secondary students' perceptions of standard grading practices in English II Honors?

RQ2 What are secondary students' perceptions of a standards-based grading report card practice in English II Honors?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this action research study is to describe tenth-grade students' perceptions of standard grading practices and standards-based grading practices at Teasley High School (THS). The secondary purpose is to address a lack of literature that examines gender as it relates to grading practices by describing the gender differences in students' perceptions and attitudes about grades. To coincide with the South Carolina Department of the Education's recent implementation of a 10-point grading scale to replace its previous seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), the school has begun to rethink its grading policies and is considering a move toward a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that rejects standard practices such as offering extra credit and allowing only one submission of an assignment and is less about comparing students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. This study sought to involve students in the process and invited them to participate in the development of an action plan that refines grading practices to more clearly and accurately communicate and reflect academic achievement.

Conceptual Framework

The framework for standards-based instruction and grading can be traced back to Tyler (1949/1969), who believed his contemporaries lacked understanding of the purposes of education. He says, "Many educational programs do not have clearly defined purposes. In some cases one may ask a teacher of science, of English, of social studies, or of some other subject what objectives are being aimed at and get no satisfactory reply" (p. 3). He argues that educators must clearly identify objectives and build everything else around those objectives: "These educational objectives become the criteria by which

5

materials are selected, instructional procedures are developed, and examinations are prepared" (p. 3).

Standards-based grading (SBG) builds on Tyler's (1949/1969) framework and encourages teachers to clarify their grading practices, to identify what is most important in the curriculum and to report achievement against those standards only. Grades related to behaviors can be reported separately (Guskey and Bailey, 2010). The goal is to clarify the meaning of grades and provide stakeholders with a clearer picture of student achievement.

Although SBG is primarily a grading practice, grading cannot be separated from instruction. SBG emphasizes the important pedagogical theory of differentiated instruction, "a collection of best practices strategically employed to maximize students' learning at every turn, including giving them the tool to handle anything that is undifferentiated" (Wormeli, 2006, p. 3). Because it utilizes curriculum standards, SBG can become easily entwined with the idea of standardized testing and other essentialist movements. According to Cohen (1999), "Essentialists believe that there is a common core of knowledge that needs to be transmitted to students in a systematic, disciplined way" (para. 3). Further, according to Spencer (2012), standards-based grading "was included in the No Child Left Behind Act as a suggested practice" (p. 5).

But to assume that because SBG promotes essentialism because it uses standards is to miss the fact that standards-based grading promotes a progressive, student-centered, differentiated approach that assumes not that one-size-fits-all but that each student has unique strengths and weaknesses. Though teachers design the objectives in a standards-based environment, they do so to provide instructional structure. Iamarino (2014) says,

An activity conducted in the philosophy of student-centered learning may lack direction if it is not designed to reinforce a particular standard; similarly, a standard may present itself as arbitrary if its achievement is not facilitated through engaging activities and lively dialogues. (p. 9)

The key to providing a student-centered education within an SBG classroom is to provide a variety of assessments to measure the mastery of those standards. Measuring every standard through a multiple-choice quiz or test will distort what makes standards-based grading the appropriate grading system. Teachers should allow students the chance to show mastery through progressive methods. Cohen (1999) says progressivism argues for students to be active learners. Progressivist pedagogical strategies can coexist with standards-based grading practices. As long as students provide sufficient evidence that meets the criteria outlined in a clearly defined rubric, teachers can accept a variety of artifacts. For example, an English teacher looking to assess students' vocabulary expertise may accept a short story that weaves vocabulary words in properly or a short digital skit that dramatizes the word. Either is acceptable because they reveal what the student knows. By allowing students this choice, teachers are recognizing that students are not the same and that they have different learning preferences and styles.

A classroom that integrates true SBG expects that students to be at different levels at different times. Teachers within these classrooms provide students with the support they need to be successful. Wormeli (2006) uses the example of two students sitting in the back of the room, one with perfect vision and one who requires corrective eyewear but is not wearing any currently. No educator would expect the nearsighted student to be able to complete an activity on the board at this point. The educator would either move

her student closer to the room or require the student to wear his glasses. Wormeli (2006) says, "When we give him his glasses, which are analogous to scaffolding (providing support), and differentiating, he is compelled to read the board and consider its content" (p. 6). A standards-based classroom does not average scores and assume that because the student has a B that she needs no more help. A standards-based grading classroom identifies and targets what the student still does not know and provides scaffolded instruction to ensure that the student is receiving the best education possible.

SBG is heavily influenced by Benjamin Bloom's theory of mastery learning. According to Guskey (2010), Bloom believed that despite learning differences, all students could achieve high levels of mastery under optimal learning conditions. Guskey (2010) says,

> In using this strategy, teachers organize the important concepts and skills they want students to acquire into learning units, each requiring about a week or two of instructional time. Following high-quality initial instruction, teachers administer a formative assessment . . . that identifies precisely what students have learned well and where they still need additional work. (p. 53)

Consider, then, the approach to SBG implementation outlined by Heflebower, Hoegh, and Warrick (2014), which asks educators to identify the most important standards, identify the best instructional practices to meet those standards, and administer an assessment "aligned with prioritized standards and proficiency scales to ensure that they are accurately and fairly measuring the prioritized standards" (p. 38). If a student fails to meet the standard, he is given the opportunity to try again. Heflebower, Hoegh, and Warrick (2014) echo Guskey's (2010) summation of Bloom's mastery learning theory

8

when they say, "Mastery may take longer for some students, and other students may simply need multiple opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills" (p. 51).

Key Words

Formative assessment: Formative assessments are assessments "used while instruction is occurring" (Marzano, 2010, p. 8). These assessments provide teachers with feedback to improve instruction and to meet the needs of students.

Grade: According to Guskey and Jung (2013), "[G]rades are the symbols, words, or numerals that teachers assign to evidence on student learning to signify different levels of achievement" (p. 64). Grades can be words, letters, numbers, and check marks, and can be used on either formative or summative assessments.

Mastery: According to Wormeli (2006), "Students have mastered content when they can demonstrate a thorough understanding as evidenced by doing something substantive with the content beyond merely echoing it. Anyone can repeat information; it's the masterful student who can break content into its component pieces, explain it and alternative perspectives regarding it cogently to others, and use it purposefully in new situations" (p. 12). The term is used in this dissertation to refer to a student's ability to meet or exceed the expectations set forth in a publicly declared standards document.

Norm-referenced grading: According to Heflebower, Hoegh, and Warrick (2014), norm-referenced grading "involves comparing one student's performance to other students' performance" (p. 3).

Points-based grading: According to Iamarino (2014), points-based grading occurs when "points are allocated to individual assignments, and students earn them as they go" (p. 1).

Report card: A document developed by a teacher and sent home to parents and/or guardians at pre-determined intervals (e.g., every six weeks, every nine weeks) that declares a student's grade in his or her classes.

Standard: According to Guskey and Jung (2013), "Student learning standards are statements that describe what educators want students to learn and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school" (p. 2). Thus, for the purposes of this study, a standard represents a specific learning goal within the classroom (e.g., The student will be able to combine sentences using a coordinating conjunction and a comma where and when appropriate).

Standards-based grading or *standards-based reporting*: According to Heflebower, Hoegh, and Warrick (2014), "Standards-based grading is a system of assessing and reporting that describes student progress in relation to standards" (p. 3). This may also be referred to as SBG or SBR.

Standards-based report card: A report card that "breaks down each subject area or course into specific elements of learning" (Guskey & Bailey, 2010, p. 7).

Summative assessment: Wormeli (2006) says summative assessments are assessments that are done "after the learning experiences; usually requires students to demonstrate mastery of all the essential understandings" (p. 200). Some scholars, including Wormeli (2006), argue that this is the only assessment that should be used in determining grades.

Methodology

Action Research

This study was conducted using action research. Mertler (2014) divides action research into four parts: planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. He says, "Within

10

this framework … action research is a recursive, cyclical process that typically does not proceed in a linear fashion" (p. 16). Within action research, emphasis is placed on the classroom teacher's perspective and experience. Unlike traditional research, which may be difficult to connect to practice, action research "is designed, conducted, and implemented by the teachers themselves to improve teaching in their own classrooms" (Quang and Hang, 2008, p. 203-204). Thus, the primary goal is immediate application to my own classroom, though my hope is that other teachers will find my results practical, applicable, and beneficial.

Participants

Participants in this study were 15 students in one fall 2016 English II Honors class. There were 16 total students in the class, although one declined to participate. Of those 15, 13 identify as White and middle class. I used a Likert scale to determine 15 students' perceptions of standard grading practices. I then chose five students who represented the White, middle-class make-up of the class, and I conducted two semi-structured interviews with those students.

Setting

The present action research study was conducted at "Teasley High School" (THS), a rural high school in the Upstate of South Carolina. THS serves approximately 900 students across the socioeconomic spectrum but is primarily White. The student-participants were selected from a sophomore-levels English II Honors class.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in fall 2016. First, I distributed a Likert scale to 15 students in a section of English II Honors. All 15 students responded to the Likert scale.

11

I used the results of the Likert scale to develop and refine semi-structured interview questions. I chose five of the 15 student-participants and conducted two semi-structured interviews. The first asked students to consider their perceptions of standard teacher grading practices. Following that, I developed a standards-based grading (SBG) report card for each of the five-student participants and distributed it to them close to the time they received a four-and-a-half weeks standard report card from the school. During the second semi-structured interview, I asked students to consider the differences between the two report cards and to consider their preferences. I analyzed the interview transcripts for patterns and themes, which are reported in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Working with alongside four of the five student-participants, I used data to develop an action plan designed to revise and refine standard grading practices at THS.

Findings

Through this action research study, I found that students in English II Honors were overwhelmingly comfortable with standard grading practices. Although there was some dissent, student-participants overall find standard grading practices to be accurate, clear, and fair. This was true for both males and females. I also found that student-participants were receptive to a SBG report card as a complement to but not in place of a standard report card. My analysis of students' responses, as well as a careful consideration of students' identities, revealed that although there may be no gender differences when considering students' perceptions of grading practices, racial and socioeconomic identities do shape these perceptions. For a sample of White, middle-class English II Honors students, all of whom are bound for a four-year institution of higher education, standard grading practices are appropriate and preferred.

Potential Weaknesses

The nature of action research necessitates it be conducted with a local population—in this class, my English II Honors class. Because of this, it would be irresponsible to suggest the findings of this study are generalizable. The findings of this study can and will be used to inform potential changes to practices and policies at my school, but they should be used a starting point for further exploration.

The sample population that I used was primarily White and middle-class and all are in an honors classroom, which suggests academic, racial, and socioeconomic privileges that may not be evident in other classrooms. A study conducted in a class where half the students have limited English proficiency, live in poverty, or are a part of a traditionally marginalized ethnic or racial group will likely produce different results. Further study is needed at this school to ensure all students are being appropriately served.

The Significance of the Study

This action research study was designed and conducted to provide information about students' perceptions of grading practices. The findings were used to develop an action plan that has the potential to alter the way grades are recorded and communicated at THS. The findings of this study can be used to inform teachers' practices and to ensure that students are receiving fair and accurate grades, ones that communicate more clearly what they are able to do.

As the participant-researcher, I intended for this action research study to provide insight into how males and females differed in the way they viewed teachers' grading practices. This study provided no indication that there is a difference, at least in this

particular English II Honors class. Instead, the findings illustrated the way that racial and socioeconomic identities and privileges shape the way students view school. The five interviewed student-participants are all White and all middle-class, and they each reported comfort with and confidence in standard grading and school practices. The findings of this study suggest a need to continually revisit the ways in which privilege outside of school affects privilege in school; further, the findings suggest more research should be done to determine how attitudes might be different in a more academically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse classroom.

Conclusion

This action research study sought to identify students' perceptions of standard teacher grading practices and of a standards-based grading (SBG) report card. Using action research methodology as described by Mertler (2014), I surveyed 15 English II Honors students and then chose five of those 15 to participate in two semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that these particular English II Honors students are not against making changes to grading policies but that they are comfortable with the standard policies. An analysis and interpretation of the findings indicates the ways that racial and socioeconomic privileges shape students' perceptions of school.

The four remaining chapters of this dissertation expand upon the information presented in this chapter:

Chapter Two of this dissertation provides a review of related literature. I attempt to provide a context in which to place the present action research study by identifying the historical and theoretical context that has given rise to both standard grading and SBG practices.

Chapter Three of this dissertation provides a detailed description of this study's action research methodology. It explains in detail how, when, where, and from whom the data was collected.

Chapter Four of this dissertation reports the findings of this study. It includes a discussion of the identified themes and patterns that emerged from this study. In addition, Chapter Four offers an analysis and interpretation of the findings, exploring how the study's findings can be closely tied to the racial and socioeconomic identities of the student-participants.

Chapter Five of this dissertation summarizes the findings of the study and then presents an action plan based on those findings. This action plan can be used by my school and school district to reform grading polices and procedures over a four-year period. The chapter also provides suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of Chapter Two: Literature Review is to report the scholarly literature related to the topic of standards-based grading (SBG) as well as to delineate the key concepts and terms related to SBG. Too many standardized tests and too much accompanying data have distorted the value of having educational standards and goals have often been misused to punish students and teachers under the guise of accountability. If teachers wish to reclaim accountability, to demonstrate that they are challenging students and helping them learn, then they must do a stronger job of reporting the fruits of their labor. A shift in grading practices from a single, numerical grade to a disaggregated, standards-based system may be a step in the right direction.

According to Tovani (2011), the following scenario mirrors the standard grading practice in gradebooks and on report cards in the USA, which account for extra credit in the form of non-academic tasks (such as good behavior), and a truth about grades in contemporary classrooms: Tate, her mother Colleen, and Tate's science teacher Mr. X, depict SBG. While looking over Tate's grades, her Colleen noticed that Tate had received a zero in the gradebook for her assignment labeled, "Kleenex Box." A classroom teacher herself, Colleen contacted Mr. X with sympathy but requested that, "Going forward, I would appreciate if Tate's grade only reflected her understanding of science" (p. 130). Tovani says, "I would bet Tate's science teacher doesn't value tissues

more than his students' knowledge of biology. Yet his grading practice sends a different message" (p. 130). Tate's grade is in no way an accurate reflection of what skills and/or content Tate has mastered. Rather than communicating Tate's abilities in relation to standards and standard mastery, the teacher is reporting diluted grades.

