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# Implementation of standards-based grading at the middle school level

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**Implementation of standards-based grading at the middle school level**

by

**Laura Jill Urich**

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to learn about the experiences of teachers as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting (SBR). In order to achieve this overall objective, the following research questions framed this qualitative study:

- 1) What understandings related to practices do middle school teachers have as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?
- 2) What kinds of supports do teachers need as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?
- 3) Is there a change in teachers' clarity regarding what their students know, understand, and do as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?

Twelve teachers from a Midwestern suburban middle school were interviewed individually and in focus groups to provide insight into the research questions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and analyzed. Six themes emerged from the data. First, in a SBR grading scheme, a grade truly represents what a student knows, understands, and is able to do. Second, SBR helps teachers achieve clarity in what their individual students know, understand, and are able to do. Third, active engagement, trust, and support from administration is valued and needed by educators transitioning to SBR. Fourth, resources such as time, professional literature, collaborating with peers, aligning rubrics with the curriculum, observing others implementing SBR, and adopting a reporting tool that is SBR-friendly are essential components of support. Fifth, formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiation are instructional practices that naturally lead to SBR. Sixth, opportunities

for parent education and effective communication with stakeholders are imperative for a successful SBR transition.

The teachers in this study appeared to be happier and more satisfied with their work in moving students forward in their learning when implementing SBR, evidenced by students learning at higher levels as well as teacher clarity in students' instructional needs. The success of the implementation of SBR was due, in part, to a slow, multi-year process of transforming practices that naturally led to SBR such as formative assessment, flexible grouping, feedback, and differentiation. Equally important to changes in instruction was a collaborative culture committed to engaging all students in learning at high levels.

Recommendations for future research are to study schools at the secondary level that have fully implemented SBR, schools that have adopted a dual system of letter grades and SBR, and college level students who have graduated from a secondary SBR system.



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Grading in secondary level schools traditionally has been based on a letter grade system (Black and Wiliam, 1998; O'Connor, 2009; O'Connor, 2011; Reeves, 2011; Wormeli, 2006). In what often seems like an educational lottery, a student's grade is determined by the teacher to which she is assigned and that teacher's subjective approach to grading. For example, the student might have a math teacher who determines final grades from pop quizzes and daily assignments. Alternatively, she might have a teacher that counts her level of participation and attendance as a significant portion of her grade. Meanwhile, the math teacher down the hall who teaches the same course determines grades from homework assignments and the final exam, yet another math teacher awards up to half-credit if a student turns in an assignment a day late, even if it is demonstrated that she knows all of the material. Perhaps there is a math teacher allowing the student to re-take a test if she originally failed it, but she can only earn up to eighty percent on the retake even if she answered one hundred percent of the answers correctly. Another math teacher would allow that student to retake a test for full credit regardless of the original score, but a different math teacher will say the day of the test is a student's one shot to show what she knows and then the class is moving on to the next chapter in the book. To that teacher, it is about covering the curriculum and getting through the book, regardless if the students learn the material.

Despite – and perhaps because of – rampant inconsistencies in grading practices and belief systems about what grades represent, “more and more educators are beginning to question traditional grading practices that were developed to sort students into learners and nonlearners, not to support learning for all” (Brookhart, 2011, p. 10). In the current era of educational accountability, public education is under intense scrutiny to move all students to

proficiency as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Teachers and administrators are being asked to focus on results and take action to improve. In spite of disparate opinions regarding the government's involvement in the accountability of schools' performance, no one can argue the fact that public school employees have a moral and ethical obligation to ensure that students are learning. This is, after all, why teachers entered the field of education in the first place (Goodlad, J., Soder, R., & Sirotnik, K., 1990; Marshall, J., 2009; Purpel, D., 1989; Sergiovanni, T., 1992; Strike, K., 2007). As teachers recall reasons why they entered the educational profession, statements are oftentimes a version of "I love working with kids and want to make a difference in their lives." That "difference" is learning. They certainly did not say, "I do not want kids to learn," or "I want to be a teacher but it doesn't matter if kids learn or not." Rather, they embrace the vision of "human flourishing" that transcends from servant-hood on the part of the teacher (Strike, K., 2007, p. 13).

Contrary to the reasons teachers entered their profession, grading systems have been generated based on teachers' subjectivity and reins of control (O'Connor, 2011; Wormeli, 2006). 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. In an age of accountability where schools are held responsible for the learning of all students, schools now increasingly need data-driven practices that provide the gateway to improved success and achievement for each student. Brookhart (2011) referred to standards-based grading as "learning-focused grading" and a necessary counterpart to reform (p.10). At its core, the foundational principle of standards-based grading is that "grades are not about what students earn; they are about what students learn" (Brookhart, 2011, p. 13).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Traditional grading practices do not accurately reflect what students know, understand, and are able to do, and yet such practices have been widely used by teachers as long as grading has been in existence. Standards-based reporting (SBR), while accurately representing a student's academic performance, faces resistance by many, particularly at the secondary level. What is not known is the degree of teacher clarity around student learning resulting from SBR practices at the middle school level, as well as what supports are needed for middle school teachers to transition to the implementation of SBR with fidelity.

### **Statement of Purpose**

This research project seeks to learn the process middle school teachers in a Midwestern suburban middle school experience as they transition from traditional grading practices to SBR, particularly how it relates to teacher clarity in regards to what students know, understand, and do. The described changes and understandings of the participants in this qualitative case study serve as a model for other middle school teachers and administrators embarking on the implementation of SBR.

### **Research Questions**

In order to understand the teachers' journeys, the qualitative study focused on the following research questions:

- 1) What understandings related to practices do middle school teachers have as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?
- 2) What kinds of supports do teachers need as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?

- 3) Is there a change in teachers' clarity regarding what their students know, understand, and do as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?

### **Significance of Study**

SBR practices empower teachers to meet each student learner at her readiness level by providing the vital information needed to guide differentiated instruction at high levels. Instead of settling for a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching where only some of the students learn at high levels on any given day, SBR provides students and teachers with descriptive information on skill development within the required curriculum. By meeting each student where she is on her own learning continuum on a day-to-day basis, instruction can be appropriately rigorous and will look different for individuals and/or groups of students. As a result, teachers will become confident in their knowledge of what specific students know, understand, and are able to do, and students intimately will come to know themselves as learners. Both stakeholders, teachers and students, take an active role in the learning process. In order to guarantee *all* students are learning, teachers are called upon to change grading practices from a more traditional, letter grade approach to SBR.

In an effort to improve student learning in public education at the secondary level, this research studied the process that teachers experience as they transition from a more traditional grading system of letter grades, a system generally inconsistent in design and practice from one teacher to the next, to a system of SBR. Of particular interest is when the need for the change in grading practices is initiated from the intrinsic calling of the teachers as their own learning experiences in grading create a metamorphosis to best practices.

A qualitative study of twelve middle school teachers was conducted as they participated in their school's building-wide implementation of SBR. The goal was to identify the fundamental principles for a successful transition to SBR at the middle school level, as well as the impact the transition process has on teacher efficacy when the transition results from a grassroots approach. This information serves as a contribution to the field of education as secondary schools turn to research for best practices centered on grading practices which will then contribute to an increase in student learning. Ultimately, this positively impacts the economy because students will be better prepared as productive, contributing citizens in the workforce and society.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The theoretic position in this study was grounded in the “human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world” (Prasad, 2005, p. 13). The intent was to learn about the experience of middle school teachers as they transitioned from traditional grading practices to SBR. This reality construction unveiled the pillars of support necessary throughout the process as well as differentiated components that value the individuality of adult learners is helpful to other secondary schools in their quest for improving student learning through more effective grading and assessment practices. While quantitative research would have provided numerical statistics to generate knowledge around student achievement and practices implemented to gain such results, it did not offer insight into the process participants go through in meeting these goals successfully. Learning intimately about the process offered invaluable information regarding teacher efficacy that focuses on behaviors, beliefs, celebrations, frustrations, and practices that are descriptive, yet results-oriented, in nature. To achieve the desired, necessary results of increased student

learning, the means to the end must be embraced. Thus, it was imperative that the research highlights the context within the process and the meaning of the experiences to the participants. To that end, the driving methodology for this research was a qualitative case study.

There was a need to learn from teachers so the stage can be set in future situations where schools embark on the journey of SBR, particularly at the secondary level where this practice was not the norm. Understanding their perceptions and changes related to practices required understanding of the context. The intent of qualitative research methods to study teachers was to learn the necessary pillars of support as well as differentiated components needed to value the individuality of each of them.

For this dissertation, the researcher studied twelve middle school teachers at a suburban middle school in the Midwest. Data were collected individually and collectively from participants through one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews, and then data were analyzed comparatively within all twelve participant studies.

### **Conceptual and Operational Definitions**

The following definitions were used during the course of this dissertation research study:

*Standard:* Standards specify what all students should know, understand, and be able to do. Standards represent specific learning goals.

*Standards-Based Reporting:* Standards-Based Reporting involves measuring students' proficiency levels using well-defined course objectives. It is the process of reporting students' progress as measured against specific standards or learning targets while, in tandem, using students' proficiency levels and to guide instruction. The fidelity of this

process is grounded in and dependent upon formative assessment. Standards-Based

Reporting is also referred to as:

- SBR (Standards-Based Reporting)
- SBAR (Standards-Based Assessment and Reporting)
- Standards-Based Grading
- SBG (Standards-Based Grading)

### **Dissertation Overview**

Chapter One provided an overview of the purpose and significance for the study of middle school teachers' transition from traditional grading practices to SBR. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on standards-based reporting. Chapter Three describes the methodology and design of this research, a qualitative case study of teachers at a suburban middle school in the Midwest. Also included in Chapter Three are the research questions that serve as a guide throughout the study, the instrument for collecting data, the selected sample of participants, the role of the researcher, and a more detailed account of the conceptual framework.

The results of the study are presented in Chapter Four, and included are interviews with teachers, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter Five concludes with a discussion of the findings that emerged from the research, limitations, and implications for further research. The appendices and bibliography are found following Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review takes an intimate peek into standards-based reporting (SBR), also commonly referred to as standards-based grading (SBG). The chapter begins by explaining the differences between standards-based reporting and traditional letter grades. The limitations of traditional letter grades then are explored, followed by a discussion of fidelity issues related to SBR and what SBR looks like in practice. This review concludes with recognition of some components missing from the research on SBR, thus setting the stage for a qualitative case study in a suburban middle school in the Midwest.

### **Standards-Based Reporting vs. Traditional Letter Grades**

In essence, a standard defines what a student should know, understand, and be able to do in each subject area and grade level (Guskey, 2009, 2011; Jacobs, 2010). Standards communicate the expected end-of-course skills to be mastered. In a practice of SBR, the proficiency levels of students are reported on an ongoing basis and supported by evidence, giving stakeholders a clear picture where each individual student is in relation to the standard as opposed to each other.

SBR is the gateway to increased student learning, serving as the hallmark of differentiated instruction and assessment. Comparing student performance to established levels of achievement in skills, understanding, and knowledge is the basic premise of this type of grading system. Implementation involves evaluating student work in relation to pre-established standards and criteria, usually depicted in rubrics (Guskey, 2009, 2008). Standards are defined as having two components: 1) what students will know, and 2) what students will be able to do as a result of their learning (Guskey, 2011; Guskey and Bailey, 2010). To that end, because of the learning process, the specificity of content in the standard



represents what students are expected to know. The level of performance indicated in the standard represents what the students will be able to do. Achievement will increase when teachers accept the calling to ensure that each student will move forward in her learning (Guskey, 2011; Stiggins and DuFour, 2009). Short of such a commitment, “assessments remain merely tools for grading, sorting, selecting, and ranking students, and teachers will have little reason to explore ways of improving their instructional effectiveness” (Stiggins and DuFour, 2009, p. 643).

Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) spoke to the meaning of SBR versus assigning letter grades:

We grade and test and score kids far more than is needed to effectively guide instruction, and ironically, we too often fail to use the data to actually guide the successive help we provide for individual students. In classrooms where teachers are constantly watching, talking, and working with kids, elaborate grading systems are unnecessary, unhelpful, redundant, and sometimes contradictory. As far as the demand for official grades and records is concerned, teachers can produce a perfectly adequate documentation of students’ growth through the occasional sampling of their work, periodic observations, and once-in-awhile examination of their products. Especially when records are backed up by a portfolio of students’ actual work - the raw material upon which any grade ought to be based - there should be no problem in explaining a given grade. When teachers make this change, substituting descriptive evaluation for grading, they are essentially making a trade: they are swapping time previously spent on scoring, computing, recording, averaging, and justifying grades, in exchange for time to collect, save, discuss, and reflect on kids’ real work. (p. 315)

As these and other commentators note, it is possible and, in their minds, desirable to embrace ongoing analysis of evidence of what the student is learning. This evidence is measured against identified standards, providing the teacher with information to guide instruction. Instead of placing a letter grade or score in the gradebook for each artifact, the teacher is purposeful in assigning a proficiency mark intermittently.

SBR “can and should replace traditional point-based grades” (Scriffiny, 2008, p. 70). A standards-based approach empowers teachers with information to guide instruction, it reduces meaningless assignments and paperwork, and, “it teaches what quality looks like” (Scriffiny, 2008, p. 73). When a student is assessed, the meaning of conversations around her learning differs when focusing on standards as opposed to using the assessment format to define a student’s achievement (O’Connor, 2009; Reeves, 2008; Wormeli, 2006). Wormeli (2006) provided an example when describing the performance of a student named Tanika:

We move from, “Tanika scored well on the first three tests, but blew it on the last one, so her grade is a C,” to ‘Tanika understands the powerful impact of the Byzantine Empire in the early Middle Ages as well as the impact of Charlemagne’s rule and the ongoing battles among the Turks, Christians, and Muslims, but she’s struggling with how events in the last two hundred years of the Middle Ages led so many changes in government, science, and man’s view of himself during the Renaissance.’” (p. 162-163)

As Wormeli noted, the first comment about Tanika lacks information around what the student has actually learned, understands, and is able to do. The second comment provides detailed information to guide further instruction and requires a different focus in thinking, centered on student learning targets as opposed to calculating the values representing the

problems on the test that the student answered correctly. Ultimately, then, the focus of the activity shifts to student learning instead of the design of the teacher's grading system. As a result, there is a daily ebb and flow as the teacher bases learning activities and flexible grouping of students on the formative data. Such flexible grouping refers to how small group and/or individual work is based on need; it is not a one-size-fits-all approach (Tomlinson, 1999, 2010; Boushey and Moser, 2009). An assignment, for example, could be used to formatively assess for the next day or activity by recording the learning outcomes to be assessed at the top of the paper, keeping students focused on their learning instead of which answers are correct or not. To this end, in the words of Wormeli (2006), "Recording more than one grade for the same assignment, focusing on performance per standard, is more work, but the information is more accurate and useful. As we increase the usefulness of grades, it is always a worthwhile endeavor" (p. 165).

Figure 1 below shows O'Connor's (2010) comparison of traditional grading practices and SBR. While a traditional grading system spotlights the individual teacher's subjectivity in grading as well as comparison of students to one another, a standards-based grading system is one of interdependence among learning targets and student involvement in the assessment process. In addition, commitment to addressing and teaching behaviors, such as the responsibility of turning assignments in on time, are equally important to academic performance; they just should not be addressed within the academic grade (Erickson, 2011; Vatterott, 2011).

Figure 1: Traditional Grading System Versus Standards-Based Grading System

| Traditional Grading System   | Standards-Based Grading System   |
|--|--|
| 1. System is based on assessment methods (quizzes, tests, homework, and so on). One grade is given for each subject. | 1. System is based on learning goals and performance standards. One grade is given for each learning goal. |

Figure 1, continued

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 2. Assessments are norm-referenced and based on a percentage system. Criteria are often unclear or assumed.                                 | 2. Standards are criterion-referenced and proficiency-based (using a limited number of levels to assess performance on a scale). Criteria and targets are known to all. |
| 3. Use an uncertain mix of assessment of achievement, attitude, effort, and behavior. Use penalties and extra credit. Include group scores. | 3. Measure only achievement. No penalties or bonuses are given. Includes individual evidence only.  |
| 4. Score everything, regardless of purpose.   | 4. Use only summative assessments for grading purposes.   |
| 5. Include every score, regardless of when it was collected. Assessments record the average, not the best, work.                            | 5. Emphasize the most recent evidence of learning when grading.   |
| 6. Calculate grades using the mean.   | 6. Use median, mode, and professional judgment to determine grade.  |
| 7. Assessments vary in quality. Some evidence comes only from teacher recollection.   | 7. Use only quality assessment, and carefully record data.  |
| 8. The teacher makes decisions about grading and announces those decisions to students.   | 8. Discuss all aspects of grading with students.  |

Source: O'Connor, K. (2010). *A repair kit for grading: 15 fixes for broken grades, second edition*. Assessment Training Institute, Inc.

### Limitations of Traditional Grading Practices

Traditional grading practices present limitations regarding authentically representing what students know and are able to do. This section begins by describing how new teachers lack the skills and understanding of grading. Discussed next are components of traditional grading practices – grading on a curve, using grades as punishment, giving extra credit, not providing retakes for full credit, averaging scores, hodgepodge grading and, using traditional report cards - and their impact on creating a culture of competition and calculating scores versus one that focuses on what a student has actually learned. Finally, this section concludes with a discussion of the cultural bias existing within traditional grading practices.

#### New Teachers Lack Clarity

Although teachers graduate from college with degrees empowering them as educators, the majority quickly learn they are ill-equipped to create and implement a grading

system that is accurate, effective, and justifiable (Whitney, Culligan, & Brooksher, 2004). In fact, all two hundred teachers surveyed throughout grading presentations by Whitney, Culligan, and Brooksher (2004) admitted feeling unprepared as a first year teacher in the area of grading. This feeling of being unprepared can cause confusion and high-stakes consequences for teachers, students, parents, and administrators since one's perceptions around grading practices are more than likely based on their personal experiences as well as limited reflection and understanding of grading practices. Most teachers fall back on what was done to them and apply it in their own grading practices (Guskey, 2004b).

### **Culture of Competition vs. Focus on Learning**

The traditional grading practices of adding up scores to calculate a grade, grading on a curve, and grading pass/fail are all counterproductive to the purpose of learning, and such practices have become more and more dramatically embedded into teaching since first introduced in 1850 (Guskey, 2001, 2011; Kirschenbaum, Napier, & Simon, 1971; O'Connor, 2007; Reeves, 2004). Consequently, there exists a culture grounded in competition and activities instead of learning and collaboration, and the grade has become more important than what the student has actually learned (Purpel, D., 1989). Such primitive practices create a "serious barrier to the true educational process of inquiry, sharing, and dialogue" (Purpel, D., 1989, p. 120).

Kohn (2004, 2011) expanded on this assertion of consequences caused by traditional grading practices and how a student's interest in the learning itself is overshadowed by his focus on earning a mark or score. A student's preference to take on a challenging task is diluted by doing the easier task that will earn the highest mark or score. In addition, the

quality of a student's thinking is potentially decreased with grades because he is focusing on numerical marks instead of qualitative feedback to improve learning.

Patterson (2003) expands this idea with the analogy of educators stuck in a box and that we must break down the walls of the boxes and think differently in regards to areas such as grading, curriculum, organization of students, and use of time. Patterson (2003) spoke to the resistance and experience of being stuck when he said, "The grading box is alive and well, and in some schools and classrooms, it is impenetrable" (p. 572). Additionally, Patterson referenced Glasser's Choice Theory as an approach for schools to increase learning and decrease dropouts (1998). It called for stakeholders in school putting their needs secondary to the students' needs in order for change to happen.

### **Grading on a Curve**

Grading on a curve places the focus on normed performance where students compete with one another, rather than specific learning criteria where students compete with themselves (Guskey, 2000c, 2001, 2009, 2011; O'Connor, 2011; Reeves, 2007, 2004). An example of a student comparing himself to peers is when a parent is concerned about his teenage child's driving skills (Reeves, 2004). While the parent is focusing on the student's individual learning of appropriate, safe driving skills, the student compares his performance to others in an attempt to appear "good enough" by telling his father that he is better behind the wheel than his peers. The point here is that the student is not performing at the expected level of performance, and he should be held accountable in learning the necessary knowledge and skills.

When high grades result from outdoing one's classmates, the learning process becomes a competitive activity rather than one where students are collaborative and are able

to keep the focus on learning (Guskey, 1996). Therefore, grading on a curve communicates nothing regarding what students have learned or are able to do, and some will always receive a failing grade regardless of what they know and are able to do. Grading should be criterion-referenced, not norm-referenced (Guskey, 2001, 2011; Reeves, 2008; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). In a standards-based classroom, “all students could get an A, or ‘Exceeds the standard,’ if they prove that they have learned the material at the corresponding level of mastery” (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006, p. 314).

### **Grades as a Form of Punishment**

Another limitation of a traditional grading system is the practice of using grades as a form of punishment (Guskey, 2000c, 2009, 2011). Studies that support the use of low grades as punishment in order to improve student learning are nonexistent. As a coping strategy to protect her self-image, a student will deem a low grade as meaningless and insignificant. Another student may blame herself for a low grade but feels incapable of making any improvement. Desolately, some teachers consider use the practice of assigning low grades as a weapon to penalize students. In a figurative sense, they wear a badge of honor because students who do not comply with their requirements must suffer the most powerful punishment a teacher can impart: a failing grade. Consequently, students are negatively affected, their relationships with teachers suffer, and there is no educational value inherent to the situation.

Penalties placed on grades for assignments submitted late or not at all are usually in an attempt to teach responsibility, motivate the student, and prepare her for the real world (Guskey, 2000c, 2004b, 2009; O’Connor, 2006, 2011; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). In reality, the grade misrepresents the student’s true achievement.

Additionally, at times it can result in either rebellious behaviors and/or no change in the non-preferred, late behavior. Furthermore, we are doing students a disservice when we hold tightly to absolute deadlines:

In the world beyond school, as adults, if we are not able to meet a timeline, we often can communicate with the person/institution to whom we are responsible, arrange a new mutually agreeable timeline, and then work to meet it. This is the responsible, adult behavior that we need to encourage in students and we do this by allowing them to request extensions. This is preferable to students ‘hiding in the back corner’ as they often do when they have late or missing assessment evidence. If we want students to be responsible and timely, then we can teach them and help them along the way, rather than assume they will learn the lessons through punitive policies. (O’Connor, 2011, p. 25)

### **Extra Credit**

Extra credit is often used but many times has little to do with required curriculum and learning targets (O’Connor, 2011; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006; Wormeli, 2006). If and when students want to increase their grade, they should be required to show evidence of mastery by being given additional opportunities to both learn and demonstrate their learning. Ultimately, a student’s grade is distorted when she is given an extra credit opportunity that is either academic in nature yet not aligned with the curricular gap in learning, or requiring of tasks such as bringing in a box of Kleenex or not using a bathroom pass (O’Connor, 2011).



## **Retakes**

In a traditional grading system, students are not given an opportunity to retake an assessment (Wormeli, 2006). Once a test is taken by students and checked by the teacher, the class moves on to the next topic or unit. However, when a teacher promotes learning in a differentiated classroom, students are given opportunities to re-do an assignment or retake an exam (Dueck, 2011; Wormeli, 2006, 2011). To assume that every student will have arrived at the same point on the learning continuum with a particular skill or concept at the same moment in time on the same day is rather senseless (Wormeli, 2006, 2011). Rather, it should be recognized that everyone learns at a different pace and in a different way. Students should be provided the opportunity to extend their learning by applying the feedback they are given, and this will support their understanding of the purpose of their learning as well as the importance of improving from mistakes (Brookhart, 2008). They deserve multiple opportunities to learn and demonstrate success (Guskey, 2003). Adult examples of continued opportunities of practice to prepare for success include a lawyer practicing debate before trial, a pilot simulating landings and take-offs before flying a plane, an architect redesigning plans until specifications are met, and surgeons practicing surgery on a cadaver before cutting open a live person (Wormeli, 2011).

## **Averaging of Scores**

It is not uncommon for a traditional grading system to average grades for a final report card grade, including homework, papers, presentations, tests, and quizzes. Instead of the final grade dependent upon the weights assigned to each source of evidence, SBR celebrates and focuses on the student's performance at the end of a learning unit or grading period (Guskey, 2009; Marzano and Heflebower, 2011; O'Connor, 2011; O'Connor and

Wormeli, 2011; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). This practice of using the student's performance at the end of a grading period to determine a grade is especially important if a student's past performance no longer reflects his/her performance level (Guskey, 1996; Marzano and Heflebower, 2011; O'Connor, 2011; O'Connor and Wormeli, 2011; Wormeli, 2006). Clymer and William (2006/07) support this argument of dynamic reporting:

Grades based on the accumulation of points over time are counterproductive for several reasons. First this approach encourages shallow learning. In most classrooms, if students forget something that they have been previously graded on, they get to keep the grade. When students understand that it's what they know by the end of the marking period that counts, they are forced to engage with the material at a much deeper level. Second, not altering grades in the light of new evidence of learning sends the message that the assessment is really a measure of aptitude rather than achievement. When assessment is dynamic, however, all students can improve. They come to see ability as incremental rather than fixed; they learn that smart is not something you are. It's something you become. (Clymer & William, 2006/2007 in O'Connor, 2009, p. 147)

The practice of averaging and crunching numbers to reach a final grade for a student was presented as a parachute analogy by O'Connor (2009), which was originally developed and adapted by Burger and Davies (2000). In this analogy are the assessment scores earned by three students who completed a skydiving course. Student A began the course strong by earning high scores and then experienced a downward trend in her performance levels.

Student B's performance was inconsistent as she performed above and below mastery level

intermittently. Student C began the course at the lowest level of proficiency when compared to the other two students, and yet she gradually improved. Her scores showed an upward trend, which resulted in the highest scores by the end of the course when compared to her peers, and the only set of end-of-course scores that ended above mastery level. If the teacher used a system to average all scores for a final grade, all three students earned the same grade at the end. However, when considering the mastery level of each student at the end of the course, Student C was most successful in packing a parachute, and she showed ongoing, persistent growth throughout the course. Ultimately, then, a skydiver would want Student C to pack their parachute. With traditional grading practices, the skydiver would have selected any of the three students since they all earned the same final score, and yet Students A and B do not possess the skills to keep the skydiver safe.

### **Hodgepodge Grading**

Hodgepodge grading speaks to the variance among teachers as it pertains to the number and types of sources of evidence of learning they use to determine a letter grade (Guskey, 2009; O'Connor, 2009). The lack of consensus about beliefs, validity, purpose, and appropriateness of these sources is at the heart of a traditional system, and this creates a roadblock for students to their learning. Then, the typical single grade placed on the grade report is entirely dependent upon the individual teacher's grading system and chosen sources of evidence. Included in this system are her percentage system, inclusion of behavior, and values attached to each assignment, project, and test. For example, while some teachers penalize students' grades for not doing practice/homework and other teachers do not even include practice/homework in their grading, "The student who does no homework yet aces the test could fail in one school and earn a B in the other" (Fisher, Frey, and Pumpian, 2011,

p. 49). Oftentimes, differences between a student who earns A's and B's and a student who earns D's and F's are "work ethic, parental involvement, intelligence, homework, engagement, nutrition, attitude, test-taking ability, prior knowledge, organization, commitment, and drug use" (Reeves, 2011a, p. 32). This inclusive list has nothing to do with what the students have learned and everything to do with characteristics of the students. A standards-based system serves as a solution to hodgepodge grading because the focus is placed on specific criteria and skills, separating behavior from academic achievement (Guskey, 2009; O'Connor, 2009; O'Connor and Wormeli, 2011; Reeves, 2011a; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006).

### **Traditional Report Cards**

The use of a traditional report card at the secondary level presents challenges in regards to clearly communicating what a student has learned (Stiggins, Alter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). Often included in report cards are grades that "mix compliance and understanding" and, the weight that each category - such as behavior, homework, projects, tests, and quizzes - contributes to a student's grades "varies across teachers, schools, districts, and states" (Fisher, Frey, and Pumpian, 2011, p. 46). There is a lack of specific information about the student's performance in relationship to the academic standards, and sometimes the grades are not even based wholly on the standards. This confusion and inconsistency among teachers' grading practices are evident during parent/teacher conferences when a teacher attempts to explain the criteria that determined the student's grade. There is evidence that "good marks in high school may not represent the imprimatur of college preparedness that we expect" (Goodwin, 2011, p. 81). The fact that thirty percent of freshman from four-year universities drop out during or after their first year of college nationwide calls to question

whether or not their good grades in high school accurately reflected what they had learned, and if they were met with too challenging of a curriculum in college (Goodwin, 2011).

Grading and reporting methods should be used “to enhance, not hinder, teaching and learning” (Guskey, 1994, p. 17).