Educators are often quick to denounce standardized tests and what they measure or fail to measure, but there is a certain level of irony given that classroom grades are often as meaningless and as punitive as standardized tests scores. Guskey (2015) argues that despite advances in developing assessments, grading and reporting practices are "seemingly immune to reform efforts" (p. 4). Guskey and Jung (2013) say that educators lack an agreed upon purpose for grading. Contemporary educators often seek to align assessments with standards, yet grades are reported using a combination of "scores from major exams, compositions, quizzes, projects, and reports, along with evidence from homework, punctuality in turning in assignments, class participation, work habits, and effort . . . The result is a *hodgepodge grade*" (Guskey & Jung, 2013, p. 93). What happens, according to Guskey and Jung (2013), is "that merging these diverse sources of evidence distorts the meaning of any grade" (p. 93). This has led educators to adopt a grading system that provides students with multiple grades rather than a single, diluted letter or percentage grade. This is the framework for standards-based grading, a type of grading that Scriffiny (2008) argues "should *replace* traditional points-based grades" (p. 70).

Problem of Practice

The identified problem of practice for the present qualitative action research involves the implementation of a new grading practice known as standards-based grading

(SBG) at "Teasley High School" (THS) in an English II Honors classroom. At THS, student achievement on report cards is reported as a numerical average. Although teachers align instruction to clearly defined sets of standards, these numerical averages often include students' academic achievement in addition to other criteria such as attendance, organization, and behaviors. In the wake of the South Carolina Department of Education's recent decision to implement a ten-point grading scale similar to one used by other states to replace its seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), THS aims to move to a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that is less about comparing students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The present Action Research was conducted by the participant-researcher who teaches ELA at the school and involves locating students' voices about these modifications to inform THS grading policy. I investigated my students' perceptions of SBG to determine how the report cards and grading practices at THS could more clearly reflect the principles of SBG in order to impact policy and give students a greater voice in assessments and grading practices. In addition, student-participants were invited to participate in the development of an action plan that invites input, discussion, and questions from all stakeholders, including parents/guardians, administrators, faculty, and students and encourages important conversations about grading reform that would benefit students of different academic, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Research Questions

In order to seek secondary ELA students' perceptions of standards-based grading (SBG), the following research questions framed the present study:

RQ1 What are secondary students' perceptions of standard grading practices in English II Honors?

RQ2 What are secondary students' perceptions of a standards-based grading report card practice in English II Honors?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this action research study is to describe tenth-grade students' perceptions of standard grading practices and standards-based grading practices at Teasley High School (THS). The secondary purpose is to address a lack of literature that examines gender as it relates to grading practices by describing the gender differences in students' perceptions and attitudes about grades. To coincide with the South Carolina Department of the Education's recent implementation of a 10-point grading scale to replace its previous seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), the school has begun to rethink its grading policies and is considering a move toward a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that rejects standard practices such as offering extra credit and allowing only one submission of an assignment and is less about comparing students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. This study sought to involve students in the process and invited them to participate in the development of an action plan that refines grading practices to more clearly and accurately communicate and reflect academic achievement.

Purpose of a Literature Review

A literature review is a key element in the dissertation process. Mertler (2014) says, "By reviewing related literature, you can identify a topic, narrow its focus, and gather information for developing a research design as well as the overall project" (p. 60).

Leedy and Ormrod (2005) argue that researchers should become extremely familiar with their chosen topics: "As a researcher, you should know the literature about your topic *very, very well.* . . . Simply put, the more you know about investigations and perspectives related to your topic, the more effectively you can tackle your own research problem" (pp. 64-65).

Mertler (2014) argues that researchers must be mindful of four things: the sheer volume of literature available, the objectivity of the literature, the publication year, and the amount of literature needed for an acceptable literature review. Researchers must carefully consider each of these elements as they attempt to uncover quality, objective, contemporary literature. The researcher's goal is to frame his or her own study using reputable literature. Mertler (2014) suggests doctoral students use at least fifty sources for their dissertations. He says that students can be fairly confident that they have done a thorough job when they "begin to see the same articles and the same authors being cited in those articles. When you begin to recognize the big names in the field, you can be more confident that you most likely have not missed any substantial information" (p. 63). Leedy and Ormrod (2005) echo similar sentiments about coming to the end of a literature review:

> Look for repetitive patterns in the materials you are finding and reading. As you
> read more and more sources, eventually familiar arguments, methodologies, and
> findings will start to appear. . . . When you are no longer encountering new
> viewpoints, then you may be reasonably sure that you are familiar with the critical
> parts of the literature. (p. 76)

<center>**Theoretical Foundations**</center>

Ralph Tyler's Curriculum Design

Guskey and Jung (2013) say, "Many people, both inside and outside of education, believe the push to define standards and clarify learning goals is a recent development in education" (p. 8). While the debate may have intensified recently, particularly with the creation and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (Ravitch, 2014; Thomas, 2014), these concepts are hardly new. The theoretical framework of standards-based grading precedes the use of the phrase.

Tyler (1949) argued that his contemporaries lacked understanding of the purposes of education. He says, "Many educational programs do not have clearly defined purposes. In some cases one may ask a teacher of science, of English, of social studies, or of some other subject what objectives are being aimed at and get no satisfactory reply" (p. 3). Guskey (1994) says, "In his writings, Tyler considered the specification of educational purposes to be synonymous with the process of defining 'educational objectives'" (p. 3). Guskey and Jung (2013)'s definition of standard—"statements that describe what educators want students to learn and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school" (p. 2)—mirrors Guskey's (1994) explanation of Tyler's objectives: "To Tyler, objectives were broadly defined as conceptions of what we want students to learn and what they should be able to do as a result of learning" (p. 3). Thus, Tyler's curriculum design is the theoretical precursor to a standards-based classroom.

Tyler (1949/1969) argues that everything within an instructional environment depends upon clearly identified objectives or standards: "These educational objectives become the criteria by which materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional

<center>21</center>

procedures are developed and tests and examinations are prepared" (p. 3). Contemporary leaders of standards-based curriculum design and standards-based grading echo Tyler's argument that the standards be identified before any other decisions are made. For example, Wormeli (2006) says,

> We do everything we can to avoid being cryptic with our lesson's objectives. It's similar to the real world: We don't pull our car with faulty breaks into a mechanic's shop and tell the mechanic, 'There's something wrong with this car. If you can figure out what it is and fix it, I'll pay you.' In the real world, we always know what the outcome is supposed to be. (p. 21)

Wormeli (2006) believes that this transparency is tied to student achievement: "Students achieve more when they have a clear picture of expectations" (p. 21). This can only be done when the teachers themselves have a clear picture of those expectations.

Similarly, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) advocate for a "backward design model" that "begins with the end in mind and designs toward that end" (p. 338). They theoretically justify their position by referencing Tyler (1949/1969), who says, "The purpose of a statement of objectives is to indicate the kinds of changes in the student to be brought about so that instructional activities can be planned and developed in a way likely to attain these objectives" (p. 45). The goal with this type of design is not to standardize the curriculum but rather to bring "clarity and precision to education improvement efforts" (Guskey & Jung, 2013, p. 98). For these educators and researchers, a standards-based classroom is one in which both teachers and students are aware of the expectations and goals of both teaching and learning.

22

A final, defining characteristic of Tyler's (1949/1969) approach to curriculum design is that it must be a unified effort:

> If a school-wide program of curriculum reconstruction is undertaken, it is necessary that there be widespread faculty participation. . . . Unless the objectives are clearly understood by each teacher, unless he is familiar with the kinds of learning experiences that can be used to attain these objectives, and unless he is able to guide the activities of students so that they will get these experiences, the educational program will not be an effective instrument for promoting the aims of the school. (p. 126)

Tyler's insistence that curriculum overhaul be a faculty effort rather than a team effort is important to the modern grade reform movement because one pressing issue is the inconsistency in grading and reporting among faculty members within the school. Guskey and Bailey (2010) argue that grading practices "vary considerably from teacher to teacher, especially in the perceived meaning of grades and in the factors considered in determining grades" (p. 224). Wormeli (2013a) argues, "Curriculum inconsistency runs through every subject," and that this inconsistency explains why a student in one class may receive the grade of C while the same assessment evidence will lead to an A for another in another class (p. 257). To remedy these inconsistencies, faculty members must be in agreement as to what standards should be measured and as to what evidence they will accept as mastery—the extent to which a student meets or exceeds established expectations—of the standard (Wormeli 2013a). As previously noted, this will not standardize the curriculum—as is explained elsewhere in this DiP, standards-based classrooms should encourage differentiated, individualized instruction (Guskey & Jung,

23

2013; Wormeli, 2006; Wormeli, 2013a; Wormeli, 2013b)—but will instead create clarity and consistency in reporting.

Essentialism

Because of its emphasis on standards, standards-based grading is rooted in an essentialist philosophy of education (Bagley, 1938; Cohen, 1999; Roberson & Woody, 2012; Spring, 2014). Cohen (1999) says, "Essentialists believe that there is a common core of knowledge that needs to be transmitted to students in a systematic, disciplined way. The core of the curriculum is essential knowledge and skills and academic rigor" (para. 3). Roberson and Woody (2012) say, "That is, teaching those subjects and points of knowledge that are essential for students to know" (p. 209). According to Cohen (1999) this movement began in 1938 with William Bagley. Bagley attempted to reclaim education from progressive educators such as John Dewey.

The essentialist philosophy is considered a teacher-centered philosophy. Cohen (1999) says, "Students should be taught hard work, respect for authority, and discipline. Teachers are to help students keep their non-productive instincts in check, such as aggression or mindlessness" (para. 3). Essentialists argue for standards-based education and suggest that these standards should be developed to help prepare students for the world outside of school.

Although standards-based grading advocates do not necessarily advocate essentialist, teacher-centered pedagogy, they do adhere to the essentialist philosophy of having clearly defined, essential curricular goals. Wormeli (2006) argues that in both planning and reflecting on instruction, teachers should consider "what is essential and enduring" for students to learn (p. 24). Guskey and Jung (2013) leave no doubt as to

24

their belief about the importance of having clear learning standards for students: "To improve our success in education and have more students learning better . . . We must commit ourselves to make these important decisions about the learning standards we expect students to achieve" (p. 10).

Mastery Learning

In the 1960s, while studying teachers, Bloom, who had studied under Tyler, noticed something: "teachers displayed very little variation in their instructional practices" (Guskey, 2007, p. 10). Bloom logically concluded that in order to reach all students, teachers must vary their instruction. Based on these findings, Bloom developed a theory known as learning for mastery, or as it later became known, mastery learning (Guskey, 2007).

Bloom noted that teachers typically organized material into an instructional unit, gave an assessment, and assigned grades. Guskey (1994) says, these assessments also represent "their one and only chance to demonstrate what they have learned" (p. 8). For students, the test or quiz signaled the end of the learning process. Bloom found that only twenty percent of students really learned in these conditions (Guskey, 1994). Mastery learning, however, called for a different approach. While teachers would still develop instructional units with a final test at the end, they would provide more frequent formative assessments "designed to give students information, or feedback, on their learning" (Guskey, 2007, p. 12). Rather than signaling the end of learning, these assessments were design to enable learning to take place. Used properly, they identified student strengths and weaknesses and allowed teachers to vary instruction based on student needs. Guskey (1994) says, "Because these suggested corrective activities are

25

specific to each item or set of prompts within the assessment, students need to work only on those concepts not yet mastered" (p. 10). Students who demonstrate mastery early in the unit are provided with enrichment activities to enhance their skills and knowledge.

Bloom argued that teachers should administer a second formative assessment to gauge whether or not the instructional interventions were successful and to motivate students to succeed (Guskey, 2007). Rather than labeling students failures because they did not understand a concept immediately, mastery learning provides students opportunities to grow into the sought-after mastery. Bloom's ultimate goal with mastery learning was simple yet certainly challenging: "Through this process of formative classroom assessments, combined with the regular correction of individual learning errors, Bloom believed all students could be provided with more instruction than is possible under traditional approaches to teaching" (Guskey, 2007, p. 14).

Elements of Bloom's mastery learning theory are evident in standards-based grading practices. Iamarino (2014) embraces the use of formative assessment so intensely that she uses it as a synonym for standards-based grading. This usage is inconsistent with the other literature, though it helps demonstrate just how closely linked mastery learning is to standards-based grading. A more literature-consistent approach that shows the influence of mastery learning on standards-based grading can be found in Wormeli (2006). He suggests organizing units with the end already in mind, going so far as to "give students the end-of-unit test on the first day of teaching the unit" (p. 21). The reason is to clarify the objectives and standards that students are expected to meet. He then suggests developing pre-assessments and formative assessments. A pre-assessment is "used to indicate students' readiness for content and skill development, and to guide

instructional decisions" and a formative assessment is designed to "provide ongoing and helpful feedback" (Wormeli, 2006, p. 27). Wormeli (2006) suggests using a variety of strategies to assess students' abilities, offering them multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know. Students who have shown mastery are allowed to move forward. Wormeli (2006) says, "With these students, we compact the curriculum to a shorter time frame, then do something different, often something connected to the unit of study that everyone else is studying, while the rest of the class continues with the regular unit" (p. 142). This mirrors Bloom's suggestion within the mastery learning framework that students who mastered objectives should engage in enrichment activities. Student grades are then reported against the standards, not as a numerical average. One goal of this action research study was to see how students at THS would respond to having their grades reported against standards rather than as a number. From there, students would be able to better understand where they most need enrichment.

Differentiated Instruction and Grading

The challenge within a standards-based classroom—one where not only instruction but also grading is based on educational standards determined at the local, state, or national level—is to honor individual student differences while still striving toward the goals and objectives embedded within the publically declared standards. To do this, Wormeli (2006) argues that teachers must use differentiation or differentiated instruction, "a collection of best practices strategically employed to maximize students' learning at every turn, including giving them the tools to handle anything that is undifferentiated" (p. 3). Tomlinson and Strickland (2005) define it this way: "As we use the term . . . 'differentiated instruction' refers to a systematic approach to planning

27

curriculum and instruction for academically diverse learners" (p. 6). In short, these authors argue that teachers must recognize the uniqueness of each student's experience, interest, and readiness level.