### **Cultural Bias**

Reeves (2008) has noted the cultural bias of traditional grading practices. On a vocabulary test, for example, the words could possibly represent a particular part of the country or culture, and students unfamiliar to these words would receive a low score. As a result, these particular students are penalized with a low grade, and the assessment does not accurately measure what was intended to be measured. Grading a student’s performance against a particular standard is the gateway to obtaining an accurate diagnosis of her strengths and areas for growth, as opposed to influencing the perception of her performance with political or cultural issues. Therefore, SBR practices break down barriers for communities that have not been well-served by schools. Another example of cultural bias is the fact that grading scales vary significantly from country to country (Guskey, 2009). A system of SBR explains age-appropriate achievement in a way that parents and students understand, and it is modified to meet the needs of the learners when necessary. Instances of when this modification would occur are schools serving English Language Learners or students with Individualized Education Plans. With a traditional grading practice, assigning of letter grades creates confusion where the meaning of what was learned is lost. SBR provides clarity in regards to where an individual learner is within a particular concept or skill.

### **Implementation of Standards-Based Reporting with Fidelity**

Guskey (2010) presented five essential understandings for successful implementation of SBR, and they serve as the foundation for educators' beliefs and practice. First, standards are not new. There has been an increased emphasis throughout the last few decades calling to action the need for specific learning targets, but little has been done to actually change practices. In fact, Tyler (1949) asserted the need for identifying, before the instructional process begins, what students should know and do as well as evidence needed to demonstrate their learning. Additionally, Tyler stressed the most effective way to assess teachers' effectiveness is to measure what the students know and are able to do.

The second essential understanding presented by Guskey (2010) is that standards reflect philosophy of schooling. The educational reform of SBR drastically slows down because of philosophical differences. These philosophical conflicts present themselves at the heart of a school's purpose as preparing students for the real world representing the current society versus preparing students to take the initiative to improve society, which includes higher-order thinking skills, autonomy, resiliency, and self-discipline (Tyler, 1949). This calls to action the need for a shared vision to be generated by all stakeholders.

Third, the terminology used is less important than the ideas (Guskey, 1999; Guskey, 2000; Guskey, 2010). While it is imperative to distinguish terminology that communicates to all stakeholders, providing clarity and consistency, a word of caution is to not get caught up in words and definitions. Rather, it is important to keep student learning at the heart of these discussions, discussing and agreeing on what students should be able to know and do and what evidence they are expected to exhibit as a result.

Fourth, many good ideas are implemented poorly, if at all (Guskey, 1999; Guskey, 2000; Guskey, 2010). It is common for states to outline required curriculum standards, and then little, if anything, is done to provide teachers with the support, resources, and accountability to implement them. A significant step needed for effective implementation of the curriculum is congruency with and identification of implementation of procedures. High quality professional development for teachers focused on best practices that link curriculum, instruction, and assessment is imperative.

The fifth essential understanding focuses on the idea that success is contingent upon what happens at the classroom level (Guskey, 1999; Guskey, 2000; Guskey, 2010). Senge discussed how the transformation of any organization is dependent upon the action that takes place at the smallest level (1990). Actively involving teachers in the change process with ongoing job-embedded professional learning and support must happen for SBR to be successfully implemented.

O'Connor (2009) listed eight actions that when put into practice, demonstrate SBR with fidelity. First, the learning targets should be congruent with grading procedures. Second, criterion-referenced performance standards as opposed to norm-referenced performance standards, should serve as the points of reference to determining one's grades. Third, the valued aspects of grades should be bound by individual achievement. Fourth, a grade should be determined by samples of a student's performance rather than all scores. Fifth, student performance should be recorded in the grade book in pencil so it can be updated efficiently. Sixth, numbers representing scores should be crunched gingerly, if at all. Seventh, quality assessments are vital. Finally, students should be actively involved in the teaching and learning process, including assessment and grading. These eight SBR components in tandem

with those presented by Guskey (2010) and Tyler (1949) represent the gateway to the fluidity of the teaching and learning process.

With SBR, long gone is the day when units and lessons are planned out months in advance. Instead, we are responding to the learner and recognizing that everyone learns at a different pace and in a different way (Cash, 2011). Differentiation, then, is essential through the three elements of content, process, and product, and based on the three categories of student readiness, interest, and learning profile (Tomlinson, 1999, 2010). This promotes flexible grouping, which is guided by the standards and the students' proficiency levels in relation to them (Reeves, 2008).

Ethically, we cannot expect that every student is going to learn the same way every day and perform at the exact level on a given day and time (Wormeli, 2006, 2011). Wormeli (2006) explained this idea well when speaking to the significant transformation that adolescents experience developmentally. Highlighted was the tremendous growth spurt that takes place during the first two years of one's life and that adolescence is "the next most dramatic transformation physically, emotionally, and intellectually of our lives. Ages ten to eighteen rivals ages zero to two in terms of how much we change" (p.114). For a teacher to expect that one hundred percent of her students will demonstrate one-hundred percent proficiency on the same test at the same time on the same day is "absurd, even abusive" (p. 114). An example he presented states, "How arbitrary and without justification it is to declare that the third of February is when everyone will be at the same point in their mastery of 'The Federalist Papers,' and there's no chance earlier or later to demonstrate and be given credit for full mastery" (p. 114). This practice casts a negative spell on the learning and confidence of students who need additional examples, more time, or a different route to reaching the



desired level of proficiency. Erroneous grades “play havoc on students’ lives and our professional integrity” (O’Connor and Wormeli, 2011, p. 42).

### **Balanced Assessment**

Balanced assessment in the learning process refers to *formative assessment*, viewed as assessment *for* learning which guides instruction, and *summative assessment*, viewed as assessment *of* learning which compares local student performance with other schools and districts seeking the same outcomes (Burke, 2010; Tomlinson, 2010; O’Connor, 2009; Danielson, 2007; Davies, 2007; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Voltz, Sims, & Nelson, 2010). Additional components of balanced assessment include common formative assessments developed collaboratively by teachers, differentiated assessments allowing students multiple ways to demonstrate what they have learned, and the various types of formative assessments based on skills and/or knowledge students must demonstrate (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2006). These formative assessments design the road map by providing information during the instructional process, before the summative assessment. Communication between the teacher and student is intertwined throughout this ongoing, dynamic process as they use the formative data to make decisions about further action steps to promote learning (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007; Davies, 2007).

An assessment is formative when approached in a timely, specific manner, honoring that there is time to take action that will guide instruction (Burke, 2010; Danielson, 2007; Davies, 2007; Popham, 2009). Examining student work empowers teachers to gain insight into their own teaching as well as the students’ learning, and this analysis can ultimately determine a different, more effective approach (Danielson, 2007; Guskey, 2000; Popham, 2009). Danielson (2007) asserted, “the full power of assessment is realized only when

teachers also include assessment for learning in their instructional planning” (Danielson, 2007, p. 62). She went on to explain that this type of assessment serves to “indicate that its purpose is not to certify mastery of content by students but to provide information to both students and teachers as to what has not yet been learned and to guide next steps” (p. 62). Those teachers who specifically design their formative assessments with the purpose of providing diagnostic information are considered experts in their field (Danielson, 2007).

The primary purpose of formative assessment is to improve student learning (Popham, 2008). Teachers improve their practice and adjust instruction based on the process of formative assessment. Merely assessing the students is not enough. It is the act of responding to the current evidence of students’ mastery levels in relation to the learning target that makes a difference. Therefore, the formative assessment process creates the ongoing sense of urgency to respond now instead of later. In essence, according to Tomlinson (2007/2008), “Informative assessment isn’t an end in itself, but the beginning of better instruction” (p. 11).

The greatest significance of the formative assessment process lies in teachers and students using results as feedback to adjust and improve learning at every turn (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007; Davies, 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2007; O’Connor, 2009; Wormeli, 2006). Aligning the instruction with the learning gap “cannot be done successfully without differentiating classroom instruction. In any classroom, one student’s ‘just right gap’ will not always be the same as another’s” (Heritage, 2007, p. 145). Foundational elements of a teacher’s knowledge critical to achieving the desired results of formative assessments are knowledge of effective assessment practices, knowledge within the domain, knowledge of content pedagogy, and knowledge of students’ previous learning (Heritage, 2007).

Formative assessments can be categorized into four areas: summaries and reflections; lists, charts, and graphic organizers; visual representations of information; and collaborative activities (Dodge, 2009). Exit cards can be referred to as the most efficient formative assessment, which can be in the form of an index card or sticky notes that are submitted as students leave the classroom. Responses can swiftly be sorted into three groups: those who have mastered the learning target and need additional challenges, those who are ready to apply the skill to master the learning target, and those who have not yet mastered and need re-teaching. This data, then, guide the flexible grouping on a day-to-day basis (Dodge, 2009; Reeves, 2008). Since formative assessments are an integral part of the process of learning, they should not be given a grade/mark as a summative assessment would (Dodge, 2009; O'Connor, 2011; Wormeli, 2006). Instead, they should provide opportunities for students to practice their skills and apply their learning (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007/2008; O'Connor, 2009; Wormeli, 2006).

Popham (2008) spoke to three areas of clarification in formative assessment necessary for students to understand: the learning target, the evaluative criteria, and the building blocks. The building blocks provide clarity for the students and teacher in regards to the progression of learning related to the required learning target that is aligned with the curriculum. As instruction progresses, the building blocks become more meaningful and relevant to the students as they provide the necessary information on the skills they must master in order to reach or exceed the curricular aim. Throughout this progression, the teacher collects evidence on individual students' performance in relation to the building blocks.

Black and Wiliam (1998) reviewed more than twenty studies representing numerous subject areas and countries, ranging in student groups from university level to five-year-olds. Their findings illustrated that improving the formative assessment process in the classroom significantly increases student learning. The effect sizes were found to be larger than most related to an educational intervention, ranging typically between 0.4 and 0.7. In other words, the presence of ongoing descriptive feedback, active student involvement, differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, quality assessments, and student involvement in self-assessing display significant gains in achievement.

Danielson (2007) presented two components with accompanying rubrics for teachers to use as a guide for their own practice around assessment: *Designing Student Assessment* and *Using Assessment in Instruction* (See Appendix A). In tandem with determining what students will learn, “teachers must decide how they know if the students have learned it” (Danielson, 2007, p. 178). Accordingly, as outlined in both rubrics, the creation of assessments is an essential component in the process instructional planning. Congruency must exist between what is taught and what is assessed, “otherwise student learning will be measured incorrectly and evidence will be inaccurate” (O’Connor, 2009, p. 41). Assessment now plays a larger role as an integral part of the instruction instead of the end of it. Teachers have recognized assessment as “a highly valuable tool in their instructional repertoire” (Danielson, 2007, p. 86).

Popham (2008) presented the cultural shifts that transform the classroom when formative assessment permeates the learning process, specifically regarding expectations and responsibility for learning as well as the role of assessment. First, significant and meaningful learning shifts only from those who exclusively possess academic aptitude to all students,

regardless of their place on the learning continuum. Second, the weight of responsibility to move students forward in their learning shifts from the teacher as the solitary agent to students accepting responsibility for their individual learning as well as that of their peers. Third, assessment transforms from a formal process that produces data comparing students to a surge of formal and informal assessments that produce informational data to guide instruction. Essentially, teacher instruction and student learning improves when practical, relevant assessments provide data to guide next steps in the learning process (Guskey, 2003). Assessments should be viewed by teachers “as an integral part of the instruction process and as crucial for helping students learn” (Guskey, 2003, p. 9). The most significant impact of assessments on increased student learning will not be recognized if schools use results merely to rank themselves and students (Guskey, 2000, 2004, 2011).

### **Student Self-Assessment**

When teachers comprehend the value of student metacognition as it pertains to assessment, students are empowered as they “develop the ability to monitor and assess their own learning so that they recognize when they are learning and when they are not” (Heritage, 2007, p. 143). Self-regulation is directly linked to self-assessment, and thus, students will “act in ways that result in learning” as they develop strategies to respond when they recognize they are not learning (Heritage, 2007, p. 143). Motivational beliefs and levels of self-efficacy in students ultimately influence their learning (Heritage, 2007).

This concept of student self-assessment is further expounded as O’Connor (2009) showcased teacher Keri Helgren on her approach to using formative assessment and standards to guide assessment practices. In her quest to producing learners who are independent thinkers, she referred to the transformation of her role with instruction and

assessment by saying, “This ‘sage on the stage’ is now a ‘guide on the side,’ and I wouldn’t have it any other way” (p. 259). She declared students “are not empty receptacles waiting to be filled” and that she is not “the keeper of all knowledge” (p. 259).

Self-assessing empowers students as they internalize learning criteria and develop a sense of responsibility and ownership in the learning process, which ultimately promotes mastery in performance. Self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation emerge and become guiding forces for them, making a positive impact on effort, participation, and achievement (Boushey & Moser, 2009; Guskey, 2009; Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Reeves, 2008). Guskey (2009) referenced this concept of intrinsic motivation and its greater weight on understanding versus rewards and punishments when describing a learning goal-oriented student as one who “is motivated by a desire to improve knowledge to have deeper understanding” and that “getting the reward or avoiding punishment is secondary” (p. 116). The ensuing result then, is motivation and learning at an intrinsic level. Behaviors representative of this intrinsic drive include students selecting more challenging tasks, demonstrating independent learning, engaging for longer periods of time and, expressing positive attitudes in the learning process. Student motivation is driven by the desire to experience success as opposed to avoiding failure, and inherently understood is the clarity in the association between effort and level of performance (Guskey, 2009).

Involving students in self-assessment and monitoring their own progress allows them to be more in tune with their proficiency levels (Black & Wiliam, 1998; O’Connor, 2011; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis, 2006; Tomlinson, 2011). Jacobs (2010) challenged us with the question, “Are we educating students for a life of tests or for the tests of life?” (p. 225) The traditional evaluation paradigm must shift to be congruent with the sense of

urgency for students to move from external evaluation to self-assessment. Instead of relying on assessment to merely assign a letter grade, “assessment should be a mechanism for providing ongoing feedback to the learner and to the organization as a necessary part of the spiraling process of continuous renewal” (Jacobs, 2010, p. 225). If high school students graduate with a dependency on other people “to tell them when they are adequate, good, or excellent, then they’ve missed the whole point of what self-directed learning is about” (Jacobs, 2010, p. 225).

Pink (2009) presented three levels of motivation, whereas Motivation 1.0 is the ancient drive to survive. Motivation 2.0 refers to being rewarded for good work with pay, benefits, and promotions. Thus, Motivation 2.0 refers to those who are motivated by external rewards. Motivation 3.0 represents intrinsic motivation comprised of those who embrace autonomy, mastery, and purpose in their work, and Pink declared this is where high levels of results happen in organizations. Additionally, he presented five steps for achieving Motivation 3.0. The first step is embracing the will to practice ruthlessly to improve performance. Secondly, one must be diligent in repetition when practicing skills. Third, one must seek out ongoing, specific, constructive feedback. The fourth step involves focusing on weaker skill areas needing the most growth. Finally, the fifth step is knowing that the first four steps will be physically and mentally draining.

Self-regulation emerges when a person is able to make meaning from his/her own thought processes, and this includes goal-setting around learning, generating action steps and strategies for achieving them, and producing products of learning (Brookhart, 2008; Reeves, 2008; Voltz, D., Sims, M., & Nelson, B., 2010). When someone is motivated intrinsically, he “is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external prods,

pressures, or rewards” (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 26). Both external, descriptive feedback from the teacher, for example, and internal feedback from the student are instrumental in empowering students with self-regulation, which includes their understanding and assessment of where their performance stands in relation to the learning target as well as specific next steps in their learning process (Butler & Winne, 1995, Tomlinson, 2011). Developing these “habits of the mind” does not happen overnight and require ongoing “practice, reflection, evaluation, and persistence” (Jacobs, 2010, p. 215). Students need to build stamina to strengthen their metacognition skills. Jacobs (2010) referred to this process with the analogy of a reflective staircase with each step closer to full internalization of metacognitive habits used by thinkers who are self-directed and effective in their approach. While the goal is to continue moving upward, students should maintain the capacity to take a step backward for reflection. “Teachers can help students become more metacognitive by inviting students to be aware of, reflect on, talk about, and evaluate their thinking. Learning to think about their thinking can be a powerful tool in shaping, improving, internalizing, and habituating their thinking” (Jacobs, 2010, p. 215). The results from a study of early adolescents’ cheating behaviors and beliefs in science, by Anderman, Griesinger, and Westerfield (1998), illustrate an increase in cheating behaviors when students view their educational experiences as extrinsically focused. To contrast, students who viewed their educational experiences as more intrinsically focused showed fewer cheating behaviors. Student motivation is negatively impacted by extrinsic rewards (Goodwin, 2011). As declared by Kohn (2011), “Every study that has investigated the impact of grades on intrinsic motivation has found a negative effect” (p. 29).



## Performance-Based Instruction

McTighe (1996/1997) highlighted the seven principles of performance-based instruction, which are necessary for students to learn the skills needed to prepare them for their current and future worlds. The first principle is to establish clear performance targets. Teachers must be confident and focused in what students are able to know, understand, and do as a result of the instructional process, and this information should be clearly communicated to students (McTighe, 1996/1997, Tomlinson, 2011). Second, products and performances should be authentic in nature as much as possible. Students should be expected to demonstrate learning in a way that reflects the world outside of the walls of their classroom. Third, criteria and performance standards should be published so all stakeholders are provided with transparent information. “When students have opportunities to examine their work in light of known criteria and performance standards, they begin to shift their orientation from, ‘What did I get?’ to, ‘Now I know what I need to do to improve?’” (McTighe, 1996/1997, p. 8). The fourth principle is to provide models of excellence. Sharing this with students in conjunction with evaluation criteria and assessment rubrics guides their understanding of the expected elements of quality. Fifth, strategies must be taught explicitly. Teachers can and must teach students how to think via strategies such as communicating the purpose of the strategy, modeling, providing guided practice accompanied by feedback, allowing students to practice applying their skills collaboratively and independently, and engaging students in continuous reflection. The sixth principle is the use of ongoing assessments for feedback and adjustment. The role of assessment is recognized as more than just measuring performance; it enhances it by guiding instructional practices. Finally, the seventh principle is to document and celebrate progress. In a standards-based classroom,

when a number of students are not performing a standard at mastery level, it is crucial to celebrate the progress that emerges along the way. The learning exists on a continuum rather than a grade/mark representing one snapshot in time.

### **Gradual Release of Responsibility**

The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model provides a framework for teachers to respond effectively and in a timely manner throughout the formative process (Fisher and Frey, 2008). It provides for communication of the learning target, metacognition, modeling, think-alouds, differentiation, collaborative learning, flexible grouping based on student performance, and scaffolding that ultimately leads to students independently performing at mastery level. The process embeds fluidity of a focus lesson, “I do it,” guided instruction, “We do it,” collaborative learning, “You do it together,” and, independent learning, “You do it alone.” While the responsibility of teaching and learning lies on the teacher’s shoulders during the focus lesson, it is gradually released to the student throughout the learning process. In a standards-based classroom, the Gradual Release Model paves the way for formative assessment to guide learning for individual students because teachers will gradually release the responsibility to students as they demonstrate targeted proficiency levels.

### **Reporting of Performance**

The use of the one-hundred point scale is discouraged, although most teachers use it (Marzano, 2010). While it is easy to assign a percentage to an assessment, the score does not inform the teacher or student of what specifically the student knows, is able to do, and whether or not any learning took place. When considering a standards-based approach, Arter and Busick (2001) offer one example of symbols to use to communicate student learning:

- 4 = Exceeds standard for this grade
- 3 = Meets standard for this grade (proficient)
- 2 = Does not meet standard but is making progress
- 1 = Does not meet standard (not progressing)
- X = Not covered in this reporting period

So all data are considered during and at the end of the grading period, quality record keeping is essential (O'Connor, 2009). A teacher's gradebook should be organized by standards, not by the informational source such as homework, quizzes, or tests. This approach tightens the teacher's focus on what the students have learned and guides the progress and instructional journey (O'Connor, 2011; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). Additionally, it creates a more comprehensive picture of an individual student's strengths and weaknesses. When considering just a single grade or symbol, it "cannot do justice to the different degrees of learning a student acquires across all learning outcomes" (Borich & Tombari, 1999, p. 213). Parents and students should fully expect that grades on high school transcripts "to at least serve as reliable benchmarks by which to measure student readiness for college" (Goodwin, 2011, p. 80).

Guskey (2004b; 2009) and O'Connor (2011) explained that in place of a low grade, a reporting system focused on learning the standards would consider the work unfinished and require additional instruction. A mark of Incomplete, for example, holds the student accountable for learning rather than letting him/her off the hook with a zero.

Not only are grades non-essential for students to learn, they are not needed in the instructional process (Frisbie & Waltman, 1992; Guskey, 1994). Rather, it is necessary for teachers to assess students on an ongoing basis to diagnose their learning and create action

steps for instruction. High school students without grades are accepted to both public universities and private colleges “on the basis of narrative reports and detailed descriptions of the curriculum,” and this provides “a fuller picture of the applicant than does a grade point average” (Kohn, 2011, p. 32). These students without high school grades have proven to be “more motivated and proficient learners, and thus better prepared for college than their counterparts who have been pre-occupied with grades” (Kohn, 2011, p. 32).

### **Use of Rubrics**

Accurate scoring guides and keys are paramount for consistency and clarity around instructional practices and student learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis, 2006). Rubrics provide teachers with an opportunity to “define complex learning targets and ensure that judgments about student work are consistent over time, between assignments, and with colleagues” (Arter & Chappuis, 2006, p. 3). They aid in the establishment and communication of criteria for assessing, relieving subjectivity on the teacher’s part (Arter & Chappuis, 2006; Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009). When done well, rubrics are the vehicle for descriptive feedback on performance of standards, and there are twenty-two components that make an outstanding rubric:

1. Focus on what’s important.
2. Be clear enough for everyone to understand.
3. Define various levels of success.
4. Be available in student-friendly language.
5. Include only those aspects of a performance or product that are most valued.
6. Include what is valued most as major parts of the rubric.

7. Align with standards.
8. Have a user-friendly format.
9. Provide directions for use.
10. Make language consistent across levels.
11. Make levels distinguishable.
12. Use no 'fudge words,' such as 'adequate' or 'sometimes.'
13. Have models to illustrate what is meant.
14. Contain descriptive detail.
15. Define terms.
16. Have visuals to reinforce definitions.
17. Use non-value-based adjectives.
18. Don't be negative at the low end.
19. Be age appropriate.
20. Match important goals.
21. Include information on what the student did right at each level.
22. Make it clear how to differentiate between score points (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis, 2006, p. 201).

Furthermore, irrelevant components should not be included in a rubric, nor should the student be assessed on them (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis, 2006). For example, if the rubric provides the guide for the development of a visual representation on a student's understanding of dinosaurs, a black and white poster demonstrating the same proficiency as one created with red, blue, and green colors should earn the same score. Requiring at least three colors on the rubric is irrelevant to the required learning target for the students.

Collaborative development of rubrics among teachers should include six necessary steps (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis, 2006). First, teachers should establish their knowledge base. This is done by pulling together resources on previous rubrics that have been created and tapping into one another's areas of expertise around assessment. The second step calls for teachers to gather samples of student performance. Once they've determined the skill or concept being measured, they need to collect samples covering a range of proficiency levels. Third, the teachers should sort student work samples by levels of quality labeled strong, middle, and weak/emerging. During this process, they collectively define their reasons for placing each sample in its selected pile. Next, the descriptors developed in the previous step should be clustered into traits. During this step, it is possible that an additional level of quality may emerge, and some descriptors may be combined because they overlap. In the fifth step, sample performances demonstrating each level of quality are identified. These provide anchor evidence for teachers to work consistently amongst each other and within their own assessing on an ongoing basis. Finally, the sixth step of rubric development involves embracing the concept as an ongoing process of continuous improvement. Rubrics can and should be analyzed by their developers and tweaked, changed, and refined as necessary.

Arter and Chappuis (2006) described a process of eight steps for rubric development. First, a relevant learning target needs to be selected. Second, it is recommended to collect existing scoring guides of high quality to use as modeling and inspiration. The third step entails the gathering of student work samples, which represent a broad range of performance on the selected learning target. This naturally leads to the fourth step, involving sorting student work into three categories of proficient, developing, and beginning, while justifying

the reasons in writing throughout the sorting process. In the fifth step, similar indicators are grouped together. This is when the rubric begins to come to fruition and generally goes through numerous revisions. Step six calls for teachers to identify work samples showcasing each level on each criterion. This is done most effectively when they start with extremes and then move into examples for the middle. It is important each level is represented by several examples so students do not perceive there is one way to perform mastery. The seventh step involves actually using the rubric while revising it as necessary. Finally, step eight jumpstarts the ongoing cycle of scoring and revising. It is imperative, then, to recognize that “rubrics are always works in progress. As educators refine their understanding of the learning target through use of the rubric, the rubric becomes more and more precise, comprehensive, and useful” (p. 80).

The success of students, as well as the call for clarity for teachers, parents, and students, is found in an approach empowering students to know their learning target and where they are in relationship to it (Davies, 2007; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). “The benefits of clear targets to students are indisputable” (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis, 2006, p. 57). Because clear targets provide a vision to both the teacher and students in regard to where they are headed, standards serve as clear learning targets for students, and rubrics provide clarity in achieving mastery and exceeding them.

### **Feedback to Students**

After examining 134 meta-analyses of all potential influences on student achievement, Hattie (2009) revered feedback as “among the most powerful influences on achievement” (p.173). Paramount to the purpose of feedback is specifically describing the quality in student work relative to the learning targets (Brookhart, 2008). Second, students

need assistance in developing improvement strategies based on teacher observations. Third, feedback has the power to generate self-efficacy for students by linking their efforts with successes in performance.

Descriptive, timely feedback is at the core of SBR (Davies, 2007; Reeves, 2011a, 2011b; Tomlinson, 2011), and this feedback can be written or oral (Brookhart, 2008). It is common for teachers to feel resistant in taking time to assess and provide feedback due to fear of the lack in time to cover their curriculum (Dodge, 2009). Dodge asserted that, “Yet in the rush to cover more, students are actually learning less” (2009, p. 4). Time must be protected and structured for students to reflect on and interact regarding new information in order for them to achieve mastery and retain it.

The comparison of a classroom with an athletic sport such as basketball demonstrates the value of feedback in improving one’s performance (Reeves, 2011a). Unfortunately, when considering the frequency, nature, and impact of feedback, it happens less in the classroom than during a basketball practice. On the court, each player receives feedback, some more than others depending on their needs. The nature of feedback is differentiated according to each player’s skills and performance level. Each receives specific feedback focusing on her area of focus. In a classroom, feedback tends to be given to a few enthusiastic students who raise their hands and participate, and it is usually general instead of specific, such as, “Great,” or, “Incorrect.” Reeves (2011a) maintained that it is realistic to expect teachers to provide high quality specific feedback more often and to all students.

The effects of three different conditions of feedback and their impact on performance and intrinsic motivation was studied by Butler and Nisan (1986), where two hundred and sixty-one sixth graders were randomly assigned to three groups. One group received



descriptive, qualitative feedback on their learning, the second group received a numerical, quantitative mark as feedback, and the third group received both types of feedback. The results of the study showed the students in the first group performed at the highest level and experienced a higher level of intrinsic motivation than the students in the other two groups.

### **A Collaborative Culture with SBR**

While traditional grading has become a very private, independent practice among teachers as independent contractors, SBR practices open the door to shared, collaborative practice among educators (O'Connor, 2011). A culture that is positive and collaborative is ensued with teacher efficacy, which, as a result, produces student learning at higher levels (Protheroe, 2008). Collective practices and communication around assessment naturally leads to a culture that identifies itself as a Professional Learning Community (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2006).

### **Cultural Shift**

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) presented how a cultural shift takes place when teachers are working collaboratively and engaged in conversations grounded in results and learning (See Appendix B). Actively engaging all teachers in collaboration transforms the culture from isolated islands of classrooms to teachers working together to develop a shared understanding around student learning aligned with a school-wide response (Glaude, 2010/2011; Protheroe, 2008). It is imperative teachers work together in assessment and grading practices, as emphasized by Buhle and Blachowicz (2009):

The term silo communication describes an organizational environment in which people or groups do not communicate with other people or groups within the organization. Instead, each person or department tends to operate as a separate entity,

frequently making decisions that do not take other aspects of the organization into consideration. An even more complex type of silo communication is the lack of communication within a person or group's thinking, specifically, the tendency not to connect one known body of information with another. We see teachers thinking in this fashion as they appear to disregard assessment results when they make instructional decisions. (p. 42)

### **Collective Practices and Communication Around Assessment**

In reality, effective teaching is built on the practice of frequent monitoring of each and every student's learning, and an effective teacher owns this responsibility instead of leaving assessment exclusively up to textbook publishers, district office administrators, or the government (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Teachers are consistent in their assessment practices when they collectively reach consensus on what each standard looks like when mastered, and their conversation becomes enriched when they collaboratively align student work to each standard and measure proficiency levels. Grading practices should be orchestrated to "improve communication, making it clear to students, fellow teachers, and future teachers the academic performance of the student. Effective communication is impossible, however, if the people involved do not know or agree on what the relationship is between performance and the numeric or letter symbols that appear in grades" (Reeves, 2011a, p. 63). Standards-based assessment practices are the means to an end marked by all students learning at high levels. Included in these practices are reporting performance levels of academics and behaviors separately, and this provides more clarity on the next logical steps in the learning progression, as stated eloquently by Guskey (2009):

The promise of standards-based grading is that both teachers and students will have a clearer conception of what needs to be learned and of what constitutes successful performance. This results in greater specification of what student-generated evidence is needed for evaluating the standard, how grades should be aligned to the evidence, and how effort and other ‘nonacademic’ factors are reported. This should lead to less reliance on teacher impressions of student effort and improve the validity of grading. (p. 107)

Meeting regularly allows teachers to share student work, reflect on it, and identify next steps in the learning process for students (Bowgren & Sever, 2010). Measuring student work against the standards empowers teachers to collectively seek out gaps in learning as well as which teachers are achieving high levels of success in their classrooms.