Tomlinson and Strickland (2005) argue, "there is neither economy nor efficiency in teaching in ways that are awkward for learners when we can teach in ways that make learning more natural" (p. 7). Differentiation, Wormeli (2006) says, recognizes that "students learn at a different pace, in a different manner, with different tools, and while immersed in different cultures" (p. 196). Differentiated instructional practices range from providing preferential seating to providing calculators for students to moving nearsighted students to the front of the room to allowing students to retake failed assessments to using analogies based on student interest to explain a difficult concepts to many other possibilities (Wormeli, 2006; 2013c).

Differentiated instruction fits comfortably within a standards-based framework. Wormeli (2006) argues that when designing a curriculum, teachers must first identify the intended outcomes of the course and/or instructional unit. He says that "great differentiated assessment is never kept in the dark; it always begins with clearly understood, developmentally appropriate mastery" (p. 21). That phrase "developmentally appropriate" informs his framework for differentiation. Without carefully considering "what we know about the specific students we serve," teachers may end up with an exciting but still undifferentiated lesson (Wormeli, 2006, p. 20). Jung and Guskey (2012) agree that appropriate standards for each student must first be identified, particularly when considering how teachers will measure, grade, and report student learning:

28

Instead of asking "How should I measure . . . ?" at the end of the marking period, a far better approach is for teachers to ask, "What should I measure?" at the beginning of the marking period. In other words, teams of educators working collaboratively should decide up front what are the most appropriate standards to measure for each student. Once these standards have been identified, measuring students' performance in relation to those standards can be clear, consistent, and equitable. (p. 38)

Identifying these appropriate standards allows teachers to begin the process of planning the appropriate instruction for each student. It also allows teachers to determine what evidence of standard mastery they will accept. It is important to recognize that unless a standard calls for the student to produce a specific artifact, (e.g., "The student will be able to write a persuasive essay") teachers should allow students choice in how they demonstrate standard mastery. Wormeli (2006) says, "There are many students who don't speak the 'language' of the assessment we give them" (p. 122). Because of this, teachers "must be sure that the assessment format reveals the truth about a student's proficiency" (Wormeli, 2006, p. 123). If students can meet a standard in multiple ways, it would be irresponsible not to let them find a way that best demonstrates what they know and can do.

Differentiating and recognizing the uniqueness of each student affects not only the instructional process but also the grading and reporting process. This is not always an easy task for teachers. Jung and Guskey (2012) argue that teachers do not receive enough help in learning how to grade struggling learners. Many teachers "arrive at the end of a grading period asking questions such as, 'How do I accurately measure what my students

have learned and are able to do?' and 'How do I fairly report that level of performance?'" (Jung & Guskey, 2012, p. 37). Wormeli (2013b) provides information on how a standards-based grading system can help answer those questions, suggesting that teachers can provide alternative tests that cover fewer standards to students. Teachers are challenged with "keep[ing] track of which objectives/standards have been mastered and work with students in tiered lessons on the objective they have not yet mastered" (Wormeli, 2013b, p. 298). Here, the emphasis is not on an overall test score as it is in a points-based classroom; instead, it is on standard mastery with the understanding that "it doesn't matter where in the grading period a student demonstrates mastery. To require all students to demonstrate mastery on Tuesday of this particular week at 10:00 a.m. in this particular format is absurd" (Wormeli, 2013b, p. 298).

Standards-based grading and reporting within a differentiated classroom is not always as simple as allowing additional time or leveling assessments to meet student needs. Jung and Guskey (2012) utilize a five-step Inclusive Grading Model, which is designed to help teachers accurately report standards-based grades within a differentiated classroom.

Step one "involves considering *each* reporting standard for the grade level and deciding whether or not an adaptation to the standard is required for the student" (Jung and Guskey, 2012, p. 38). If an educational team consisting of both educators and parents determines that the student may not meet standard during the school term, an adaptation may be necessary.

Step two involves determining "whether those adaptations are *accommodations* or

modifications" (Jung and Guskey, 2012, p. 40). An accommodation is an adaptation that does not change the standard but provides an alternate method of demonstrating mastery of that standard. This may involve allowing reading test questions to a student. A modification, however, "is an adaptation to the curriculum that fundamentally alters the grade-level expectation" (Jung and Guskey, 2012, p. 41). This is not simply a modal change; it is a curricular one that modifies the expectation to best suit the student.

Step three involves "establish[ing] modified expectations that student will be able to achieve with appropriate services or supports" (p. 42). Jung and Guskey (2012) say, "Modified expectations should be directly linked to the grade-level standards" (p. 42). For example, a team may determine that a fifth-grade student is not ready to use fifth-grade vocabulary, but that they expect him to use fourth-grade vocabulary. The expectation is still linked to vocabulary, but it is modified to meet the needs of the individual student.

Step four involves "assign[ing] report card grades *based on the modified expectation*" (p. 45). Students who receive accommodations are measured against the same grade-level standard as those who do not. In a standards-based grading system, reporting removes behavioral elements that traditionally influence grades, so a student who receives an accommodation should not have his grade "lowered because he responded orally" nor should he have his grade raised "based on his attitude, effort, progress, or any other factor that is not a part of every other student's product or achievement grade" (p. 44). Students who receive modifications, however, should be graded against the modified standard. If a student received a language arts modification that said she would be able to identify nouns and verbs rather than use them in a sentence,

she should be graded based on that standard; her grade should not be lowered because it is not grade-level nor should it be raised because behaviors.

Step five involves communicating the grades and what they mean. Jung and Guskey (2012) say, "It is important to remember that some special notation, such as a superscript number or an asterisk, should be included on the report card and permanent record (or transcript) beside *each* grade that is based on modified standards" (p. 45). Wormeli (2013b) echoes the need for the asterisk and encourages the use of "a narrative comment . To explain the adjustment" (p. 296). Jung and Guskey (2012) remind educators that transcripts cannot include phrases such as "special education goals" or "IEP goals" for legal reasons (p. 46). These phrases are acceptable on a report card, but the authors prefer using phrases such as "based on modified standard" for both transcripts and report cards "since they can be used for students who need modifications for a variety of reasons" (Jung & Guskey, 2012, p. 46).

When implemented correctly, standards-based instruction and grading recognizes each student's individual nature, and differentiates both instruction and grading accordingly. It provides a framework for challenging, rigorous instruction that understands students learn differently and need responsive teaching.

Student Understanding of Grades

Despite extensive research about what constitutes effective grading practices, a relatively small amount of that research addresses students' understanding of grades. Here, "students' understanding" refers to students knowledge of why they received the grade they did and whether or not they feel as if it is an accurate reflection of their abilities. The studies that do exist focus primarily on higher education rather than

secondary education, the focus of this dissertation, although even those studies are uncommon. Boatwright-Horowitz and Arruda (2013) say, "Only a few researchers have examined students' expectations about grades, including the discrepancy between instructor and student beliefs about the basis of grading" (p. 254). Adams (2005) says, "Although faculty and students agree that grades should reflect achievement performance, they do not agree on the relative impact effort should have on grades" (pp. 21-22). Based on his research, he determined that "students consistently believed effort should account for significantly more of a final course grade than did faculty" even though some faculty members believed "that hard-working students deserved some kind of reward for their efforts" (Adams, 2005, p. 23).

According to Guskey (2015), the students Adams studied believed that process criteria—that is, grading criteria that considers "*how* students got there" and criteria such as "responsibility, effort, or work habits" (p. 74)—is as important as product criteria— that is, the "summative evaluation of student achievement and performance" (p. 74). In other words, the students in Adams' study believed that their behaviors were as important as their performance on major assessments. Zinn et al. (2011) conducted a similar study to Adams'and found similar results:

> Results of our study were similar to those of Adams (2005), who found that in a situation describing high effort and low performance faculty ascribed approximately 17% of the grade to effort, whereas students designated a much higher 38% to effort. In our study, faculty reported that effort should count for approximately 13% of the grade compared to students' suggestions of around 39%. (p. 14)

Some of the disconnect between grades reported and grades expected comes when teachers do not communicate clearly their expectations. Gordon and Fay (2010) found that students were willing to accept responsibility for their own grades if they felt the teacher helped them perform well on tests. Gordon and Fay say, "When students have greater opportunity to prepare for tests, it is more likely that they will take credit for the grades they receive" (p. 96). This does not mean that they are always happy with their grades. Students within the same study valued teachers who provided opportunities to increase their grade: "For example, allowing students to perform additional work to shore up poor grades may rectify the effects of a 'bad day at the office,' during which a major test was administered" (Gordon & Fay, 2010, p. 97).

Ultimately, this research from Gordon and Fay (2010) indicates that students want clear communication of expectations and they want their effort honored while teachers want to place more emphasis on the end product. A standards-based grading system would allow each of those wishes to be honored. Grading criteria would be explicitly defined, and both product and process criteria—alongside progress criteria, which "is how much students gain from their learning experiences" (Guskey, 2015, p. 75)—would be reported. The difference is that rather than reporting them in one single grade, they could be reported individually. Guskey and Bailey (2010) provide the most extensive explanation of how to do this effectively. They argue,

> A practical solution to the problems associated with these different [product, process, and progress] learning goals, and one used by increasing numbers of teachers and schools as they develop standards-based report cards, is to report *separate* grades or marks on each set of goals. In other words, after establishing

explicit indicators of product, process, and progress learning goals, teachers

assign a separate grade or mark to each. In this way, the grades or marks assigned

to demonstrations of study skills, work habits, efforts, or learning progress are

kept distinct from those representing assessments of achievement and

performance. (p. 53)

By utilizing the principles associated with standards-based grading and reporting, Guskey

and Bailey (2010) seek to reconcile the philosophies that other researchers have

identified, thus making reporting clearer and more accurate.

Historical Foundations

Grading After the One-Room Schoolhouse

Although contemporary public schools group students by age, that was not always

the case. According to Spring (2014), "One of the major organizational changes in the

schools in the nineteenth century . . . was the division of students into separate

classrooms" (p. 152). Prior to this division, schools placed students in a one-room

schoolhouse with one teacher. Spring (2014) explains that schoolrooms in Boston were

built to house as many as 300 students. The method for reporting student progress was

drastically different from today. Teachers reported their students' progress not through

report cards such as the one modern educators are familiar with but through

conversations with parents, "usually during visits to students' homes" (Guskey, 2015, p.

24).

The shift from the one-room schoolhouse to the age-graded classroom (which was

not a nationwide shift given that, according to Spring [2014], "Many rural areas retained

one-room schoolhouses, and in 1920 there were still 200,000 of them [p. 153])

35

necessitated a shift in, among other things, how student progress was reported. Guskey (2015) says that teachers began to use "formal progress evaluations of students' achievement in school. In these evaluations, teachers simply wrote down the skills each student had mastered and those on which additional work was needed" (p. 24). This type of narrative reporting continued in elementary schools, but high schools, which were becoming increasingly subject-specific, moved toward percentage grading. According to Guskey (2015), "This was the beginning of the grading and reporting systems that exist today" (p. 24).

Guskey (2015) acknowledges the logic of the shift to percentage grades, noting that it "seemed a natural result of the increased demands on high school teachers, who now faced classrooms with growing numbers of students" (pp. 24-25). Yet this logic did not erase concerns, and researchers began addressing the problems at the turn of the 20th century. Starch and Elliott (1912) were particularly concerned with the educational research that suggested a "wide variation and the utter absence of standards in the assignment of values" (p. 442). Essentially, they recognized that there was a stark difference in the way teachers graded or marked assignments; their research confirmed this truth. They gave the same two English papers to different teachers and different schools. Their results showed the following:

> Teachers usually state, when asked about differences in marking, that the grades of the same paper assigned by different teachers might differ at the most 10 points. It is almost shocking to a mind of more than ordinary exactness to find that the range of marks given by different teachers to the same paper may be as large as 35 or 40 points. (p. 454)

36

Guskey (2015) argues, "Some teachers focused on elements of grammar and style, neatness, spelling, and punctuation, while others considered only how well the message of the paper was communicated" (p. 25). In short, teachers were wildly inconsistent in how they approached the same paper, revealing the need for more specific assessment criteria. To prove that the findings applied not simply to English papers, according to Guskey (2015) a team of math researchers known as Starch and Elliott in 1912, conducted a similar study the following year using geometry papers and "found even *greater* variation in mathematics percentage grades" (p. 25).

Nearly 100 years after Starch and Elliot's first study, Brimi (2011) conducted a similar study. He asked, "Would teachers across the district, having received the same training, assign the same paper grades that lie within a range similar to the ranges shown in the Starch and Elliot (1912) study?" (p. 6). The results were startling: "Despite several sessions of training in using the same grading methods, these participants awarded final scores that were as discrepant as those recorded in the Starch and Elliot (1912) study" (Brimi, 2011, p. 6).

If the research from across a century clearly indicates that there is an issue with assessment, why have no strides been made to establish better criteria for assessment, grading, and reporting? There are perhaps two best answers to that question. The first is that the 100-point scale most commonly used in schools and from which educators derive percentage grades has been used for so long that to move away from it would violate tradition. Guskey and Jung (2013) say that parents and guardians "can also be some of the most adamant opponents" of grading reform because they are "comfortable with traditional report cards that offer a single grade for each subject or course" (p. 112). This

is despite the fact that, as Starch and Elliott (1912) and Brimi (2011) stated, single grades are often inconsistent and misleading. The other best answer for why grading has not been changed is because of the ease of record keeping. Computer-based gradebooks have made recording single percentage grades easy. Guskey (2015) says that "the resurgence of percentage grades appears due mainly to the increased use of technology in grading and the partialities of computer technicians [who design the programs]" (p. 26).

While undoubtedly steeped in 20th century tradition and easier to record, percentage grades do more harm than good to students. As seen in Starch and Elliott (1912), grades reported as a single number can have damaging effects on students. Though their language choice is the language of their contemporaries and not of ours, they offer a sobering thought when they examine the implications of poor grading practices: "Therefore it may be easily reasoned that the promotion or retardation of a pupil depends to a considerable extent upon the subjective estimate of his teacher" (Starch & Elliott, 1912, p. 454). As educators, we must recognize the power of the grade and work to ensure its accuracy.