### **Professional Learning Communities**

Student learning increases dramatically with PLCs (professional learning communities) as teacher leadership and ownership is distributed throughout the organization (Delisio, 2010; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Wilhelm, 2010). To avoid misunderstandings between colleagues, teachers need collaboration to build a foundation of shared knowledge around instruction and assessment (Delisio, 2010; Allington, 2009). In addition, with a guaranteed and viable curriculum in place, “collaborative teams in PLCs are in a perfect position to monitor student learning in a systematic fashion” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 119). The use of anecdotal data gives teachers specific information pertaining to individual students’ skills, making discussions around standards transparent. Collaboration provides consensus regarding what teachers want students to learn as well as the skills needed to achieve this (Guskey, 2009). Implemented with fidelity, professional learning communities

honor results *and* relationships, recognizing that collaborative groups of teachers foster “ongoing growth and development of the people who produce the results” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 201). The key element to high levels of learning for all students is the improvement of the adults in charge of learning. This results-oriented improvement of adults should target shared vision, mission, and beliefs, and learning-focused conversations around curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Essentially, then, such protocols challenge teachers in a way that differentiates a school between one that succeeds and one that fails in regards to student learning (Eason, 2009). Regarding protocols among curriculum, instruction, and assessment, standards-based practices provide consistency for teachers as communicated by Guskey (2009):

Just as standards-based education has resulted in greater curriculum, standards-based grading can result in more consistency in what grades mean, how they are determined, and how they are integrated with instruction. This could be the most important impact of standards-based grading – getting teachers together to develop and implement consistent grading practices that are based primarily on student achievement. (p. 106-107)

### **What is Missing in the Research**

Research against SBR is nonexistent. Dissertations in relation to SBR have focused primarily on elementary schools. Cherniss (2008) honed in on teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of standards-based report cards, Souter (2009) spoke to the feedback provided to students in standards-based classrooms, and Dittmar (2005) identified factors, including standards-based grading, affecting elementary students on Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. At the secondary level, Stephens (2010) conducted research on secondary

English teachers in rural classrooms in Nebraska, while Haptonstall (2010) showed a strong correlation between standards-based grading practices and the Colorado Student Assessment Program among middle and high schools. What is missing from the research is a study of understandings and changes related to practices as middle school teachers transition from traditional grading practices to SBR. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study a group of middle school educators whose movement to SBR began from a grassroots approach, one that began from their own work rather than a directive from central office administration and the school board. To date, this particular profile has not been studied.

### **Conclusion**

There is significant power in student learning when there is seamless alignment of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and reporting (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). This process, while ongoing, begins with curriculum standards and ends with how student performance is reported to stakeholders. The ultimate goal of SBR practices is “to teach, assess, improve, and communicate about student learning in relation to academic learning standards. We can focus less of our time on providing subject area grades and still accomplish our goal if we move toward the use of rich, descriptive performance statements that provide specific information about where the student is relative to each standard” (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006, p. 331).

This literature review examined the components of SBR practices, including a comparison to traditional grading practices. A motivating force for this study is that while much information is available regarding the justification for SBR and how to implement it with fidelity, there is minimal research highlighting specific school districts’ experiences in practice as they transition to SBR, particularly at the middle school level. Hagen (2009)

shared the experience of middle school teachers in one particular school district as they transitioned from traditional to SBR practices. Her research communicates the need for a shared vision, protected time for collaboration, and clear procedures and expectations. During this time of need for educational shifts to increase student learning, peering into the windows of schools and districts as they transition to implementation of SBR practices would empower other educators with the tools and insight to do the same.

Inquiry ignites research and provides the beacon of light throughout the process (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). While an abundance of literature supports various components of SBR, there is a calling for an intimate peek into a middle school in a Midwest suburban district to serve as a model for other school districts, one where teachers owned the sense of urgency to implement SBR, looking then to the district office for support in its implementation. Furthermore, others can access their story to help guide their path as they transition to a standards-based approach in their commitment to increase learning for each and every student.

Chapter Three presents the methodology for this study, centering on a qualitative case study with a constructivist framework. Chapter Four then discusses the findings of the study, followed by an analysis of results and recommendations for future research in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study captured an in-depth view of middle school teachers' experiences as they transitioned from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting (SBR). Because qualitative methods guide the researcher in capturing the meaning people give to their experiences, a qualitative approach was used to tell the teachers' stories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). These stories are what Brown (2010) eloquently refers to as "data with soul," and they provided the lens through which the researcher could view the depth and breadth of the teachers' experiences.

### A Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach is necessary when the nature of inquiry examines a phenomenon within its natural, authentic context (Shusterman, 2010). Questions are based on the *how* or *what* so the researcher can capture microscopic insight on a particular topic (Patton, 2002). For this study, the researcher explored and examined middle school teachers' experiences with implementation of SBR by asking the following overarching research questions:

- 1) What understandings related to practices do middle school teachers have as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?
- 2) What kinds of supports do teachers need as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?
- 3) Is there a change in teachers' clarity regarding what their students know, understand, and do as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?

Quantitative research creates barriers to understanding perceptive experiences of participants such as feelings and thought processes, whereas a qualitative approach serves as

the lens into such phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Studying teachers' authentic understandings and perceptions within the implementation of SBR provides clarity to teacher efficacy and true understanding of students' proficiency levels.

To uncover detailed, lived experiences within their social context and natural landscape, it is imperative to use a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Esterberg, 2002). This study targeted middle school educators who teach together in the same building and have lived the same yet individually different experiences regarding the transition from traditional letter grades to standards-based reporting practices.

Qualitative research is grounded in the researcher serving as an active participant in the process, becoming centered in the research (Brown, 2010; Creswell, 2009). During this study, the role of the researcher functioned as the primary instrument in both the collection and interpretation of data (Stake, 1995).

A constructivist paradigm employed within a case study approach provided meaning into middle school teachers' feelings and experiences regarding clarity of students' proficiency levels in learning. The case study methods for conducting research included purposive sampling, semi-structured individual interviews as well as focus group interviews.

Information around qualitative research is extensive and does not cleanly align to any source of genesis; instead, it has evolved over the years (Bogdan & Bilkin, 2006; Prasad, 2005; Stake, 2000). The purpose of qualitative research is to provide more depth and detail than quantitative research through a primarily inductive process. Qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of people's lives within the worlds in which they exist (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). The increased presence of qualitative research over the past quarter of a century is evidenced in the field of education (Prasad, 2005). The wave of



qualitative research that made its presence known in the 1980s “has yielded both a rich body of research using nonstatistical methods and substantive amount of methodological advice on how to engage in qualitative inquiry” (Prasad, 2005, p. 3).

Oldfather and West (1994) presented a playful metaphor of qualitative research as jazz music in an attempt to illuminate the nature of qualitative inquiry. First, the qualitative research process is guided by epistemological principles, socially constructed values, focus on inquiry, and the emergence of findings. The dynamics are grounded in collaboration and interdependence, weaving together old and new themes. Second, the research itself happens in varied places. Third, participants are enveloped physically, emotionally, and intellectually, presenting the interplay of deeper meaning and understanding of their voices. Fourth, qualitative research may go through a period of uncertainty and discomfort as it adjusts to ambiguities and new perspectives. Fifth, it is expected that the initial design of the research will be adapted and elaborated according to the evolving themes of the inquiry. The researcher discovers which questions or issues are important to insiders of the culture she is attempting to understand, and, this thereby shapes the direction of the research. Finally, the researcher should choose a manuscript of familiarity so she can delve into the deep structures and improvisatory aspects of a particular paradigm.

The craft of qualitative inquiry allowed the fostering of depth in understanding the changes related to practices of the participants in this particular study and their personal perceptions and experiences regarding implementation of standards-based reporting. The critical tenets of qualitative research study include methods, methodology, theoretical perspectives, and epistemology (Crotty, 1998). This chapter presents each of these components in relation to this study.

### **Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective**

Constructivism provided the epistemological framework for this qualitative study. A constructivist framework declares that even when living through the same event, each person constructs meaning in different ways (Crotty, 1998). To this end, the findings and interpretation of data in qualitative research are specific to the context. The researcher poses open-ended questions so participants naturally share their experiences, making sense of their world based on their historical and social perspectives. Constructivism is grounded in the belief that social interpretations, versus awareness of an external reality, generate knowledge (Stake, 1995). Generally, the foundational beliefs of qualitative researchers include knowledge is constructed as opposed to being discovered and the world is viewed as “a particularly human construction” (Stake, 1995, p. 99).

The research in this study was based on the interpretations of middle school teachers who have transitioned from traditional grading practices to SBR. While each has experienced the same event, of particular interest was their individual stories of transformed clarity around students’ proficiency levels. Additionally, an in-depth study of their understandings provided a basis for further decision-making and strategic directions to improve standards-based practices. Their individual and shared experiences reflected constructivist epistemology.

The analytical framework in this study was grounded in the interpretive theoretical perspective. As stated by Anfara and Mertz (2006), this theoretical framework helps the researcher make sense of and sorting the data. This is exemplified by the researcher’s interest in “understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). Of particular interest in this study were how teachers interpret their experiences

of implementing SBR and how these experiences impact the clarity in their practices with students' learning. The interpretive approach is viewed through the lens that there is a need for examining and exploring the context through inquiry and actions as opposed to preconceived assumptions. Through immersion in the natural world of the participants, the researcher was able to intimately interpret their reality with fidelity; essentially, this should be the primary focus (Esterberg, 2002; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). The descriptive culmination that commences is achieved through an inductive approach (Merriam, 2002).

Yin (2009) demonstrated the linear, yet nonlinear process of conducting case study research in Figure 1. Essentially, the researcher found herself flowing in and out of each stage, as the essence of qualitative research is about the process, as opposed to the destination.

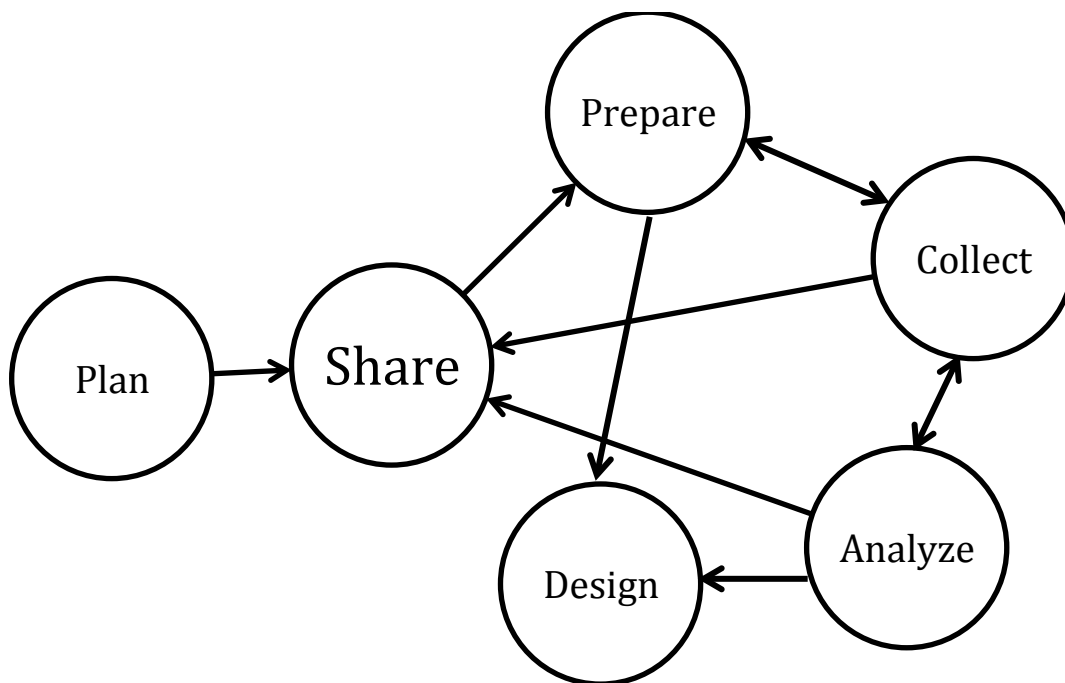


Figure 1: The Process for Conducting Case Study Research

Source: Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods, fourth edition*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

## Research Design

The driving methodology for this research was a qualitative case study. As Maxwell (2005) asserted, each component of the research design – research questions, goals, conceptual framework, methods, and validity – are interconnected and fluid, yet not rigid. He used a rubber band metaphor in clarifying this analogy, stating it “portrays a qualitative design as something with considerable flexibility, but in which there are constraints imposed by the different parts on one another, constrains which, if violated, make the design ineffective” (Maxell, 2005, p. 6). This landscape of case study research is designed with the idea that the researcher saturates herself within a case that is bounded by time and activity (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006; Yin, 2009). Information about an event, process, or one or more individuals is intimately collected over an established period of time. Stake (1995) discussed the complexity captured in a case study and that “we study a case when it itself is of very special interest. We look for the detail of interaction with its contexts. Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Therefore, a case study allows the researcher to understand a larger phenomenon through an intensive study of one specific instance.

For this particular study, the phenomenon under analysis was the implementation of SBR. The case studied was a group of middle school educators from a public school district in a Midwestern state. Data were collected through individual interviews and group interviews. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed into narrative word documents. The data then were coded for emerging themes.

The five essential components of a successful case study are research questions, purpose of the study, unit analysis, data logically linking to propositions, and established

criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2009). Questions in this study focused on the *what* and *how* of implementing SBR practices as well as their impact on teacher clarity of student learning. The purpose of this study was to learn, through teachers' perceptions, their described changes and understandings related to practices as they transitioned to SBR. The units of analysis were the teachers in a public mid-sized suburban school district in a Midwestern state. As data were analyzed on an ongoing basis, themes emerged that were congruent with the research questions. When themes were generated as a result of coding the data, the findings elicited meanings that guided recommendations for practice as well as future research.