Standards-Based Education in America

Although *The Tyler Rationale* (1949) established the theoretical basis for standards-based education as early as 1949, the term "standards" only became ubiquitous in the 1980s. According to Sleeter and Stillman (2005/2013), "the mid-1980s ushered in the standards movement, which viewed the main purpose of schooling as bolstering the U.S. economy and its national sovereignty and security" (p. 256). This movement arose from the Reagan-era *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR), a 1983 document that was "a response to the radical school reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 23).

38

Ravitch (2010) argues that these reforms ranged from wanting to "advance racial equity in the classroom and to broaden the curriculum to respect the cultural diversity of the population" to revoking "any sort of adult authority" (p. 23). ANAR stressed the importance of bettering American education and criticized elements of school such as "curriculum, graduation requirements, teacher preparation, and the quality of textbooks" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 25). Developing standards to please everyone, though, has not been easy.

In the early 1990s, during the George H. W. Bush administration, an agency within the United States Department of Education provided grants to groups who worked to develop voluntary national standards in a variety of subjects including history. The history standards are notable for their role in helping the national standards crumble. Despite being developed by university historians, the standards were criticized for their emphasis on "teaching social history through the lens of race, class, and gender" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 17). Political conservatives in the United States, including Lynne V. Cheney and Rush Limbaugh, championed the movement against the standards. In the wake of the controversy over the history standards, the Democratic Clinton administration distanced itself from that particular standards effort (Ravitch, 2010).

Shepard, Hannaway, and Baker (2009) say, "A standards-based vision was enacted in federal law under the Clinton administration with the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)" (p. 1) though Ravtich (2010) explains the administration put forth a standards-based vision earlier that year with its Goals 2000 program. Goals 2000 "gave the states federal money to write their own academic standards" (Ravtich, 2010, p. 19). Again, controversy surrounded these

standards, though not because of political bias. This time, it had to do with the writing itself. Ravitch (2010) explains,

> [M]ost of the content standards were vague when it came to any curriculum content. It seemed that the states had learned from the battle over the history standards that it was better to say nothing than to provoke controversy by setting out any real curriculum standards. (p. 19)

States continued to develop their own standards, but the term became more heavily used under the George W. Bush administration thanks to its *No Child Left Behind Act (2002)* (NCLB). As with William J. Clinton's *Goals 2000* program, "states set their own standards and pick[ed] their own tests" to measure student achievement (Ravtich, 2010, p. 21). NCLB forced heavier accountability into school systems and did so with the promise of all students displaying academic proficiency by 2014 (Shepard, Hannaway, & Baker, 2009). As Ravitch (2010) describes, though, this was problematic because "it was left to each state to decide what 'proficiency' meant. So the states, most of which had vague and meaningless standards, were left free to determine what children should learn and how well they should learn it" (p. 21).

Shepard, Hannaway, and Baker (2009) argue that NCLB created both "promising and "disappointing" trends in education:

> Educators have redirected efforts as intended, adopting curricula aligned with state standards and dramatically increasing the amount of instructional time devoted to reading and mathematics. Accountability pressures have resulted in increased use of test data to redirect instructional efforts, extensive test

40

preparation practices, and increasing use of interim and benchmark tests

administered periodically to monitor progress toward mastery of standards. (p. 2)

In short, though NCLB forced educators to consider standards-aligned instruction, it did

so at a cost. Ravitch (2010) says, "NCLB was all sticks and no carrots. Test-based

accountability—not standards—became our national education policy" (p. 21).

Debates about the necessity and implementation of standards intensified during

the Barack H. Obama administration with the creation of the Common Core State

Standards (CCSS) (Ravitch, 2014; Thomas, 2014). The standards seek "to determine

what students need to know and demonstrate the ability to do in order to be prepared for

an entry-level college course" (Bidwell, 2014, p. 1). Though the standards were endorsed

by scholars such as Guskey (2013), they were met with criticism from both the

Democratic Party and the Republican Party. A common complaint was that they

represented federal overreach. This complaint distorts the truth. Although the standards

filled the role of college and career readiness standards required by the Obama

administration's Race to the Top grant, "the federal government had absolutely no

involvement in the development of the standards, and . . . will play no role in the

implementation" (Bidwell, 2014, p. 2).

Federal overreach is not the only complaint educators at all levels levied against

the CCSS. Bidwell (2014) says, "Proponents have criticized the quality of the standards,

claiming they haven't been field tested, that they aren't grounded in research and that it's

unclear if they have been appropriately benchmarked against international standards" (p.

2). Some of the biggest complaints were related to same topics that sparked standards-

based reform in the 1980s and stifled the 1994 national history standards. Thomas

41

(2014a) says, "The problem for education reform, then, is *not specifically Common Core*, but that the evidence base shows *standards-based reform has not and will not address issues of equity or achievement*" (para. 7). Whereas the contemporary standards movement began partially as a response to calls for more inclusive education and the 1994 history movement ended because of it emphasized history through the lenses of race, gender, and class, the CCSS found itself under fire because it did not directly address the way those topics influence student achievement. The push for higher standards does not negate the need for students to have healthy food, sufficient housing, and appropriate healthcare. Though there has been support for standards-based education (and an accompanying standards-based grading system), when standards are used strictly as a means of creating high-stakes tests and pressure-filled accountability (as will be addressed elsewhere in this literature review), they will do nothing to close the achievement gap or the need for necessary social reform.

Standardized Testing and Accountability

The push for standards-based education in the US cannot be separated from the push for educational accountability in United States. NCLB, urged standards-based reform, but it did so Among other things, Ravitch (2010) argues, school reform under NCLB "was characterized as accountability [and] high-stakes testing" (p. 21). NCLB allowed states to choose their own standards and tests as well as their own definitions of proficiency—essentially asking states "to grade themselves by creating tests that almost all children could eventually pass" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 21)—and did so while promising that all students would be proficient by 2014. Spring (2014) explains the consequences of schools who did not show improvement as measured by standardized tests: "To ensure

that children were not trapped in schools considered to be failing because of student test scores, the law required failing schools to improve; and if these schools were unable to improve, they were to be completely restructured" (p. 441).

This push toward better schools and to change failing schools sounds good in theory, yet its execution drew plenty of critics. NCLB seemingly ignored "cultural and language issues … favor[ing] a monolingual and monocultural society" (p. 441). Thomas (2015b) notes that the high pressure from NCLB, including what he calls "unattainable goals such as 100% proficiency" (para. 12), led educators to cheat on standardized tests. Guskey and Jung (2013) say, "Fearing sanctions, teachers also may spend inordinate instructional time in test-preparation tasks and neglect more engaging learning activities" (p. 45). Ultimately, the legislation proved unsuccessful. Thomas (2015b) notes that research analysis reveals the racial achievement gap between black and white students did not change and that schools taken over by the government showed no "significant student achievement" (para. 20).

The Obama administration's 2009 Race to the Top program did little to ease the concerns about standards, standardized testing, and accountability. At the urging, but not requirement, of the federal government, including President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, many states adopted the CCSS. Those who did not adopt the standards or chose to drop the standards after adoption were forced to develop college and career readiness standards that could be tested. *Race to the Top* emphasized testing and punitive measures as well (Ravitch, 2014). Spring (2014) emphasizes that one goal *Race to the Top* "was part of a larger attempt to not only collect and store student test scores, but to also to [sic] create data linkages between students, teachers, principals, and

teacher training institutions" (p. 446). He explains that data were not collected for collection's sake; instead, he says, "Data collected on student test scores were to be used to evaluate teachers and school principals" (Spring, 2014, p. 446). This is despite the fact that using test scores to evaluate teachers "is unreliable for individual teacher evaluations and will discourage teaching high-needs students" (Thomas, 2015b, para. 19). The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium developed assessments to be used to measure student learning of the CCSS and to measure teacher effectiveness, yet their ability to do such is questioned. Freedman (2015) says, "[These tests] may not get us what we need—a valid, reliable, fair, trusted, and transparent accountability system" (para. 3).

Conclusion

Reforming the grading and the grade reporting process is neither easy nor simple, yet it must happen if we wish to be more accurate with our grades. Guskey and Jung (2013) say, "In essence, grading is an exercise in professional judgment on the part of the teachers. And because of the consequences grades can have, those judgments always must be thoughtful and informed" (p. 65). We must identify and seek to correct the flaws that can make our report cards as meaningless as a single standardized test scores. We must be fair and equitable, recognizing the importance of considering multiple avenues and attempts for students to demonstrate what they know. When we begin to eliminate the factors and decisions that dilute and invalidate grades, we can be more certain that our grades and our report cards are true indicators of and communication about what students know and are capable of doing. Though the switch to a standards-based system of reporting and grading cannot in and of itself make those changes, it can cause educators

to reconsider how we evaluate students, and that can lead to the necessary changes to benefit our students and our schools.

Chapter Three explains the action research methodology I used to conduct this action research study to see how my students feel about the grading practices addressed in this chapter and whether or not they agree that a standards-based grading report card is more appropriate and accurate than a standard report card.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of Chapter Three is to describe the action research methods used to collect data over the fall 2016 semester to determine "Teasley High School" (THS) students' perceptions and understanding of traditional grades (i.e., letters and numbers) in a secondary English classroom by providing students with two types of report cards: a traditional progress report and a standards-based grading (SBG) report. Chapter Three reviews the research design of the study including a summary of the purpose of the study, the problem of practice, and the research questions as well as an overview of the action research methodology used to conduct the study.

Problem of Practice

The identified problem of practice for the present qualitative action research involves the implementation of a new grading practice known as standards-based grading (SBG) at Teasley High School (THS) in an English II Honors classroom. At THS, student achievement on report cards is reported as a numerical average. Although teachers align instruction to clearly defined sets of standards, these numerical averages often include students' academic achievement in addition to other criteria such as attendance, organization, and behaviors. In the wake of the South Carolina Department of Education's recent decision to implement a ten-point grading scale similar to one used by other states to replace its seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), THS aims to move to a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that is less about comparing

46

students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The present Action Research was conducted by the participant-researcher who teaches ELA at the school and involves locating students' voices about these modifications to inform THS grading policy. I investigated my students' perceptions of SBG to determine how the report cards and grading practices at THS could more clearly reflect the principles of SBG in order to impact policy and give students a greater voice in assessments and grading practices. In addition, student-participants were invited to participate in the development of an action plan that invites input, discussion, and questions from all stakeholders, including parents/guardians, administrators, faculty, and students and encourages important conversations about grading reform that would benefit students of different academic, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Research Questions

In order to seek secondary ELA students' perceptions of standards-based grading (SBG), the following research questions framed the present study:

RQ1 What are secondary students' perceptions of standard grading practices in English II Honors?

RQ2 What are secondary students' perceptions of a standards-based grading report card practice in English II Honors?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this action research study is to describe tenth-grade students' perceptions of standard grading practices and standards-based grading practices at Teasley High School (THS). The secondary purpose is to address a lack of literature that examines gender as it relates to grading practices by describing the gender

47

differences in students' perceptions and attitudes about grades. To coincide with the South Carolina Department of the Education's recent implementation of a 10-point grading scale to replace its previous seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), the school has begun to rethink its grading policies and is considering a move toward a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that rejects standard practices such as offering extra credit and allowing only one submission of an assignment and is less about comparing students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. This study sought to involve students in the process and invited them to participate in the development of an action plan that refines grading practices to more clearly and accurately communicate and reflect academic achievement.

<div align="center">**Action Research**</div>

Action Research Design

The present action research study was conducted using qualitative action research, particularly Mertler's (2014) four-step cycle of action research: planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. Mertler (2014) says, "Action research is defined as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers . . . for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn" (p. 4). In short, action research in education is research conducted by a practitioner. This stands in contrast to traditional educational research, which some teachers often find difficult to comprehend or to connect to their respective practices. According to Mertler (2014), "[T]raditional educational researchers have a tendency to impose abstract research findings on schools and teachers with little or no attention paid to local variation" (p. 13). Action research values these individual variations, pushing educators

to examine the problems and concerns of their work environments. Quang and Hang (2008) say that action research "is designed, conducted, and implemented by the teachers themselves to improve teaching in their own classrooms" (pp. 203-204). Thomas (2015a) values traditional research but says that it must be taken lightly: "Of course, high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental research matters, but many aspects of teaching and learning require and lend themselves to other research paradigms—notably qualitative action research conducted by classroom teachers with the real populations they teach" (para. 8). Action research is crucial for practitioners because it is practical in a way traditional research is not.

Researcher

As the action researcher, I served two functions: the researcher and the teacher. Because the nature of action research necessitates using a local population, I conducted this study using students in my classroom. I had an obligation to ensure that my students felt comfortable enough with me and that I honestly sought their opinions even when they differed from mine. This was particularly important because my objective was to better understand students' perceptions, and thus, I had to make sure they knew I was actually listening to what they were saying. I made sure to clarify any confusion when necessary. Further, I reminded them repeatedly that their choice to participate, withdraw from participation, or not participate at all would have no reflect on their grades.

Setting

This action research study was conducted at Teasley High School, a rural high school located in Upstate South Carolina. The school is one of two high schools within its district, a state and regionally accredited district that with over 5,000 students and five

49

elementary schools, three middle schools, two high schools, and a career center. Teasley High School has approximately 950 students in grades 9-12 and has maintained an "Excellent" rating on the South Carolina Annual School Report Card since 2012 (South Carolina State Department, 2014).

Participants

I administered a Likert scale to 15 students in an English II Honors class. All 15 are high school sophomores. Of those 15, 13 are female and two are male. The majority of the students—14 out of 15—identify as White and most identify as middle class. After analyzing the results of the Likert scale, I refined my interview questions and chose five students to interview. Because I chose only five, I was able to spend more time conducting the interviews, thus providing the students an opportunity to better share their thoughts and feelings. Although the semi-structured interviews were all conducted face-to-face, I was able to use digital communication such as e-mail to communicate with students for clarification, reflection, and scheduling.

The five student-participants, each given a pseudonym, are described below:

"David." David is a White, middle-class male. He does not participate in extracurricular activities at school. David does well academically. He is quiet in class and prefers to work alone unless he is in a class with his girlfriend. He prefers to solve problems without help but is open to constructive criticism and guidance from his teachers.