### **Research Site**

In the state where this study took place, there were over three hundred public school districts. The suburban district used for this study was one of the fastest-growing districts in the state. The growth in enrollment called for an increased need for differentiation in the instructional process, which led to a consequent need for improved, differentiated assessment and grading practices. The specific school site used in this study enrolled over eight hundred students in grades six through eight. Thirteen percent of these students were eligible for free or reduced lunch and nine percent had Individualized Education Plans. Eighty-nine percent of the students were Caucasian.

A unique characteristic of this particular school was the teachers were intimately engaged in the grass-roots birth of the standards-based transition. The movement toward SBR described in this study initially began with teachers declaring a need to learn more about quality grading and assessment practices. These efforts transformed over time into a felt sense of urgency to implement standards-based practices. Their professional learning

over the few years leading up to this study ultimately indoctrinated them to a point where SBR was the answer they were seeking in order to better meet the needs of their students. In other words, the inception of this journey for the teachers did not begin with a declared vision of SBR. Put simply, this particular group of teachers set out to improve their practices in the area of grading and assessment and the administrators partnered with them in this work.

The recommendation to implement SBR was one of consensus by both middle school teachers and administrators. As standards-based practices were already in place at the elementary level, the intent focused on seamlessly mirroring those same practices at the middle school level. For example, a sixth grader entering middle school would experience a smooth transition to SBR since she came from SBR in elementary. While teachers in all three grade levels at the middle school implemented standards-based practices during the first year of implementation (when this study occurred), teachers in grades seven and eight still assigned letter grades as well. Subsequently, in the second year of implementation, the seventh grade teachers would no longer assign letter grades. At the end of the second year, an analysis of student performance data would guide the school board and administration to the next step of the implementation process leading into the third year of SBR at the middle school level. This transition of phasing out letter grades would essentially prevent any students from an abrupt change where they move away from receiving letter grades.

Because this study took place during the first year of implementation of SBR at the middle school level, sixth grade teachers were exclusively selected as participants for this study since they were no longer assigning letter grades. In other words, the sixth grade teachers were not working in a dual system of SBR and letter grades. The opportunity to

hone in on their experiences while transitioning to full implementation of SBR was ultimately what the researcher was seeking.

Obtaining permission and access to the middle school educators required communication with district-level administration. This district was interested in the findings since it essentially included qualitative data collected from its employees. District-level leaders planned to use the results to guide future planning of professional development and teacher mentoring, particularly as it pertains to the implementation of SBR.

### **Participants**

The selection of teachers for this case study was driven by purposive sampling, also known as purposeful sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Patton, 2002). Maxwell (2005) referred to this as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88). The criteria for selection was the experience of transitioning from traditional grading practices to the implementation of SBR at the sixth grade level without the dual usage of letter grades as well. Since the overarching goal of this study was to capture teachers’ experiences and how they impacted their clarity in what students knew, understood, and could do, teachers across different content areas were included in the interviews.

### **Data Collection Methods**

A case study grounded in integrity and effectiveness has multiple sources of data (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2006; Yin, 2009). Triangulation, the converging of evidence, ensures credibility through comprehensive and accurate results (Denzin, 1970; Maxwell, 2005; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009). Depending on the participant and the question posed in this particular study, a focus group interview may have caused one or more participants to

withhold information, while the one-on-one interview may have caused other participants to withhold information; thus, triangulation allowed for comparing and contrasting all evidence. This technique enabled the researcher to intricately tell the story of the case being studied, truly honoring the participants' experiences.

### **Interviews**

Audio taped interviews were conducted one-on-one in person with each of the twelve participants, as well as with two focus group interviews, each made up of six of the participants. Esterberg (2002) described the interview as a conversation between the interviewer and interviewee where the interviewee is asked questions and responds accordingly. The interviewing process in a qualitative approach empowers the interview in, "studying people's understanding of the meaning in their lived world" (Kvale, 1006, p. 105). Fontana and Prokos (2007) refer to interviewing as, "one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow humans" (p. 9). The establishment of relationships based on trust and rapport is necessary to achieve truth in the interviewee's experiences, and two common behaviors for achieving this are displaying a nonjudgmental attitude and listening actively (Fontana & Prokos, 2007; Seidman, 2006). Patton (1987) presents six types of questions to ensure an effective interview in a case study: behavior/experience, belief/opinion, feeling/emotion, knowledge, sensory, and background/history. Furthermore, Esterberg (2002) discusses the importance of open-ended questions versus those that are either leading and closed in nature. He also views in-depth interviews as semi-structured, inviting a free-flowing conversation between the interviewer and interviewee.



Focus group interviews are useful for collecting data while using group interactions to generate information from the members of the group (Fontana & Prokos, 2007; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Patton, 1987). Morgan (1997) stated the hallmark of interactions within a focus group is to “produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (p. 12). Krueger (1994) asserted a focus group elicits data to “provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants” (p. 19).

The teachers selected for interviews were what Patton (2002) referred to as key informants. These participants were extremely knowledgeable about the setting of inquiry and can articulate their perceptions and experiences because they have been an active, driving force in the transformation to SBR practices since its inception at this particular school.

Twelve participants were interviewed during this case study between January 3, 2012, and January 21, 2012. Individual interviews as well as the focus group interviews were held face-to-face at the participants’ school. Individual interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes in length, while the focus group interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes in length. Coupling individual interviews with a focus group interview allowed for triangulation.

In addition to audio-taping the interviews, handwritten notes were generated during the interviews for the purpose of capturing points of interest and importance. The transcription process began immediately following the first interview and to ensure accuracy, the transcripts were shared with each interviewee for review. The act of verifying internal validity, by sharing the transcriptions with the interviewees, guaranteed that the

interpretations were authentic representations of their realities (Creswell, 2009; Talburt, 2004).

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative approach requires the dance of data collection and data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). This craft is based on the premise that there is not one exclusive manner to perform qualitative research, because the analysis of data is, at its core, the process of making meaning. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) referred to this as a creative process as opposed to a mechanical one. Furthermore, Esterberg (2002) encouraged the researcher to “get intimate with data” (p. 157). This is achieved by working “intensively with your data, line by line, identifying themes and categories that seem of interest” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 158). As the data are revisited early and often, words and phrases will be captured to express the researcher’s ideas, thoughts, and analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Maxwell, 2005). Comparing and contrasting each participants’ data to one another sets the stage for themes and patterns (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Maxwell, 2005).

The analysis of data in this study told the story of teachers’ perceptions and understandings as they transformed their practices to standards-based reporting and achieved clarity in their approach to student learning. The open-coding process naturally led to emerging themes within the data (Huberman & Miles, 1994). As the researcher discovered issues and moments in the experiences that were significant and emotionally charging to the participants, the direction of the inquiry was shaped (Oldfather & West, 1994).

This study respected the interactive, fluid steps recommended for the analysis process according to Creswell (2009). First, the data were organized in preparation for analysis by transcribing audio tapes into transcripts. Second, the data were reviewed in order to obtain a

general overview of the information. Third, a detailed analysis began with the coding process, involving categorization. Fourth, the coding process led to deeper descriptions, which then led to more generalized, emerging themes. Fifth, the themes were woven together in a qualitative narrative. Sixth, the meaning of the data was interpreted.

When organizing data, Wolcott (1994) offered three categories as description, analysis, and interpretation. The researcher can flow in and out of one or all three, and this is driven by the desired emphasis. Essentially, they move from the *what* to the *how* to the *meaning*.

Parlett and Hamilton (1976) addressed the concept of progressive focusing, referring the process of refining, modifying, and even changing initial research questions in response to early questions not working, new issues surfacing, and/or the design of the process changing. Interpretation of the data plays a critical role in research. The qualitative researcher's primary task when collecting data is to "maintain vigorous interpretation" (Stake, 2005, p. 9). Also important is embracing vulnerability within the process, recognizing that as the qualitative researcher, one must let go of control (Brown, 2010). As the concepts addressed in this paragraph were applied to this particular study, the process guided the researcher in embracing the ebb and flow of interpretation of the data. The structure of interview questions served as a guide to commence the research, which actually molded itself throughout the intimate cycle of data collection and analysis.

### **Research Steps**

The steps followed in this case study followed a consistent protocol to ensure the fidelity of the process so the interviews yielded evidence consistent with the goals of the study:

- 1) Participants were invited to engage in the study, and they were informed of the risks involved.
- 2) One-on-one semi-structured, in-depth interviews took place in at the participants' school.
- 3) The twelve participants were divided randomly into two focus groups for semi-structured, in-depth interviews that took place at the participants' school.
- 4) Individual interviews were face-to-face, approximately sixty minutes in length, and transcribed within a day of their occurrence. The focus group interviews were also face to face and approximately forty-five minutes in length. They were transcribed within a day of their occurrence.
- 5) Following the transcriptions, contact was made with each participant so he/she could have the opportunity to review the respective transcript in order to confirm accuracy of data collection.
- 6) The data were coded for emerging themes.

An audit trail was generated throughout the process to provide documentation of confirmable, valid research steps (See Appendix G).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness and Ethics**

To ensure credibility, ethics, validity, and trustworthiness throughout the researcher's active participation in the collection and analysis of others' experiences, qualitative research called for triangulation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Stake, 2000). The researcher was compelled to view the world through the eyes of the participants without asserting her own assumptions and opinions. Esterberg (2006) presented the ethical analogy of the researcher

sleeping well at night if she is honoring practices congruent with trustworthiness and goodness.

Triangulation was achieved with the use of multiple data sources (Esterberg, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Prasa, 2005; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009). Additionally, participants had the opportunity to review their individual transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their content, the researcher sought out a peer review of findings as they surfaced, and an audit trail provided documentation of collection, analysis, and steps taken throughout the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) viewed such member checks as the most critical component in achieving trustworthiness.

Yin (2009) asserted that a rich, robust case study is compelling in its totality, it exhibits alternative perspectives, it is supported with comprehensive evidence, and it is reported in an engaging manner. Also, Merriam (2002) recommended enveloping reflexivity, engagement, maximum variation, and rich description. Reflexivity refers to the necessary, critical self-reflection by the researcher in order to identify and deal with assumptions, biases, and relationships to the study, all which could affect the outcome of the research. Engagement invites ample time for the collection of evidence, resulting in complete immersion. The act of intentionally seeking diversity in the selection of the sample provides a wider range of utilization of the findings by consumers of research. By presenting rich descriptive narratives that allow the reader to contextualize the research, she could ascertain the extent to which their experience is congruent with the research.

The researcher addressed the critical role of reflexivity in qualitative research as advised by Guillemin and Gillam (2004):

Reflexivity involves critical reflection of how the researcher constructs knowledge from the research process – what sorts of factors influence the researcher’s construction of knowledge and how these influences are revealed in the planning, conduct, and writing up of the research. A reflexive researcher is one who is aware of all these potential influences and is able to step back and take a critical look at his or her own role in the research process. The goal of being reflexive in this sense has to do with improving the quality and validity of the research and recognizing the limitations of the knowledge that it produces, thus leading to more rigorous research. (p. 275)

With the intent of honoring reflexivity as discussed in the previous passage, the researcher was cognizant of her role as a former colleague and supervisor of the participants. Self-awareness in how she positioned herself as interviewer as well as stepping away to reflect on interactions between herself and the participants was an ongoing process throughout the period of data collection.

The issues of anonymity and confidentiality were addressed by communicating at the onset that when information is shared, no identifiable evidence would be disclosed (Esterberg, 2006; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Through use of pseudonyms, as well as providing a signed commitment, each participant was assured of the anonymity of her identity and, as a result, confidentiality of the information she shared.

### **Researcher Positionality**

A delineating characteristic when comparing qualitative research to quantitative research is the role of the researcher, as she is paramount to the center of the process (Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2006). In qualitative case study research, the principle instrument in the

collection and analysis of data is the researcher (Stake, 2005). She is urged to acknowledge herself as both the primary research tool as well as a human instrument. Personal biases, limitations, and opinions must be considered throughout each step of the research process and should not be asserted onto others as these could significantly impact the outcome of the study (Krieger, 1985; Merriam, 2002). The researcher must acknowledge his/her involvement within the context of the study and find a balance to keep one's personal emotions in check (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Kreiger, 1985; Laurau, 1996; Mason, 2005). It is also important to mention that in social science, researchers have a tendency to feel intimidated by the data, having the inability to confidently own it (Krieger, 1985).

In the interest of full disclosure for this study in order to prevent unethical or unintentional influences on my analysis of teachers' experiences, it is imperative that the researcher presents her personal connection to this particular case. She has spent twenty-one years in her career in public education, with three recent years as Principal of the school selected for this study (2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11). During her tenure, she was actively involved in the grass-roots inception of the transformation to SBR practices as she worked alongside the teachers and helped lead them in their efforts. To this end, she developed professional, trusting relationships with the participants based on a deep level of respect. A rich passion for grading and assessment practices emerged within her throughout this experience. At the completion of the 2010-11 school year, she accepted a position in another school. As a result, she was no longer involved with the participants on a day-to-day basis, nor was she their supervisor. Handled delicately, it was imperative she communicate that her position as the researcher was not one of power linked to their former working relationship. To support this point, a confidentiality agreement was presented upfront in the process that is

signed by the participant and her, committing that their conversations were safe and trustworthy. The only exception to confidentiality, which was addressed in the agreement, was if a participant was inflicting harm on another person or was violating the law.

It was imperative she control her own bias when collecting and interpreting interview responses. Her strategy included stepping away from the data during the anticipated moments of internalization and focusing on the participants' experiences rather than her own. Similarly, the atmosphere she created with the participants during the interviews invited openness and honesty, extending formal permission for their true responses in spite of potential negativity towards the described experiences and/or her.

While she had an intimate understanding of the historical and social context of the school throughout the experience during those three years, she was no longer closely connected to the participants' perceptions and experiences with implementation of SBR. Having observed and having been personally impacted by the teachers' commitment to increasing student learning with their servant approach and embracing of data, she was in awe of their journey to transition from traditional letter grades to standards-based practices. To capture their stories and how their experiences led them to clarity regarding student learning, she determined a basis for further decision-making and strategic planning for professional development and teacher mentoring. In short, she had an intrinsic drive to capture the connection between the teachers' experiences in this particular school with research around SBR.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study was although the district selected has two middle schools, only one was selected for participation and within the selected school, only some teachers



were selected as participants. While the middle school was comprised of grades six through eight, participants were sixth grade teachers. Since the scope of research was limited to one grade level in one school, it is recommended that the findings not be applied to similar contexts. According to Creswell (2009), conducting case study research in one grade level from one school can, in fact, be perceived as a delimitation. This qualitative case study was delimited to the anecdotal data generated from the twelve participants in this particular school. The experiences of teachers in one grade level, school, or district could vary greatly when compared to those of another grade level, school, or district.