"Logan." Logan is a White, middle-class female. She is on the girls' golf team and has been successful even as a sophomore. Shortly after her second semi-structured interview, she won the school's beauty pageant. Logan always participates in class, asks

questions when she is confused, and enjoys school. She is polite to teachers, always saying, "Thank you," and "Yes sir," when she receives an answer to a question. She worries about her grades.

"Kayla." Kayla is a White, middle-class female. The daughter of a teacher, she is incredibly concerned about her grades. She checks her mobile device for grade updates frequently and stresses about her position in the top five of her class. She is sometimes reticent to participate in class but will if she realizes no one else is going to volunteer. She asks questions when she is confused. Kayla is a soccer player and plays for both school and non-school teams but seeks to balance her athletics and her academics.

"Rick." Rick is a White, middle-class male who is currently ranked number one in his class. A quiet student, Rick completes all of his work on time and asks few questions about class material. Rick runs cross country during the fall, but he manages to balance his athletics and his academics.

"Stephanie." Stephanie is a White, middle-class female who other students have described as the most popular student in the sophomore class. A volleyball player, Stephanie is a hard worker who cares about her grades and frequently checks her grades on her mobile device. She has not always been in honors classes but her determination to succeed has led to her teachers placing her in these classes.

Research Ethics

I paid attention to research ethics during this study. At no point during this study did I withhold sound instruction from any student. I sent home a letter to each student's parent/guardian with an explanation of how the research would be conducted and offered

students the opportunity not to participate (see Appendix A). Students who chose to participate did not receive any extra credit for participation, and students who chose not to participate were not punished in any way. Recognizing that parents often have concerns about SBG practices (Guskey & Jung, 2013), I provided opportunities for parents and guardians to meet with me to discuss the research and its importance.

All audio and video recordings and interview transcriptions were kept private in either a locked closet or on a password-protected computer and mobile device. No one other than me had access to any of the data that was collected, which ensured confidentiality for the students.

Instrumentation and Materials

I used three instruments to collect data. First, I provided 15 English II honors student-participants with a printed Likert scale (see Appendix B) that asked them to consider to what extent they agreed or disagreed with standard grading practices. Although the Likert scale produced quantitative results, the primary purpose of administering the Likert scale was to gather student responses that would inform qualitative collection. I then chose five student-participants and conducted two semi-structured interviews, the first to gain an understanding of students' perceptions of standard grading practices (see Appendix C) and then to gain an understanding of students' perceptions of a standards-based grading (SBG) report card compared to a standard report card (see Appendix E).

With the permission of the student-participants, I audio recorded student interviews and took notes on a Google Doc. The notes and audio recorded were password protected. I used the audio recordings to transcribe interviews and used

transcriptions to identify patterns and themes, which I grouped together in another document.

To ensure students were put at ease, I made sure to inform them that they had the option to skip any questions that made them uncomfortable. I provided them with a copy of the questions prior to the interviews but did inform them that given that these were designed as semi-structured interviews, I would possibly be adding additional questions as we went along. I allowed students to pause and think without rushing, and I always redirected if I felt students misunderstood the question rather than telling them their answers were wrong or incorrect.

Data Collection

Qualitative data for this action research study was collected from three main sources: a Likert scale distributed to a class of high school sophomores (see Appendix B); a semi-structured interview with a group of selected students to determine students' perceptions of standard grading practices (see Appendix C); and a semi-interview structured interview with the same group of selected students to determine students' perceptions of a standard report card when compared to a standards-based grading (SBG) report card (see Appendix E).

During the first week of the semester, after reviewing student rosters and getting to know students, I chose one English II Honors class to participate in the study and sent home a letter for parents (see Appendix A). During the second week of school, I distributed a Likert scale to 15 student-participants to complete. After reviewing the Likert scale results, I chose five students—three females, two males—for formal interviews, which began during the third week of the semester. These students were

chosen because they represented the demographics of the class—mostly White and middle class. I needed five students so that I could better determine if gender differences in students' perceptions of grades existed. Given that there were only two males in the class, I knew I needed to interview both. Because there were more females than males in the class, I needed to ensure that I had a sample size that included more females than males.

I asked these five student-participants more in-depth questions about their perceptions of standard grading practices (see Appendix C). The questions asked them to consider whether they consider their teachers' grading practices to be accurate and fair and whether they understand why the receive the grades they receive. I recorded the interviews using a mobile device, and I took informal notes as the student-participants spoke. I used the audio recordings and notes to transcribe accurate responses from my student-participants. All recordings and transcriptions were password protected.

As grades were finalized for the first reporting period, I create an SBG report card to be distributed alongside the traditional grade report (see Appendix D). The SBG report card was based on the format provided by Guskey and Bailey (2010) and disaggregated first-quarter achievement by ACT Quality Core learning standard ("ACT QualityCore," 2015) and separated academic performance (product grades) from behavioral performance (process grades). Detailed descriptors were included on the rubrics to help students under their achievement levels. I distributed the SBG report card on the day students received their traditional progress report.

After students received both types of report cards, I conducted a final set of semi-structured interviews with the same students, gauging their reactions to the new reporting

system (see Appendix E). I audio recorded the interviews on my mobile device, and I took informal notes as the student-participants spoke. I used the recordings and my notes to transcribe accurate responses from my student-participants. All recordings and transcriptions were password protected.

Data Analysis & Reflection

After transcribing the interviews, I read through each response and used inductive coding to determine emerging patterns and themes. I grouped similar answers and then determined what those answers had in common. If I had a question about something a student said or felt as if I needed clarification, I spoke with the student privately for confirmation.

I compared these patterns and themes to the patterns and themes that I previously discovered in the literature. Because of the timing of this study, I was unable to meet with my student-participants as a group. I was able to communicate with students individually in person and through electronic communication. During these conversations, I presented students with what I uncovered through the analysis process and asked students to consider the findings as they considered their potential roles in an action plan for grading reform.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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Chapter Three presented an overview of the action research methodology used to conduct this qualitative action research study during the fall 2016 semester. Utilizing a Likert Scale and two semi-structured interviews, I sought students' perceptions of both standard and standards-based grading (SBG) practices. Of my 16 total students, 15 completed the Likert scale and five chosen student-participants completed two semi-

structured interviews. The five interviewed student-participants received an SBG report card as well in order to compare it to a standard report card.

I analyzed the available responses and identified patterns and themes that emerged from the data collection. A detailed explanation and analysis of those patterns and themes are presented in Chapter Four of this dissertation. A four-year action plan, which was developed based on the collected and reflected upon data, is presented in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS & INTERPRETATIONS

The purpose of Chapter Four is to present the findings of the present action research study that was conducted at "Teasley High School" (THS) to determine secondary students' perceptions of teachers' grading practices in an English II Honors classroom and the implications of those findings. This study examined students' perceptions of 'traditional' or 'standard' teacher grading practices and of two types of report cards, a standard report card that reports a numerical average and a standards-based grading (SBG) report card that disaggregates achievement by learning standard and separates product grades from process grades (Guskey & Bailey, 2010). A total of 16 students were asked to participate in the study. One declined to participate leaving 13 females and two males. Of those 15, five students were asked to participate in two semi-structured interviews. Chapter Four begins with a brief review of the problem of practice, research questions, and purpose of the study. The Chapter then provides an overview and interpretation of the findings of the study.

Fifteen students completed a Likert scale about grading practices (see Appendix B). Five students were chosen to participate in two semi-structured interviews because they were reflective of the gender, racial, and socioeconomic make-up of the class. These five students were also given two types of report cards: a standard report card with a numerical average provided by the school and a standards-based grading (SBG) report

57

card, developed by the teacher-researcher. These report cards reflected student achievement in the course at the end of the first four-and-half-week grading period. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five students. The first was aimed at determining their perceptions of the current teacher grading practices in English II Honors (see Appendix C), and the second semi-structured interview addressed their feelings and perceptions of the SBG report card (see Appendix E).

Problem of Practice

The identified problem of practice for the present qualitative action research involves the implementation of a new grading practice known as standards-based grading (SBG) at Teasley High School (THS) in an English II Honors classroom. At THS, student achievement on report cards is reported as a numerical average. Although teachers align instruction to clearly defined sets of standards, these numerical averages often include students' academic achievement in addition to other criteria such as attendance, organization, and behaviors. In the wake of the South Carolina Department of Education's recent decision to implement a ten-point grading scale similar to one used by other states to replace its seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), THS aims to move to a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that is less about comparing students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The present Action Research was conducted by the participant-researcher who teaches ELA at the school and involves locating students' voices about these modifications to inform THS grading policy. I investigated my students' perceptions of SBG to determine how the report cards and grading practices at THS could more clearly reflect the principles of SBG in order to impact policy and give students a greater voice in

58

assessments and grading practices. In addition, student-participants were invited to participate in the development of an action plan that invites input, discussion, and questions from all stakeholders, including parents/guardians, administrators, faculty, and students and encourages important conversations about grading reform that would benefit students of different academic, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Research Questions

In order to seek secondary ELA students' perceptions of standards-based grading (SBG), the following research questions framed the present study:

RQ1 What are secondary students' perceptions of standard grading practices in English II Honors?

RQ2 What are secondary students' perceptions of a standards-based grading report card practice in English II Honors?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this action research study is to describe tenth-grade students' perceptions of standard grading practices and standards-based grading practices at Teasley High School (THS). The secondary purpose is to address a lack of literature that examines gender as it relates to grading practices by describing the gender differences in students' perceptions and attitudes about grades. To coincide with the South Carolina Department of the Education's recent implementation of a 10-point grading scale to replace its previous seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), the school has begun to rethink its grading policies and is considering a move toward a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that rejects standard practices such as offering extra credit and allowing only one submission of an assignment and is less about

comparing students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. This study sought to involve students in the process and invited them to participate in the development of an action plan that refines grading practices to more clearly and accurately communicate and reflect academic achievement.

Findings of the Study

Data collection for the present study began at the beginning of the fall 2016 semester. I chose one section of English II Honors to participate in the study. Of the 16 students in the class, 15 chose to participate. I distributed a Likert scale to the student-participants. All 15 returned the completed Likert scale. Following analysis and reflection with the class, I chose five students from the class to participate in semi-structured interviews; these five students were reflective of the gender, racial, and socioeconomic make-up of the class—mostly female, White, and middle-class with aspirations to attend four-year institutions of higher education. I interviewed the five students about teachers' grading practices within the school and analyzed their responses. I then developed a SBG report card (see Appendix D) for each of the five students and conducted another semi-structured interview, this time asking these same five students to compare a standard report card to a SBG report card. I then transcribed and analyzed the data for patterns and themes (Mertler, 2014).

Likert Scale

I provided 16 students in a section of English II Honors with a Likert scale that asked them to consider their teachers' grading practices. The statements and the total number of student responses are presented below in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Total Number of English II Honors Responses to Likert Scale About Teachers' Grading

Practices

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
I understand how my teachers calculate my grade.	0	2	2	9	2
I believe my grades accurately reflect what I know and can do.	3	4	2	5	1
My teachers' academic expectations are clearly explained.	0	1	4	9	1
Non-academic factors such as participation, attendance, and timeliness should be factored into my grades	0	2	2	7	4

The results of the Likert scale revealed the majority of students understand how teachers calculate grades, understand teachers' academic expectations, and believe non-academic factors should be included in grades. Students' perceptions of grade accuracy are more evenly distributed among the five options.

Semi-structured Interviews

After analysis of the Likert scale, I asked five students to participate in two semi-structured interviews. I selected two males—the only two males in the class—and three females. All five are high school sophomores, identify as White and can be described as middle-class, socioeconomically speaking, which is reflective of this particular group of

English II Honors students. What follows is a description of each student who participated in the semi structured interviews.

Participants

"David." David is a White, middle-class male. He does not participate in extracurricular activities at school. David does well academically. He is quiet in class and prefers to work alone unless he is in a class with his girlfriend. He prefers to solve problems without help but is open to constructive criticism and guidance from his teachers.

"Logan." Logan is a White, middle-class female. She is on the girls' golf team and has been successful even as a sophomore. Shortly after her second semi-structured interview, she won the school's beauty pageant. Logan always participates in class, asks questions when she is confused, and enjoys school. She is polite to teachers, always saying, "Thank you," and "Yes sir," when she receives an answer to a question. She worries about her grades.

"Kayla." Kayla is a White, middle-class female. The daughter of a teacher, she is incredibly concerned about her grades. She checks her mobile device for grade updates frequently and stresses about her position in the top five of her class. She is sometimes reticent to participate in class but will if she realizes no one else is going to volunteer. She asks questions when she is confused. Kayla is a soccer player and plays for both school and non-school teams but seeks to balance her athletics and her academics.

"Rick." Rick is a White, middle-class male who is currently ranked number one in his class. A quiet student, Rick completes all of his work on time and asks few

questions about class material. Rick runs cross country during the fall, but he manages to balance his athletics and his academics.

"Stephanie." Stephanie is a White, middle-class female who other students have described as the most popular student in the sophomore class. A volleyball player, Stephanie is a hard worker who cares about her grades and frequently checks her grades on her mobile device. She has not always been in honors classes but her determination to succeed has led to her teachers placing her in these classes.

Traditional Grading Practices

Five student-participants were asked to consider their teachers' grading practices including the criteria teachers typically use to determine a grade, their perceptions of grade accuracy, their perceptions of grade clarity, and their feelings about what should constitute final grades.

Grade Accuracy. Student-participants varied on whether or not they believed that their final grades were accurate reflections of what they know and can do. "David," "Kayla," and "Rick" agreed that their grades are usually accurate. "Stephanie" and "Logan," however, disagreed. Stephanie argues that teachers' assessment practices do not always allow her to demonstrate what she knows:

> I would say [grades are not accurate] because, like, I could talk to [teachers] when they ask me questions in class and be able to explain why I know that or think that, but on a test, sometimes I freeze up. I don't test well. (personal communication, September 8, 2016)

Logan agreed:

I don't think that my grades always match what I can do. I'm not a terrible test taker, but I really stress myself out when it comes to tests. If teachers would take into consideration that some people aren't the best test takers . . . I think that would be better. (personal communication, September 9, 2016)

Grade Clarity. Three of the five student-participants found teachers to be open to discussing grades when asked. Rick said that even if teachers do not put specific feedback on work, they are normally open to discussing assignments: "They're usually pretty open if you just go up and ask them. They usually have a pretty reasonable answer for you" (personal communication, September 9, 2016). David said his teachers are normally clear about grades. He said, "They would, like, put notes on the side or talk to me or talk to me individually and say why I did good" (personal communication, September 13, 2016). Stephanie said that teachers are not forthright with explanations of grades: "I've asked teachers before [to explain grades] and I got, 'That's just how I saw it or that's just how I thought it needed to be' so it's never really a definite answer" (personal communication, September 8, 2016). Logan said that she does occasionally ask her teachers to clarify why she received a certain grade but that she is often "not left in the clear" (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Rubrics. Four of the five student-participants agreed that rubrics were useful in helping them understand why they earned a certain grade. Kayla said, "With rubrics, I know step by step what I need to do to get 100" (personal communication, September 13, 2016). Logan said, "I like to know what's expected of me" (personal communication, September 9, 2016). Rick, however, said that he prefers teachers not providing rubrics.

He believes that rubrics stifle his creativity (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Grade Criteria. Student-participants said that the most common criteria teachers use to calculate grades include tests, quizzes, daily work, and occasionally class participation with tests and quizzes making up the majority of the grade.

Behaviors. Student-participants found that some teachers do give grades for behaviors such as maintaining an organized notebook or class participation. David said that notebook checks are unfair for students who may be intelligent but not well-organized. He said,

> I've always been pretty organized myself, but there are some people who are pretty smart, but they don't organize like you think they would, but they still get their work done, so I don't think, like, a notebook check should be included in there. (personal communication, September 13, 2016)

Rick said that the way work is presented is not as important as what the student knows:

> I think that the main thing the teacher should pay attention is what is on the piece of paper or what the student actually turns in. . . . Unless [the handwriting] is absolutely unreadable and you know the student didn't really try their best at all, then, I mean, you can take off points. (personal communication, September 9, 2016)

Kayla believes that class participation should not be a grade requirement because some students are naturally shy (personal communication, September 13, 2016). She said that students should not be punished for that shyness. David said that students should

have the option of using class participation as an assessment as an alternative to traditional quizzes and tests (personal communication, September 13, 2016).

Late Work. Student-participants said that teachers often take off points, if not a whole letter grade, on work that is turned in late. Stephanie said that she agrees with this practice for the most part: "I guess it depends on the situation because sometimes things happen that you can't help, but for the most part, I think they should [take off points] because it's your responsibility" (personal communication, September 8, 2016). Kayla said that although she understands some students have busy schedules, teachers should still take off points for turning in work late. She said, "Teachers can't grade differently just because one student is an athlete" (personal communication, September 13, 2016). Rick said that he likes the idea of getting extra credit for turning in work early but that it would not be fair. He said, "That would be something that would be pretty cool if they took that into account but then again it wouldn't be fair to those who didn't turn it in [early] because, say, they had something else [to do]" (personal communication, September 9, 2016). David said it is acceptable for teachers to take off points for turning in assignments late because it is the student's responsibility to turn assignments in on time: "You should turn it in on time. . . . If you turn it in late, even if it is a perfect project or essay, you still turned it in late, so you know, you should have some points deducted for that" (personal communication, September 13, 2016).

Standards-Based Grading Practices

Five student-participants were provided with a SBG report card along with a standard report card and were asked to consider the similarities and differences between the two as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the SBG report card. The traditional

report card provided a numerical average for the school while the SBG report card disaggregated achievement by learning standard and also separated academic achievement from behaviors.

Familiarity. David explained that while he appreciated the detail of a SBG report card, he preferred the traditional report card. He said, "I'm just more used to the original report card" (personal communication, October 6, 2016). He said that although the SBG report card helped him target specific strengths and weaknesses, he liked seeing a numerical average because it helped him understand that he needed to do better or try harder: "[The SBG report card] shows me more of where to improve, but the original one shows I need to improve, just try better." He did explain that even though he preferred the traditional report card, he could understand why a teacher would choose a SBG report card system and admitted that he could get used to the system. Logan said she likes the SBG report card but also enjoys a traditional report card. She said, "The number grade is really important to me because of the type of student I am when it comes to my grades, but I also really like seeing the [standards]" (personal communication, October 14, 2016). Kayla said that to appease all types of students, teachers should use both types of report cards: "I think that you should stick to the original report card and this one because some students may like the other one better and some, like me, like this one better because you're not able to please everybody because everybody's different" (personal communication, October 14, 2016). Rick said that he saw no weaknesses with the SBG report card, but he did want the numerical average that he was used to: "I think it's all around a really good set up for a report card. It doesn't have the number grade on there,

which, I mean, if you added that in there, that may be helpful" (personal communication, October 7, 2016).

Specificity. Student-participants noted that the SBG report card was more specific than the traditional report card. For Rick, this is a positive. He said,

Definitely students can see what they need to work on or if they need to work on anything. It's a lot better than just having to see a number there and basically that's just a number [that] would tell you, like, if you got, say, a 97 I'd think I'm doing pretty good, but if you got one of these your teacher could tell you how to get better. (personal communication, October 7, 2016)

He noted, too, that he found the separation of academic achievement behaviors to be fair because it clearly explains what students need to work on, something an average may not necessarily do:

I think it's pretty fair to separate it and that breaks it up even further so that you can see what you need to work on just a little more or even a lot more. . . . Say you just have an average, say you got a three or whatever—you're doing a one in punctuality—you wouldn't know what you needed to work on.

Stephanie found that the disaggregated information helped her understand what she specifically needs to work on, which, she said, she often wonders about (personal communication, October 5, 2016). Kayla said that she appreciates how the SBG report card "defines each section" (personal communication, October 14, 2016). Logan said that separating behaviors and academic achievement would allow students to target their behavioral weaknesses: "I like that they're separate things because participation—some kids are very quiet but that also allows them to see what they can work on and

cooperation, too—some kids are the ones that take charge and some are [not]" (personal communication, October 14, 2016).

Student Input

Five student-participants were asked to consider how they felt about being invited to offer their input about teachers' grading practices. All five students said they enjoyed offering their insight. Stephanie said that asking for her input shows that teachers care: "I feel like it makes me feel like y'all actually care. That it's not just 'your way or no way.' It shows that you care about your students and how we feel about it and stuff" (personal communication, October 5, 2016). Logan said, "I really enjoy being able to say what I like about how I'm graded or what they can work on" (personal communication, October 14, 2016). Kayla explained that she would like a chance to talk to her teachers but would attempt to do so appropriately: "I wouldn't be, like, rude about it or anything, but I would tell them something that they could work on, I guess, in a nice way" (personal communication, October 14, 2016). Rick explained that he does not necessarily want to offer input but that he believes it is a good thing for teachers to ask:

> Me personally, I'd just go with the flow, but I think there are some people out
> there that would like to have some input on how teachers tests would be, and I
> think it would be great if they gave us a day or two or even a week to think about
> what kind of stuff we could work on to make our classes grades better. (personal
> communication, October 7, 2016)

Interpretation of Results of the Study

This portion of the chapter presents the interpretation of the data collected on traditional teacher grading practices and specifically, two types of report cards: astandard

report card that reports a numerical average that often links academic achievement with behaviors such as organization and timeliness and a standards-based grading (SBG) report card that disaggregates achievement by learning standard and separates product grades from process grades (Guskey & Bailey, 2010). Data was collected from15 students in an English II Honors course 13 females and two males. Of those 15, five students were asked toparticipate in two semi-structured interviews.

Likert Scale

Student-participants completed a The Likert scale survey. The data, showed that student-participants overwhelmingly believe they understand how teachers calculate their grades and what their teachers' academic expectations are. Although two students said they disagreed and two said they had no opinion, a majority of students also believe it is acceptable for teachers to include behaviors such as participation and timeliness in a final grade. The students' overwhelming belief that this is acceptable is in contrast with the literature. For example, Wormeli (2006) cautions against grading participation unless participation is integral to the course. He says, "If participation is merely an avenue a teacher travels with students in order to arrive at mastery, then it is inappropriate to grade it" (p. 105). O'Connor (2011) explains that teachers should not penalize students who fail to turn work in on time. He says, "Grades are broken when they include penalties for student 'work' submitted late. Penalties distort the achievement record the grade is intended to communicate, can actually harm student motivation, and for many students do not result in changes in behavior" (p. 24).

Responses to the survey question: "I believe my grades accurately reflect what I know and can do" were more evenly distributed. These data indicate that some students

feel as if current assessment practices are not allowing them to demonstrate what they have learned. This data does reflect the scholarly literature's emphasis on differentiated instruction and assessment. Wormeli (2006) emphasizes the importance of assessing students in a variety of ways: "When we assess students through more than one format, we see different sides to their understanding, too" (p. 31). Based on their responses, student-participants in my action research study would like to see different opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned.

Interviews

I began this study with the assumption that students are unhappy with current teacher grading practices and that they would see a shift to SBG practices as a positive move. The reality, though, is not quite that simple. Although the five student-participants who participated in two semi-structured interviews and received a SBG report card liked the SBG report card, they, in contrast to many of the adults in the grading literature, did not necessarily decry traditional teacher grading practices. This required me to reflect upon my own biases and to ensure that my questions to and conversations with these students did not reflect my assumptions but instead valued how these students felt. I know what I believe, but this study sought students' perceptions, and I constantly had to remind myself of that.

Student-participants identified their teachers as mostly open to discussing grades in one of three ways: feedback, one-on-one (often student-initiated) conversations, and rubrics. What is less clear from these interviews is how teachers utilize these discussions about grades: Are they only happening at the end of a unit or grading period, or are they happening frequently along the way? Wormeli (2006) argues, "If we want [students] to

heed our feedback on their work, they have to know that it can be used to improve their status" (p. 115). In other words, feedback without opportunities for improvement or growth is not useful.

Student-participants were split on whether or not they believed behaviors should be included in final grades. They all believed, for example, that it is acceptable for teachers to deduct points for late work. However, they were against the idea of students receiving a bad grade for keeping an unorganized notebook. Both timeliness and organization could be considered behaviors, yet students found little wrong with losing points for the latter while finding problems with losing points for the former. It seems that this rests on the fact that they admitted teachers normally count off for late work while they rarely count off for organization. For these students, familiarity matters. They see nothing wrong with what has always been done but are willing to challenge practices they are less familiar with.

Although two student-participants expressed frustration with the fact that their grades do not always match their perceived abilities, three student-participants said grades and their perceptions normally match. Two of these students, Rick and Kayla, are in the top five of the sophomore class, which indicates they typically make good grades regardless of teacher criteria or assessment methods. The third, David, is not as academically successful but still does well in school and his overall quiet nature would make him less likely to challenge teachers' practices. The two others, despite making what are normally considered good grades, admit to having to work harder. Stephanie, who was placed in honors because of her hard work and not because of innate academic ability, may want to do well but feel confined by traditional practices. She may require a

differentiated approach to assessment, one that allows her to meet standard but using a different strategy. Her needs may be met with a system that utilizes Bloom's mastery learning, one that allows her multiple opportunities for assessment (Guskey, 2007).

Given that students overall expressed few problems with current teach grading practices, it is no surprise that students responded warmly but not overly excited to the SBG report card. Even students who liked the set-up of the report card admitted that they wished a traditional numerical average had been included. Guskey and Jung (2013) report that parents are often reluctant to see changes in grade reporting, and this reluctance is also evident in these student-participants. Although they did find the SBG report card to be more specific, the tradition of the numerical average is an engrained one.

In the interpretation and analysis of these responses, it is important to note that SBG implementation occurred at the report-card level only. Although I have implemented many of the principles of SBG over the last five years of teaching—accepting late work without penalty, allowing students to resubmit assignments for full credit, and developing detailed, specific rubrics for summative assessments—my responsibility to the school and its commitment to traditional gradebooks and record keeping has required me to use a traditional grade report first and foremost. Therefore, classwork, quizzes, tests, and major assignments are still graded using numbers. Even when I use systems such as a check-plus, check, check-minus, those marks must be associated with numbers that can be converted to percentages on a 100-point scale. While implementing an entirely new system of grading and finding a way to convert it to the 100-point scale is possible, it is outside of the scope of this action research study. I

explained this situation to student-participants so that they would understand the evolution of the study.

With these caveats in mind, I suggest that the student-participants' refusal to fully embrace the SBG report card is not necessarily the same as the student-participants' refusal to fully embrace SBG as a systemic model of grading. It is fair, however, to say that these interviewed student-participants might be challenged by full SBG implementation. David, for example, who saw no problem teachers taking off points for late work, might question a system where full credit is given to every assignment regardless of when it is turned in. Rick, who decried the use of rubrics, may resist a system so heavily dependent on rubrics (O'Connor, 2011; Wormeli, 2006). In addition, he may resist the idea of developing specific educational objectives (Tyler, 1949/1969). He may wish to explore and learn based on his own interests.

Finally, it is critical to note that student-participants valued being asked their input on grading practices. Although there are instances of student voices in the literature on grading (Heflebower, Hoegh, & Warrick, 2014), the majority of grading literature is written by educators to other educators. This is not to suggest that these authors do not value students. On the contrary, these authors want the best possible classroom environments for students; they just rarely ask for student feedback and input. Developing an action plan alongside the student-participants allowed them to be active participants in their own education.

Gender Differences

Voyer and Voyer (2014) explain that girls tend to receive higher grades than boys, but little has been written about students' perceptions of grading practices. To address

the scarcity of literature that addresses gender and students' perceptions of grading practices, I analyzed the data to determine if students who identify as male responded differently from students who identify as female. The students were chosen from a class of students that had 15 females and two males. Both males in the class agreed to participate in the study, and three females volunteered to participate in the study.