The data collection process presented an additional limitation to the study. Information gleaned from the interviews depended on the interviewee and what he or she was willing to share, and the nature of this data was confined by his or her personal perspectives and lived experiences. It is important to note, however, that the triangulation of evidence helped validate the findings and support the prominent themes that emerged.

Another limitation was the researcher's professional connection to the participants. Although the researcher was no longer their direct supervisor, the fact that she previously supervised them could have possibly influenced their willingness to be completely honest about their understandings, perceptions, and experiences. However, a delimitation of this point is that trusting relationships existed between the researcher and participants, so it was not difficult for the participants to accept the researcher's immersion into their experiences.

The opportunity for bias existed in this study, particularly in regard to the participants' assumptions of their role in the assurance that all students will move forward in their learning. The traditional practice of placing a mark of judgment on student work or an overall letter grade for a course was not perceived as best practice by the participants because

not all students were academically successful. The participants in this study intrinsically accepted the responsibility to increase learning for each individual, and consequently they sought out practices to replace traditional grading. The researcher recognized the existence of educational stakeholders who believe in traditional grading practices. Many stakeholders believe it is merely the teacher's responsibility to offer an opportunity to learn while ultimately it is the student's responsibility to take advantage of the opportunity. For example, if a student failed a quiz, it was the student's fault for not learning the material because the teacher covered it in class. In such circumstances, the teacher moved on in the curriculum whether or not the student actually learned. Put simply, practitioners of SBR are grounded in the assumption that they are responsible for each and every student to learn and are willing to adjust their practices to meet individual needs.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three presented the epistemological framework, theoretical perspective, methods, and methodology for this research in addition to the justification of their existence in this particular design. Included was the constructivist paradigm and qualitative methodologies as well as strategies to ensure trustworthiness in the culminating findings.

Chapter Four presents the results of the research. Then, Chapter Five discusses the findings, presents conclusions based on the analysis of results, and considers implications for practice, ultimately providing recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

Chapter Four describes the fundamental themes that emerged from decoding data generated from twelve in-depth interviews and two focus group interviews. Six initial themes that emerged from individual interviews were further explored in focus group interviews. Information gleaned from focus groups reinforced strongly what the researcher heard from individuals. Dominant themes that were saturated within various patterns and categories in the data metamorphosed from the inductive analysis depicted in Chapter Three. Chapter Five discusses the themes within the context of this study, particularly how they align with the three overarching research questions.

### Participants

This study focused on the perceptions, understandings, and changes related to practices of twelve sixth grade teachers representing different content areas at a middle school. All twelve teachers initially invited to participate in this study accepted without reservation. Ten of the twelve teachers were female and two were male. They had been teachers in that particular district for an average of 12.25 years, with a range of 3 to 26 years. The median number of years in this district was 10.5.

The participants described their school community as one where children are the center of all that they do. Children and adults are perceived as learners and each learner is encouraged to take risks to reach her next defined level of performance on the continuum of learning. Teacher leadership opportunities are numerous and the faculty is progressive as they embrace best practices in teaching and learning. Keeping differentiation in mind, the teachers do not perceive the culture of the school as a cookie-cutter environment; rather, the teachers are intentional in collectively trying to meet the needs of individual students.

Furthermore, the participants described their faculty as passionate, energetic, warm, friendly, and positive. When asked to describe the school, Teacher Samantha shared the following:

The school is very forward thinking, always on the cusp of the latest research, always keeping the students at the forefront of everything. Students always come first no matter what, and the teachers are always very willing to work hard, make changes, do whatever is best for students. It starts with administration being the leaders and the leaders of change, and what's best for students, but also we have willing teachers that jump on board and take risks and try new things to better themselves and better the students. (SamanthaIIP2)<sup>1</sup>

Put simply, the participants described their school as a collaborative, learning-focused community, one where they collectively deemed it imperative that teachers change *their own* behaviors in order for students to learn at optimal levels.

### **Data Collection**

A constructivist paradigm employed within a qualitative case study approach provided meaning into these middle school teachers' feelings and understandings regarding the transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting (SBR) as well as clarity of students' proficiency levels in learning. The case study methods for conducting research included purposive sampling and semi-structured individual interviews as well as focus group interviews.

Following an individual interview with each of the participants, dominant themes emerged from the interviews. Areas needing additional clarification were further explored in two focus group interviews made up of six teachers per group. The teachers were interviewed in a conference room at their school site and each of them selected a pseudonym in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from the participants are labeled in order to find the quotes in the original documents. This notation includes the specific transcript and page number of the quote, e.g. "SamanthaIIP2" stands for Samantha, individual interview, page 2.

maintain confidentiality. The protocol of questions from both individual interviews and focus group interviews are delineated in Appendix D.

### **Study Findings**

The researcher discovered particular themes as a result of the data analysis. Following the individual, in-depth interviews (see Audit Trail, Appendix G), data were transcribed. As the researcher assembled and apprehended meaning from the data, she determined dominant themes as well as issues that necessitated further exploration. To this end, the protocol for the focus group interviews was generated (see Interview Guide, Appendix D). The data generated from the focus group interviews were then transcribed. Transcriptions from the interviews were generated from the original audio recordings by transcriptionists at NoNotes.com. The accuracy of the transcriptions were then confirmed by the researcher and the participants.

A comprehensive analysis of all transcribed interviews – individual and focus group – naturally led to sorting and coding categories. Repetitive, intimate examination of the data brought forth inaugural patterns, new categories and subcategories, and codes were merged and revised. As patterns surfaced, themes were determined. Throughout the process, key words and phrases assigned to color-coded sticky notes were adhered to margins throughout transcriptions, which were then organized in a binder.

Six fundamental themes emerged and evolved from participants' responses as the researcher continued to interview. The researcher inherently categorized these themes, which were immersed in the data from the interviews. First, in a SBR grading scheme, a grade truly represents what a student knows, understands, and is able to do. Second, SBR helps teachers achieve clarity in what their individual students know, understand, and are able to do. Third,

active engagement, trust, and support from administration is valued and needed by educators transitioning to SBR. Fourth, resources such as time, professional literature, collaborating with peers, aligning rubrics with the curriculum, observing others implementing SBR, and adopting a reporting tool that is SBR-friendly are essential components of support. Fifth, formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiation are instructional practices that naturally lead to SBR. Sixth, opportunities for parent education and effective communication with stakeholders are imperative for a successful SBR transition.

### **Theme I: Position on Grading**

The first main theme that emerged unanimously from the participants was the assertion that a grade truly represents a student's academic performance. Overall, the teachers viewed grading as what should be a form of communicating students' performance in relation to the board-approved curriculum standards. Such standards clarify and identify what students should know, understand, and be able to do as opposed to the generality of letter grades. For example, Linette provided an analogy of a salad bowl to describe the traditional grading system:

It's like averaging out a student. It's like assigning an A to that student without really taking into consideration all of the different standards that we learn throughout the year. If we teach them fifty things in Language Arts and give one letter grade, it's kind of like a mixing all of the ingredients of a salad into a bowl and just saying you're an A without taking anything into consideration. The student could actually be kind of not doing so well – let's say in a vocabulary section – but doing extremely well in a writing standard and something in between in reading, but then assigning an A. This A really doesn't describe much of anything, and it's just a letter descriptor, and it really doesn't tell overall how the student is doing. It's just a letter that stands for not much of anything when it comes down to it. (LinetteIIP3)

Letter grades have not traditionally demonstrated what students have learned and have instead presented a mask to students' actual proficiency levels. For example, a letter

grade clouds a teacher's ability to accurately represent the assessment of an English

Language Learner, as expressed by Samantha:

My first couple years here, I had to give letter grades to students in my class. For my class, I just remember it being so tricky to know what an A is for students who can't speak the language or have hardly any language skills. How can I attach a letter grade to that, and exactly what do I grade? Like I said, it was really tricky and there would be days or even a series of days where I would be working on content stuff and get away from what I should have been teaching them because they needed support in science or social studies or math. Then, I would need to get a grade in the grade book but it had been so long since I worked with them on the skills they needed. Now, standards-based reporting has come. It's just so much easier to give them a Beginning or to tweak the standards are to backtrack, and find out where they are as learners as opposed to giving them an A, a B, a C. When assigned a Beginning, their skills are beginning in the standards. They are beginning the road to where they need to be, and that's a very true representation of where they are, as opposed to the idea that you really can't give them an A because they can't do any of the work at their grade level and so you just mark them in the middle of the road as a C, but they've hardly done any of the work, so maybe they were at an F. I would look on PowerSchool for all the students who were getting traditional grades and receiving an F, and I'll look to see the assignments they failed, and it's because they don't have the language skills to complete them. They don't have the background knowledge to do those assignments, and so the best that we can do is exempt them from those assignments, or try to accommodate them, and then their grade can easily go from an F to an A. Then again, how can they begin with an F, change a few things in the grade book, and then they're at an A? That's not representative of what they know either because an A means mastery, and that's not at all representative of the student. (SamanthaIIP3-4)

Traditional letter grades have also masked the learning of gifted students, calling to question whether or not they have learned as a result of an instructional experience. For example, a gifted student could achieve at a high level early on in the instructional process, earn an A, and not actually move forward in her learning. Bobbi discussed the barrier of traditional letter grades for gifted students from her lens as both a teacher and a parent:

I have had three students go through the schools, each with a 4.0 plus – which, by the way, how do you get a 4.0 plus? I would sit in conference after conference and was always told they were such great students but there was nothing else. As a parent, I would like to have heard what are they ready to learn next? What am I going to do to ensure their learning because I know an A didn't mean necessarily that they were learning? An A meant that they mastered what was taught but not whether or not they

moved forward in their learning. They may have known a lot prior to any instruction, so having that parent hat, and knowing what my children went through, standards-based reporting opens up these opportunities. If they do know this, and where they are as far as Beginning, Developing, Secure, or Exceeds, and if they are Secure, what then am I going to do with this information? It puts the responsibility back on the teacher. We can no longer say, 'Well, you have an A and that means I'm a great teacher.' Now that they have the desired skill, what is the next step for them as a learner? Every student has the right to move forward in learning, and it's not okay to hold a bright student back because they already know it and others don't. (BobbiIIP3)

Each participant shared that behavior is no longer a component of the reporting of academic performance. They collectively view behavior and academics as two completely different entities that should be reported separately. Renae discussed her awakening once she realized the impact of a student's grade when behavior is included: "I never realized before how much of our grades were impacted by behaviors. Late work or kids who didn't do the last three problems, we would penalize them and blend the behavior into the grade, and it really has nothing to do with what the student knows." (RenaeIIP8)

Across the board, all twelve participants discussed the interdependence of behaviors and academics, although they are reported separately. For example, material too challenging or too easy can cause a student to be disruptive or unengaged. Determining the cause of misbehavior, such as assessing whether or not a student's academic needs are being met, and providing an appropriate response often alleviates behavioral concerns. Emily echoed the views shared by the participants regarding this topic of determining the cause of an undesired behavior. "I tend to see the behavior issues more often when students are either bored or way over challenged where they can't even get started. It's our responsibility to identify the function of the behavior and then instructionally do something with this information." (EmilyFG2)



Each of the participants discussed the value of reporting academic and behavior performance separately, providing accurate information from which stakeholders can appropriately respond. For example, an initial impression of a “C ” in math suggests the student is an average performer in math, impacting educational planning for the student. In a classroom with traditional grading practices, this particular student could be the highest achieving student in math and yet struggling to hand assignments in on time, and consequently his “A” is penalized because of late work. His lack of responsibility to submit work on time has impacted his academic grade. Participants in this study shared the importance of addressing behaviors; however, the behaviors should be reported separately from academic performance. For instance, the participants use rubrics on an ongoing basis to specifically address expected classroom behaviors such as responsibility and respect. Behaviorally and academically, parents, students, and teachers receive meaningful information in regards to what students know, understand, and can do.

The participants were consistent in their responses regarding incomplete work with SBR. In lieu of assigning a zero, which would have occurred when they were applying traditional grading practices, the teacher assigns a mark of, “Insufficient Evidence,” with the expectation that the student will do her work. Rose mirrored the participants with the expectation for students to complete their work instead of accepting a zero. “They will finish it, so it doesn’t matter when it gets done. It’s going to get done at some point in time because I have to report out their performance on the standard.” (RoseIIP14)

Unanimously, the twelve participants admitted that averaging in a zero in their more traditional classrooms resulted in a grade that did not truly reflect the student’s learning. An example discussed in one of the focus groups is the concept of averaging temperatures during

a hot summer week. If during the seven-day period the researcher forgot to measure the temperature on one day, averaging in a zero for that particular day would result in an inaccurate average for the week.

All twelve participants asserted the importance of assessing the reason why the student's work is incomplete. While one student may view the material too challenging to complete, another student may view it too easy and therefore is not motivated to do it. Still, another student may hold a personal issue preventing her from doing the work while another student may have chosen simply not to do it. The participants were in agreement that incomplete work is a result of a behavior so it should not be averaged into the mark that represents what a student knows, understands, and is able to do. Instead, the teacher should seek out the function of the behavior and respond accordingly.

Each participant supported the practice of offering students the opportunity to retake assessments for full credit. To value the individuality of each learner is to recognize students' understanding of a particular learning target is on a continuum at any given moment on any given day. Since the ultimate goal is for each student to be at least proficient on the learning targets, it is expected that students be given opportunities to address nonproficient areas with support of the teacher and be reassessed in those particular areas. Offering a cap of 80 percent on a retake, for example, does not accurately represent a student's academic performance if the student performed at a proficient level on 100 percent of the assessment.

In a number of classrooms at this particular school, the term "homework" has been replaced with "independent practice" according to many of the participants. The transition to SBR has called on many teachers to reflect on the purpose and meaning of the work assigned to students. The clarity of the standards has helped determine purpose. In addition,

independent practice now aligns with differentiation as teachers realized not all students need the same amount and type of practice.

Without hesitation, each participant stated that extra credit is now nonexistent with SBR. Many shared that they have enjoyed laughs over the past few years as they identified extra credit opportunities that they either experienced as students or that they incorporated in their own classroom that actually have nothing to do with learning, such as bringing in a box of Kleenex.