I observed no meaningful difference between genders during this study. This is certainly in part to the small sample size, a limitation of studying a class with only two male students. While there were certainly disagreements between Rick and/or David and the females in the study, there were no instances of both males' perspectives being in opposition to all three females' perspectives. The closest example would be in relation to rubrics, which Rick said he did not like. David expressed no strong feelings either way but did note that they were appropriate for essays (personal communication, September 13, 2016). All three females expressed how much they liked rubrics. Logan, for example, said, "I like to know what to go by and what is asked of me when it comes to getting 100s or As" (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

It is critical to note that all five students are White, middle-class students in an honors class. Four of the five are athletes. These students are far more similar than they are different, and these similarities may impact their perspectives far more than their gender differences do. Although the nature of action research precludes my conclusions from being generalizable, I can say that within this sample population, gender does not affect students' perception of teachers' grading practices.

Racial and Socioeconomic Privileges

Although within this sample population of students ,gender did not affect students' perceptions of teachers' grading practices, the students' racial and socioeconomic identities most certainly did. These students' responses cannot and should not be extricated from the privileges they experience.

All five students who participated in this action research study are White, middle-class students who are bound for a four-year institution of higher education. THS serves students from across the socioeconomic spectrum, but these student-participants in English Honors II do not reflect this spectrum. Instead, they reflect a point on the spectrum, one that allows them to wear brand-name clothes, drive themselves to school in nice, if not new, cars and own new smartphones.

The school and community also provide opportunities for these students to succeed. Although THS is not the most technologically advanced school in the county, students all have Chromebooks that they take are able to use at school and at home. Students have opportunities to participate in a variety of arts including band, chorus, orchestra, theatre, and visual arts; opportunities to participate in a variety of athletics; and opportunities to take a variety of required and elective courses either in a traditional, brick-and-mortar classroom or through virtual avenues. Students have access to a variety of Advanced Placement courses and have well-trained, hands-on guidance counselors who provide them with appropriate guidance on how to apply for college. They have opportunities to take college-entrance exam preparation courses both during the school day and after school. Even students who come from families who do not travel often

have opportunities through school sponsored-activities to visit Europe, New York City, Washington, D.C., and Walt Disney World.

Students attend school on grounds that are well-kept with trimmed bushes and mowed lawns and in a building that is cleaned daily by a custodial staff who begins cleaning at 6:00 a.m. and ends well after 5:00 p.m. The roads outside of the school, on which students drive cars that are often no older than 15 years, are wide and well-maintained.

The surrounding community is critical to these students' successes. The community's support can be seen in the support from the various churches in the area. The community's firm Christian faith and belief in the importance of Christian values is not unlike colonial schools in New England (Spring, 2014). Within five miles of the school are at least as many churches representing various denominations. These churches provide food, support, and prayer for the school and its students. Seniors attend a baccalaureate service at a local church, and the chorus sings the Lord's Prayer at graduation. The community not only prays for the students but also provides them with employment opportunities. Students are employed by surrounding businesses including auto shops, grocery stores, and restaurants.

It is critical to see how these students' privileges shape their understanding and perception of teachers' grading practices. It is easy to believe that these students' successes are primarily the product of hard work and determination and that if they can do it, anyone can. Why, a teacher might ask, should anyone change their practices if they do work for this group of students and their friends? These are students who are financially, emotionally, and socially stable, and who, on top of that stability, have access

to a school and a surrounding community that provides additional stability and support. This is not to diminish their own hard work and dedication to school; it is, instead, to emphasize the ways in which their socioeconomic and racialized identities influence their understanding of school practices. These students are both White and middle-class, and thus, they have certain expectations for themselves and their life styles. They do not question if they will go to college and get a job; they only question where they will go and what they will do. They expect success, not failure, because they have never had their existences challenged, not in school and not in the world.

What the results of this study indicate is that the current grading practices are accepted by and possibly appropriate for a particular type of privileged student. It is not surprising that since school has worked for them for so long, they would be resistant to change. What they need to see—and what being involved in the action plan delineated in Chapter Five will help them see—is what many teachers still need to see: Not all students at THS benefit from these same privileges. The school and community still seek to support these other students, but those who do not drive on the well-maintained roads but instead ride an old, prone-to-breaking down bus may find the roads less winning. Student-participants who lack wireless internet access at home may find the Chromebooks less valuable. Student-participants who lack the money to rent or buy instruments or art supplies felt the same way about the fine arts offerings.

THS is currently working to refine its grading practices as some teachers argue earning an A is too easy and that policies must change to ensure good grades are earned, not given. Some teachers have argued that they should simply give harder tests to ensure students do not earn a 90, the new cut-off for an A. Others have become stricter on late-

78

work policies. These policies could present challenges to many of our students. As THS wrestles with questions about grading and how to best move forward in refining its grading practices, it must consider the findings of this study and the feelings of the White, middle-class students, but it must also consider the students who are traditionally marginalized, who have not been afforded the privileges these five student-participants have. What works and is appropriate for these students may not necessarily work or be appropriate for students whose socioeconomic and racial identities are different.

Conclusion

White, middle-class English II Honors student-participants at WHS overall were satisfied with the status quo regarding their teachers' current grading practices. The student-participants felt that the criteria most teachers use to calculate grades is fair and their teachers are always willing to discuss why they assigned certain grades. Student-participants did note that current teacher assessment methods did not always allow students to showcase what they know and can do and thus may not be an accurate reflection of student ability. These students are primarily college-bound, and they understand the high stakes involved with honors and Advanced Placement coursework. They also understand the high stakes involved with college scholarships and college admission and the connection to a grade point average or GPA. Therefore, they are less willing to challenge the existing system that is serve them well and their families well for generations. On the other hand, the school administrators understand the need to reach all students at the school and are interested in alternative assessment strategies to reach historically marginalized groups such as poor people, people of color (and women in the case of Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics (STEM) fields) in the higher-

level courses in order to equal the playing field for college admittance or postsecondary schooling opportunities.

The student-participants in the present study overall liked the SBG report card although they still insist upon a standard report card that shows achievement as a numerical percentage. They understand that they have always been successful with this practice, and they see how it will help them in the future. They understand the importance of the GPA to college admission and scholarships upon graduation from high school.

I observed no meaningful differences in students' responses based on gender. Instead, I found it more likely that students' similar social class and race affected their perceptions of teachers' grading practices.

Chapter Five discusses the final stages of Mertler's (2014) action research cycle: developing and reflecting. The chapter provides a summary of the present action research study, delineates the action plan that I have developed with the student-participants using the information presented in this chapter, and offers suggestions for future research at Teasley High School.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of Chapter Five is to summarize the findings of the present action research study that was conducted at "Teasley High School" (THS) to determine secondary students' perceptions of teachers' grading practices in an English II Honors classroom and to delineate the action plan that was created based on the results of this study. This study examined students' perceptions of 'standard' teacher grading practices and of two types of report cards, a standard report card that reports a numerical average and a standards-based grading (SBG) report card that disaggregates achievement by learning standard and separates product grades from process grades (Guskey & Bailey, 2010). A total of 16 students were asked to participate in the study. One declined to participate leaving 13 females and two males. Of those 15, five students were asked to participate in two semi-structured interviews. Chapter Five begins with a brief review of the identified problem of practice, research questions, and a statement of purpose for the study. The Chapter then provides an overview and summary of the study. Next, a description of a four-year action plan designed to identify, review, and modify standard grading practices at THS is provided. The Chapter concludes with suggestions for future research.

Problem of Practice

The identified problem of practice for the present qualitative action research involves the implementation of a new grading practice known as standards-based grading

(SBG) at Teasley High School (THS) in an English II Honors classroom. At THS, student achievement on report cards is reported as a numerical average. Although teachers align instruction to clearly defined sets of standards, these numerical averages often include students' academic achievement in addition to other criteria such as attendance, organization, and behaviors. In the wake of the South Carolina Department of Education's recent decision to implement a ten-point grading scale similar to one used by other states to replace its seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), THS aims to move to a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that is less about comparing students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The present Action Research was conducted by the participant-researcher who teaches ELA at the school and involves locating students' voices about these modifications to inform THS grading policy. I investigated my students' perceptions of SBG to determine how the report cards and grading practices at THS could more clearly reflect the principles of SBG in order to impact policy and give students a greater voice in assessments and grading practices. In addition, student-participants were invited to participate in the development of an action plan that invites input, discussion, and questions from all stakeholders, including parents/guardians, administrators, faculty, and students and encourages important conversations about grading reform that would benefit students of different academic, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Research Questions

In order to seek secondary ELA students' perceptions of standards-based grading (SBG), the following research questions framed the present study:

RQ1 What are secondary students' perceptions of standard grading practices in English II Honors?

RQ2 What are secondary students' perceptions of a standards-based grading report card practice in English II Honors?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this action research study is to describe tenth-grade students' perceptions of standard grading practices and standards-based grading practices at Teasley High School (THS). The secondary purpose is to address a lack of literature that examines gender as it relates to grading practices by describing the gender differences in students' perceptions and attitudes about grades. To coincide with the South Carolina Department of the Education's recent implementation of a 10-point grading scale to replace its previous seven-point grading scale (Adcox, 2016), the school has begun to rethink its grading policies and is considering a move toward a more standards-based model of assessment and grading that rejects standard practices such as offering extra credit and allowing only one submission of an assignment and is less about comparing students to each other and more about enabling students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. This study sought to involve students in the process and invited them to participate in the development of an action plan that refines grading practices to more clearly and accurately communicate and reflect academic achievement.

Focus of the Study

The focus of the study was to identify English II Honors students' perceptions of standard teacher grading practices and to determine whether students would prefer a standards-based grading (SBG) report card to a standard report card. I conducted the

study to determine which grading practices were deemed effective and appropriate by those whom they most effect—the students. Because students are often left out of conversations about education despite being its nominal focus, I felt it appropriate and necessary to engage students to see how they felt regarding grading practices.

Summary of the Study

This action research study was conducted at Teasley High School (THS) during fall 2016. As a teacher-researcher, I asked for English II Honors students' perceptions of standard teacher grading practices and asked for students' perceptions of two types of report cards, a standard report card that represents achievement with a single number and a standards-based report card that disaggregated achievement by learning standard and separated academic achievement from behaviors. Fifteen students completed a Likert scale sharing their perceptions of teachers' grading practices, and five students completed two semi-structured interviews about grading practices and the two types of report cards. These five students—two male, three female, all White and middle-class—were reflective of the larger make-up of the class. Their responses indicated no differences between genders but did reveal that racial and socioeconomic privilege play a role in the way that students perceive their schooling.

The responses revealed that student-participants are overall happy with standard teacher grading practices and believe that their teachers' grading criteria are clear and fair. Student-participants overall agreed that behaviors such as neatness, organization, and timeliness should be considered when determining final grades. Student-participants did express that teachers should use a wider variety of assessments to determine student achievement, provided the assessments are aligned to standards. For example, if asking a

student an oral question can achieve the same effect as putting a question on a quiz, the students believed the teacher should provide the option.

Student-participants overall liked a standards-based grading report card but said that the standards-based grading report card should not replace the standard report card. Instead, if used, it could be used as a complement. However, the student-participants felt more comfortable and familiar with a numerical average.

In my analysis and interpretation of results, I found no evidence of different attitudes toward grading practices based on gender in this English II Honors classes. Instead, I came to realize the way that the five student-participants who were interviewed were shaped by their status as honors-level, White, middle-class students. Their academic, racial, and socioeconomic identities have afforded them opportunities to succeed, and it is clear from their answers that they are comfortable with how school currently runs. Although they are not opposed to reform, they do not demand major changes. They instead suggested complements to standard practices so that, for example, they can have both a standard report and a SBG report card. They did suggest that teachers offer differentiated assessments, but they never argued for getting rid of standard assessments such as tests and quizzes.

Working alongside the student-participants, I developed an action plan that provides opportunities for teachers to reflect upon standard grading practices, read and reflect upon pertinent literature, and implement appropriate new policies. This action plan is designed to allow all stakeholders to voice concerns and to have those concerns taken seriously and to have any questions answered by a committee of educators, parents, and students committed to ensuring fair grading practices.

85

Action Researcher

My role as the teacher-researcher presented various challenges throughout this process. Because the nature of action research necessitated that I conduct the study with my students in my class, I was forced to alter my project to accommodate elements outside of my control. Although I knew I must consider myself an outsider who sought to be objective, I am first and foremost a public school teacher who must respect the decisions made by my administration with regard to my teaching assignments and duties.

I must acknowledge that this study was originally designed to take place within a college preparatory junior English class, which is what I have taught for most of my career. These courses are often academically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse. As I prepared this study, I did so with the intention of conducting it within one of those classes. However, two months prior to beginning the study, I found out my teaching assignment had changed and that I was now a sophomore honors teacher. Although I was and remain excited to teach English II Honors, it certainly changed the nature of the research as I was now dealing with a less diverse group of students whose educational experiences were generally favorable and who had typically benefitted from standard grading practices, even if they wished some aspects were different. The student-participants, namely the five student-participants who were interviewed twice, were candid, but I cannot help but think the study would have been quite different if I had conducted this study with participants from a class where 14 out of 28 receive special services or have limited English proficiency.

I also found it challenging to conduct this study because while I am firm in my beliefs about grading practices, I realized early on how many of my colleagues disagreed.

Thus, although I consider myself a curriculum and instruction leader within the school, I was often silent on these issues in conversations. This was particularly challenging for two reasons. The first reason is because, during this study, I did not want to insinuate to my student-participants that I somehow viewed their other teachers' practices as less sound or less valid than my own. The second reason is that when I have been vocal, I have seen how challenging it will be to effect change within the school. Much of this stems from teachers' beliefs about how students will fare outside of school if we change our grading practices. Teachers within the school frequently express concern that allowing students to retake a failed assignment, for example, will not prepare students for college or careers, where, the argument goes, retakes are not allowed. Others suggest that students should never be granted the opportunity to turn work in past a set deadline because it will not teach responsibility. The action plan that I have created alongside my student-participants takes place over multiple years rather than multiple months to provide ample time and opportunity for my colleagues to read, research, collect, analyze, and question and for me to continue to do the same.

Key Questions

This action research study generated several key questions that drove the creation of an action plan that provides opportunities for teachers to reflect upon standard grading practices, read and reflect upon pertinent literature, and implement appropriate new policies:

> KQ1 Given that some students have found standard practices to be acceptable, what changes should be made to ensure students' voices are valued and respected but that what is best for students remains paramount?

KQ2 What steps must be taken to ensure any changes in grading policy or practices are understood by all stakeholders?

Action Plan: Implications of the Findings

I used the findings of this study as well as the input from four of the five interviewed student-participants (one declined to participate) to develop an action plan that can be used to effect change in grading practices at THS. As mentioned, teachers have resisted conversations about grading practices in the past, offering reasons for why they believe change is detrimental to students. The details of this action plan will certainly challenge some teachers within the school, but the goal is to ultimately develop and implement research-based and site-tested strategies that will benefit the students and provide them with opportunities to succeed. This action plan will include opportunities for all stakeholders to ask questions and engage with me and other identified leaders. Although this plan could lead to times of frustration, the ultimate goal is to encourage reading, reflection, and thinking from all teachers over multiple years.

Based loosely on the timeline for standards-based grading implementation outlined by Heflebower, Hoegh, and Warrick (2014), the action plan is designed to be a multi-step, four-year project that will introduce THS to research-based, effective grading practices that clarify the meaning of grades, separate academic achievement from behaviors, and more clearly align grades with instructional standards. Further, this action plan involves the voices of all stakeholders including parents/guardians, administrators, faculty, and students. The last stakeholder listed, students, is particularly important to me as the student-participants expressed the importance of being involved in this process. For example, "Logan" said,

The student are representatives of the school they attended. Their scores are a way of showcasing what a school's teachers are capable of teaching and a way of students showing off what they have been thought. I believe [the principal] should listen to students when it comes to grading so that they could represent their school in a better and more efficient way. (personal communication, January 17, 2017)

Presentation of Findings. The action plan begins at the beginning of year one with a presentation of what I discovered during the process of the present action research study: Although current grading practices are overall working for White, middle-class students, there are still concerns about the way teachers calculate and report grades, and there are areas for students who do not benefit from racial and/or socioeconomic privilege.

First, I will present my research findings and analysis to my principal, the assistant principal in charge of curriculum and instruction, and the school district's secondary instructional coach as they will not only have to provide the authority to move forward and ultimately present the findings to the superintendent and the school board but will also be able to help organize and delineate this information in the most appropriate way.

Committee Selection. Next, we will select members of an oversight committee whose responsibility it is to reflect upon current grading practices and the trends in the literature. An administrator will be assigned to lead the committee alongside me. We will invite parents who are members of the School Improvement Council, three faculty members, and three willing students to participate. These student-participants could

include the four who participated in the development of this action plan, although only three agreed to participating in such a committee. My goal, however, is to include a wider range of racial and socioeconomic voices on the committee. To this end, I will ask students who represent a range of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic identities, ensuring that any conversation about grading does not continue to marginalize the traditionally marginalized. The committee will be responsible for meeting with teachers, students, and parents/guardians as well as administrators and the District's instructional coach to gather information, perceptions, and attitudes about current grading practices. This information will be compiled in a centralized, digital location, such as on Google Drive. The oversight committee will meet monthly to discuss the gathered data. This endeavor will take approximately one school year to complete.

Presenting to Faculty. At the beginning of year two, the committee, after analyzing the results of the present action research study and meeting to reflect and discuss grading practices and trends in the literature, will work together to develop a presentation for the faculty. As the action researcher whose research sparked this initiative, I will lead the presentation, which will ask faculty members to consider the ways in which current grading practices do not necessarily communicate or reflect actual student achievement. For example, I will ask teachers to consider whether they would find it fair if an administrator deducted a dollar from each paycheck for every day lesson plans were late, or if they would find it fair if an administrator used a single observation to make an overall evaluative judgment about their teaching. From there, we will begin to explore how our grading practices, which we may deem fair and just, do not necessarily align with our feelings about how we are evaluated in our professional lives.

Professional Learning Communities. The administrators and faculty members who were a part of the initial committee and I will divide the remaining faculty into professional learning communities (PLCs) based on planning periods. These PLCs will be organized as book clubs, and each book club will be responsible for reading, discussing, and responding to one of the following titles:

- *Answers to Essential Questions About Standards, Assessments, Grading, & Reporting* by Thomas R. Guskey and Lee Ann Jung

- *A School Leader's Guide to Standards-Based Grading* by Tammy Heflebower, Jan K. Hoegh, and Phil Warrick

- *Fair Isn't Always Equal* by Rick Wormeli

- *Grading Exceptional and Struggling Learners* by Lee Ann Jung and Thomas R. Guskey

- *On Your Mark* by Thomas R. Guskey

- *Practical Solutions for Serious Problems in Standards-Based Grading* edited by Thomas R. Guskey

The PLCs will meet once every two weeks during planning periods. Although each PLC will have a leader, I will ultimately be responsible for fielding questions and addressing issues that arise as administrators and faculty wrestle with the implications of shifting grading practices. Through these readings, the members of the PLC should see ways to refine practices including aligning instruction and assessments more closely to instructional standards, changing late work policies to accept late work with minimal or no academic penalty, removing assignments that reward students for having organized notebooks, and utilizing redone assignments in lieu of extra credit. In addition, members

of PLC should begin to see and discuss how a standards-based grading (SBG) report card might look at THS, although a full implementation of SBG is not necessarily the goal of this plan. Once administrators and teachers complete their book studies, we will reconvene as a faculty to discuss areas of concern. We will have concerns brought to the oversight committee, whose job it will be to consider and respond to these concerns and to seek solutions and plan for the next year.

Pilot Testing. The third year of this plan will begin with pilot testing the new research findings. As with the present action research study, this phase of the action plan will necessitate gathering data and reflecting on the findings. During this phase, a select number of teachers, at least one from each content area and at least one college preparatory teacher and one honors-level teacher, will implement the newly developed grading policies. Depending on the willingness of the participants, this could include developing brand new report-card systems, but at minimum, it will include changes such as new late work guidelines and new 'redo' or retake policies. The goal will be to spend a semester with these new policies and to determine both teachers' and students' perceptions of the new practices. Every six weeks, the teachers will meet with the oversight committee to discuss issues, successes, and failures. The oversight committee should be well-versed in the appropriate, necessary literature including the results of the initial action research study.

Presenting the Findings. By April of the third year, it will be the committee's goal to have gathered, analyzed, and reflected upon the available data. At this point, we will develop a proposal to bring to the superintendent and the school board. This proposal will be presented at a school board meeting with the suggestion that the local

board approve the changes to the grading policy at the secondary level with an eye toward refining practices at the elementary and middle-grade levels.

Full Implementation. Assuming our data and suggestions are welcomed warmly by the school board, we will plan on full implementation of new policies and procedures at the beginning of the fourth year. We will do so, however, with the understanding that there will continue to be questions, challenges, reflection, and refinement. This process should never be considered wholly finished.

Facilitating Educational Change

The goal of this action research project was to identify students' perceptions of standard teaching grading practices and to ultimately use those findings to help shape the way grades are reported at THS. From the beginning, the goal was to change the way we as a faculty think about grades and grading and to make those changes based on research and on what is best for our students. It is my desire to ensure that our grades communicate clearly what our students know and can do. It is my firm belief that through practices such as abolishing late work penalties, disaggregating achievement by learning standard, and allowing students to redo or retake assignments rather than offer diluted extra credit assignments, we can achieve a clearer, fuller picture of our students' capabilities.

I recognize, however, that such change is not easy. Teachers, as Evans (1996) explains, are notoriously resistant to change, and I know that asking teachers to reconsider their beliefs about grading practices—the ones they not only use in their classrooms but also the ones they likely experienced as students—is asking for resistance. Admittedly, as I finish this study, I am struggling to reconcile my research-based beliefs

with what I learned from student-participants. I am teaching a new group students, but they are English II honors students as well, and I believe they would be as comfortable with standard practices as their first-semester counterparts. It would be easy for me to maintain status quo. But ease cannot be a prerequisite for change, not when we are considering the education of our students and not when we are considering what is truly fair and equitable. As a curriculum and instruction leader within the school, I feel that I cannot stand back and allow the resistance to keep me from advocating for what I believe is correct. Certainly, as I continually reflect upon the process and the results from the action plan, I may see my beliefs shift and change, but I know it is important to never give in to those who resist solely because resistance is easier.

Facilitating change within any environment, and especially within education, requires a devotion not merely to tradition but also, and perhaps primarily, to what is equitable and what is research-based. The results of this action research study, coupled with what I have uncovered and analyzed in the literature, provides me with the practical, historical, and theoretical context in which to ground my advocacy. Although I certainly have more to read, more to learn, and more to practice, I am confident in my ability to effect change, even on a small scale.

Suggestions for Future Research

I began developing this study when I regularly taught college preparatory, not honors, classes and when my classes better reflected the ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity of the school. The nature of action research required that I conduct this study with my students, and thus, when I began teaching honors classes, this study became about honors students. It is critical, though, to understand that studies on

grading practices at THS should not end with a study of honors students. Future action research at THS should seek to include students that represent a variety of academic, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic voices. A future research project could also incorporate more student voices. I used five because my sample population was only 15, but teachers who have larger classes may want to work with a larger group of student-participants.

Similar action research at THS could include interviewing teachers for their perceptions of grading practices. Because teachers are the ones assigning grades, their biases, perceptions, and understanding of grading and grading practices are crucial to long-term shifts in school policy. Asking teachers to reflect upon their practices may lead to positive changes.

The present action research study sought students' perceptions of grading practices, which is incredibly important and often left out of the literature. However, this action research study did not address student achievement. An action research study that looked at student achievement in a class with standards-based grading practices and compared it to achievement in a class that used standard grading practices could be useful, although a valid and reliable measure of achievement would need to be identified or developed.

Conclusion

I conducted an action research study regarding students' perceptions of teachers' grading practices and asked students to consider their attitudes toward standard grading practices and toward both standard and standards-based grading report cards. Fifteen student-participants expressed their attitudes toward standard grading practices through a

Likert scale. Five student-participants—three females and two males, all middle-class and White—offered their insight on grading practices and report cards through two semi-structured interviews. An analysis of the students' responses showed that while these students are open to changes in grading practices, standard grading practices have served them well and they are not adamant about change. I found no discernable differences between males and females in this study. I did, however, identify and recognize the roles that students' socioeconomic status and race play in determining students' attitudes toward school. Because these students experience socioeconomic and racial privilege and experience the support of a hard-working, firmly middle-class community, they have succeeded and will likely continue to succeed without significant changes to school policies.

Working alongside those students, I developed an action plan to effect change at THS. Over a four-year period, administrators, faculty, and students will work together through professional learning communities, workshops, and committee meetings to research and review related literature, generate potential changes, pilot any changes in willing classrooms, present findings to the superintendent and school board, and implement findings across the school, all with the intent of making grades clear, accurate, and fair for each and every student.

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APPENDIX A

PARENTAL CONSENT LETTER

Dear Parent and Participant,

My name is Drew Timmons, and I am your child's English teacher. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Instruction & Teacher Education at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and I would like to invite your child to participate.

I am studying students' perceptions of traditional grading practices as well as standards-based grading practices. If you permit your child to participate in my study, your child will be asked to complete a survey regarding his/her attitude toward grading practices in school. It is possible that your child will then be asked to meet with me for an interview about his/her attitude toward grading practices. In particular, your child will be asked questions about whether or not he/she believes grades are accurate reflections of what he/she knows and can do and will be asked to compare a traditional grade report with a standards-based grade report.

Participation in this study is completely confidential. Study information will be kept on a password-protected computer or mobile device. Any printed or handwritten paperwork will be kept in a locked closet. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your child's identity will not be revealed. Participation is anonymous, which means that no one (not even the research team) will know your child's name or answers. Your child will not be required to write their name on any of the research materials.

Participation, non-participation, or withdrawal will not affect your child's grade in my class in any way.

You may contact me (by phone at 864-472-2836 ext. 4256 or by e-mail at timmonba@email.sc.edu) or my faculty advisor, Dr. Susan Schramm-Pate (by phone at 803-777-3087 and sschramm@mailbox.sc.edu), if you have study-related questions or problems.

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

106

If you **do not** wish for your child to participate please sign the statement below and return the form to me.

With kind regards,

Drew Timmons
864-472-2836
TimmonBA@email.sc.edu

I do not wish for my child to participate in the above-described study:

Student name: _____

Parent signature: _____

APPENDIX B

LIKERT SCALE

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
I understand how my teachers calculate my grade	1	2	3	4	5
I believe my grades accurately reflect what I know and can do	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers academic expectations are clearly explained	1	2	3	4	5
Non-academic factors such as participation, attendance, and timeliness should be factored into my grades	1	2	3	4	5

108

APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS #1

1. What criteria do your teachers normally use to determine your grade?

2. Thinking back on your grades in other classes, do you believe that your report
   card grades accurately reflect what you actually know? Why or why not?

3. When you receive a certain grade, how clearly do you understand why you
   received that grade?

4. What do you believe your teachers should consider when determining your grade?

APPENDIX D

STANDARDS-BASED GRADING REPORT CARD

Student Name: _____
Class: _____
Period: _____
Grading Period: _____

Achievement Grades		Standard Marks	
A	Exemplary	4	Exemplary
B	Proficient	3	Proficient
C	Satisfactory	2	Basic
U	Unsatisfactory	1	Struggling

Process Marks	
++	Consistently
+	Moderately
-	Rarely

English II Honors – Mr. Drew Timmons

Academic Achievement (Standards Based on ACT QualityCore English 10 Standards)	[Letter Grade]	Process Goals	
Apply reading strategies to informational texts to increase fluency and comprehension.		Participation	
Identify and evaluate how an author uses point-of-view.		Cooperation	
Write a response to literature that organize an insightful interpretation around several clear ideas, premises, or images and support judgments with specific references to the original text.		Punctuality	
Write an introduction that engages the reader.		Homework	

Description/Comments:

APPENDIX E

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS #2

1. How would you compare the way your grade was reported on the standards-based
    report card to the way your grade was reported on the traditional report card?

2. What strengths do you find with the standards-based grading report card in
    comparison to a traditional report card?

3. What weaknesses do you find with the standards-based grading report card in
    comparison to a traditional report card?

4. Based on your experiences with both a traditional report card and a standards-
    based grading report card, what suggestions would you make to me or other
    teachers about the way we report grades?

5. In what ways, if any, are you more aware of your strengths and weaknesses in
    English based on the standards-based grading report card?

6. How do you feel about being included in the conversation about how grading
    practices?