In both the individual and focus group interviews, the concept of a dual system of SBR and letter grades was explored. An overwhelming concern of the incongruence of a dual system was expressed, particularly from ten out of twelve participants. Dana, for example, discussed the confusion it presented to parents during the previous year when she and her colleagues implemented SBR while also assigning letter grades:

Because putting a letter grade to the standard wasn't correctly matching the student's performance, it wasn't fitting. We ended up associating a traditional A to Secure, and it was difficult for the parents to understand that connection because most of them have obviously only been graded on a traditional grading system. As it turned out, we as teachers struggled because a letter grade really did not accurately reflect where the student was performing in relation to each standard. It was more of a process on a continuum of learning, and it's hard to label that with a letter grade. (DanaIIP4)

Ten participants shared students' attention to feedback is generally remiss when accompanied by a letter grade because the traditional culture has placed priority on the final mark of judgment – an overall letter grade – instead of feedback on the continuum of learning in relation to a target. Sophia shared how her students internalize the feedback and use this information to improve their learning when it is not shadowed by a letter grade:

It is internal because I remember when we were going through this process of implementing SBR and talking about the conflicts of trying to do both letter grades and standards-based reporting. When we did both, students automatically went to the

mark – the grade – and they didn’t care about the feedback. Now that the mark – grade – is not there, they have internalized the feedback and used it in their learning. That’s a pretty big thing. (SophiaIIP12)

Ten of the participants expressed frustration when sharing the experiences of their colleagues teaching in seventh and eighth grade because they are bound to the current dual practice of SBR while also assigning letter grades. Incorporating practices aligned with SBR has made the marking of a letter grade an arduous, incongruent act for the teacher because the mark does not truly represent what the student knows, understands, and is able to do.

The summary table below represents the participants’ positions on grading. With the exception of sub-theme 7, where ten of the twelve participants believe SBR is not congruent with letter grades, all other sub-themes were unanimously communicated by the participants across the board.

Table 1: Theme I: Position on Grading

| Theme I: Position on Grading  | Sub-Themes of Theme I  |
|---|--|
| I. A grade truly represents what a student knows, understands, and is able to do. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A grade communicates a student’s performance in relation to the board-approved curriculum standards.</li> <li>2. Behaviors are reported separately from academic performance.</li> <li>3. Opportunities to retake assessments are the norm, and students can earn up to 100% on a retake.</li> <li>4. Independent practice holds little to no weight in a student’s grade.</li> <li>5. Extra credit is nonexistent.</li> <li>6. Instead of assigning a zero for incomplete work, the first response for the teacher is to identify the function of the student’s behavior. If it is determined the assigned task is appropriate for the student, the student then earns “Insufficient Evidence” until meeting the expectation of completing the work.</li> </ol> |

Table 1, continued

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | <p>7. Implementation of SBR is incongruent with assigning traditional letter grades.</p> <p>8. Traditional grading practices did not communicate if and what the student actually learned.</p> |
|--|--|

### **Theme II: Achieving Clarity in Student Learning**

The second theme to emerge unanimously from the twelve participants as they shared experiences of transitioning to SBR was their clarity in what their individual students know, understand, and are able to do. The journey over the last few years was described as an exciting one that did not begin with SBR in mind. In actuality, the participants recalled the teacher-initiated charge to study grading and assessment practices in order to better meet the needs of each learner. Through studying the research, engaging in substantial professional reading, embracing opportunities to try and refine different approaches in their classrooms, and having ongoing conversations at the individual, team, and building levels, the teachers and administrators collectively arrived at a sense of urgency to envelop SBR practices. The trial and error of learning and embedding best practices in the classroom as well as opportunities to collaborate with peers throughout the process led to capacity building of believing SBR is a better way when compared to traditional grading practices, particularly in regards to how well teachers know their students as learners. Each participant shared that one of the most significant changes throughout the process was their transformed focus to what students were actually learning as opposed to simply covering material. For example, Renae captured the thoughts expressed by the participants regarding the greater clarity she has in knowing her students' learning needs with SBR when compared to traditional grading practices and merely covering the curriculum:

In a traditional classroom, I was just more concerned about, ‘Yes, we taught that already and the students experienced it,’ and now I feel more of a responsibility for them to learn. Standards-based reporting is much more formative because it’s ongoing. Something that’s been interesting this year is that with standards-based reporting, you truly expect all kids to make progress, and you truly expect all kids to move along the spectrum. So, we expect them to move from Beginning to Developing, and then Secure. Or, they might start at what we defined as Developing, but they are going to move to at least Secure, and possibly Exceeds. But with traditional grading practices, there really was not that expectation that they all would move forward. It was more of that summative piece, like, ‘Okay, so now that we’ve taught it and we have done all these activities, where did they end up?’ And then there wasn’t that feeling of responsibility if they earned eight out of ten. ‘That’s pretty good, so let’s move on,’ where as now we’re like, ‘Wait a minute, they only earned eight out of ten. Which two didn’t they get?’ Now we have the responsibility to go back and reteach. (RenaEIP6)

Understanding where students are in relation to learning targets empowers the teachers to design instruction to meet their individual needs, thereby increasing student engagement, according to each of the participants. During individual and focus group interviews, participants discussed the impact of formative assessment data in guiding the specific feedback provided to students, leading them as individual learners towards the designated learning target. For example, formative data provides clarity in a student’s understanding of angles, determining whether the student is missing background information, is able to immediately measure angles, or is ready to identify angles in a classroom. Participants have witnessed increased engagement in their students because they are receiving what they need instructionally as individuals.

Accountability for students to learn is increased with SBR as opposed to traditional letter grades, according to all twelve participants. When formative data provides insight on where a student is in relation to a learning target, the expectation for reaching the target has been communicated to the student, and specific feedback on what steps need to be taken to reach the target have been discussed with the student, settling for a traditional grade of a C,

D, or F is no longer an option. With SBR, the student must achieve at least proficiency on a specific target.

When the participants were asked to cite artifacts that evidenced student learning since implementing SBR, Emily discussed the increase in her students' scores on the MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) test. Maddy maintained her IEP students' progress monitoring graphs as a celebratory artifact of the implementation of SBR. A number of participants discussed students' work samples and an increase in students' reading levels as artifacts of learning. Some participants referenced students' individual reflections that justify how and why they are secure in what they know, understand, and are able to do with the standards. All participants discussed products generated from the formative assessment process as evidence of each student's learning. Larry exemplified the responses on formative assessment when he said:

I'm assessing more, so that allows me to lead my – it directs me towards what I need to actually teach the next day or the next week, but it's just – it allows me to be able to group the students and see what they need as individuals as opposed to teaching to the whole group. Before standards-based reporting, it was 'this is what we're teaching and everybody is getting the same deal,' when now I know to break it up and put the students in groups based on what they need. (LarryIIP14)

Linette echoed the majority of respondents when she noted her concern for students served prior to implementation of SBR, as she shared examples of artifacts:

Sadly, it's the students that I didn't have this opportunity with before. I'm thinking specifically about them, and it makes me feel sad because they didn't have this kind of opportunity to rework things, and to get to that place on the rubric or reach that particular learning target, and sadly in my eyes, I think I was defining them differently as students, too. Now, each student is expected to show growth on rubrics – and the process of learning includes sitting down and conferencing, showing what they retain and what takes them deeper. (LinetteIIP15)

The summary table below presents the sub-themes supporting the participants' clarity in what students know, understand, and are able to do when implementing SBR.

Table 2: Theme II: Teachers' Clarity in Student Learning

| Theme II: Teachers' Clarity in Student Learning  | Sub-Themes of Theme II  |
|--|---|
| II. Teachers achieve clarity in what their individual students know, understand, and are able to do. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. SBR provides clarity where each student is in relation to a specific learning target, including gifted students, special education students, and English Language Learners.</li> <li>2. Teachers provide specific, ongoing feedback to individual students in relation to the learning targets.</li> <li>3. Students are actively engaged in their learning and can clearly articulate their learning targets, where they are in relation to the targets, and what they need to do to move from Beginning to Developing to Secure to Exceeds.</li> <li>4. Teachers view themselves as more effective teachers with SBR when compared to using traditional grading practices, even though SBR requires more preparatory work for the teacher.</li> <li>5. Each student is held accountable for learning with SBR.</li> </ol> |

### **Theme III: Administrative Involvement**

The third theme to emerge from the data was the participants' assertion that active engagement, trust, and support from administration is valued and needed by teachers as they transition to SBR. Each participant in the study spoke of the necessary trust between and among teachers and administrators, and although teachers initially expressed the need for professional learning in the area of grading and assessment, the administrators knew when to nudge teachers – individually and as a group – to try implementing either a new practice or one that would tighten services provided to students throughout the building. A common tenet noted in the process by all twelve participants was the importance of taking time to



generate teacher ownership of revised and innovative grading and assessment practices as opposed to receiving a directive from the administration.

Active engagement of administrators was identified as a crucial component in the transformation to SBR, according to all twelve participants. Allowing the process to happen *with* the teachers versus *to* the teachers was weighted as a priority. For example, Rachel explained the value of administrative support in the ebb and flow of adults collaborating and learning together, as well as the much needed support for administrators to take initiative to lead a situation when discourse surfaces:

It's the learning support – the instructional support from administrators – and the willingness to catch us when we fall. It's just feeling like we're okay to try stuff in our classrooms and having a safety net of administrative support. We knew it was okay to give something a shot. It's not just the support to give something a shot, though, because I've known administrators who are what I would call 'rubber stampers' where it's like, 'Yeah, sure it sounds good, so go ahead and try it.' They may come to you with an idea and say, 'Go ahead and do this,' but then there's no follow-through. What matters is having somebody in administration who follows through and reflects with us. It's, 'What do you think about this? About this?' Then I go try it, and the administrator comes back and asks, 'How did it go?' If an administrator doesn't ask how it went, they're just rubber-stamping and letting people do whatever they want. There's no accountability or support. It's also seeing the administrators actively involved. Our administration has been part of the reflective cycle and an active part of communicating. They created the wiki for parents and taught parent classes and met with parents when some teachers weren't comfortable communicating about SBR yet. As teachers, it felt really good to us. I mean, it was very heartening to see that SBR mean just as much to the administrators as it did to us. It wasn't a message from administration, 'Just do this stuff.' It was, 'We're all doing this together, and we're leading the charge because it's that important.' So that was it – it was the support of seeing the administrators take a hold of it when we needed them to. (RachelIIP11-12)

Dana replicated the views of the other participants as she recalled the transition to SBR as a slow one in partnership with administration, providing her with time to transform her practices as well as strengthen her conviction regarding SBR:

Definitely a lot of support was obvious from administration at the building and district level, and the understanding that this cannot be a fast process. Even though we knew it was best for kids and we wanted to move fast, we knew we needed to take the time to do it right. And I feel like I'm very flexible with change, and I don't usually resist things, so I mean I think you need to consider the people that are going to be a lot more resistant. The slower the process, the better. The administrators didn't say, 'Here's a book. Read it.' They said, 'Let's read this together.' We were able to process it together and engage in professional development and spend time learning about standards-based reporting. The administration realized that people were at different places, so they differentiated support for us. (DanaIIP6)

As communicated in the previous quote by Dana, woven into the gift of time was differentiated support by administration. In other words, the value of honoring each teacher's level of readiness and providing individualized support empowered teachers to move forward from where they were in regards to their level of understanding, skills, and beliefs with SBR. Assurance and nonjudgmental support extended to teachers by administration as well as teachers' experiences of student success in the classroom generated trust among the community of educators throughout the school. Accordingly, teachers gradually became more confident and continued taking steps to improve and transform their instructional practices to align congruently with SBR.

The summary table below presents the sub-themes underlying participants' needs from administration regarding active engagement, trust, and support.

Table 3: Theme III: Administrative Involvement

| Theme III: Administrative Involvement  | Sub-Themes of Theme III   |
|--|---|
| III. Active engagement, trust, and support from administration is valued and needed by participants. | <p>1. Trust is necessary between the teachers and administration.</p> <p>2. Taking the time to honor teacher readiness in the learning process around grading and assessment practices is essential for generating teacher ownership. The decision to move to SBR should not be a top-down decision; rather, it should be made collaboratively between teachers and administrators.</p> |

Table 3, continued

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | 3. Administrators and teachers actively learning in tandem about grading and assessment practices creates a safe culture of shared beliefs where teachers are comfortable taking risks. |
|--|---|

#### Theme IV: Necessary Resources

The fourth theme to emerge from the data centered on resources needed by participants to successfully transition and implement SBR. Providing professional development synchronized with time that 1) differentiated with the inclusion of teacher choice and readiness, 2) included professional readings and research from numerous experts, 3) focused on the formative assessment process, flexible grouping, and differentiated strategies, and 4) provided opportunities for structured collaboration among peers was at the helm of what participants considered essential to the success of transitioning to SBR. Also attributed to the success was the time committed for allowing teachers to work together with the intent of intimately learning their curriculum, identifying essential learnings, and generating rubrics that align with the curriculum standards.

Each of the participants discussed a building-wide book study of *Fair Isn't Always Equal*, by Rick Wormeli, and how a group of teacher leaders guided the faculty's professional learning throughout its reading. For example, Bobbi noted these specifics from the book study:

The book study brought up great conversations of things that I knew were struggles for gifted learners. Homework, for example. Why do we have certain homework assignments that don't seem to have a purpose? Why are we doing units that don't fit into the curriculum? What does an A mean? What does a B mean? As the discussions continued and people learned more about these things, they started to change their practices while evaluating themselves along the way. Then it became essentially, 'Why don't we do this? We all believe this is a better way,' so then it was just a matter of figuring out how to move forward and do it right. (BobbiIIP2-3)

Collectively and collaboratively identifying the essential learnings from the board-approved curriculum was communicated as an important dogma by each of the participants with the guidance of *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006), as well as committing time to generate rubrics reflecting these particular curricular standards. Put simply, teachers and students need the clarity provided by the ongoing use of rubrics in order to know what students need to progress in their learning. Also expressed was the acceptance that the work around the rubrics, including discussion regarding the meaning of each standard, is a continual process that never truly ends. As professionals, they are always seeking to improve their work, and they have discovered the need to revise the rubrics because students are learning at higher levels. Larry echoed the participants as he communicated how rubrics helped the teachers better understand student performance:

As we progressed from traditional grading to standards-based, we came up with rubrics to help us understand what the students were learning and are capable of learning. The rubrics have been an adjustment, but a good adjustment. Now we really know what the standard is and we can get down to the very specific skill set that the student can do or can't do yet. (Larry IIP2-3)

The twelve participants unanimously placed time, professional development, and instructional resources as essential components to supporting the implementation of SBR. The resource of time allowed for teachers to intersect new learning from professional development with traditional practices. Additionally, the resource of time included structured collaboration among peers to share reflections and ideas, generating instructional plans for the classroom aligning with SBR. Participants were adamant about needing instructional resources for the classroom to support implementation of differentiation and flexible grouping, such as flip tablets, manipulatives, and leveled reading texts.

Time allowed for teachers to implement SBR practices in phases, and participants learned from one another throughout the journey of instructional transformation to SBR. For example, language arts and math teachers initially phased in SBR, and they shared experiences with their peers such as the use of three artifacts to determine a student's level of proficiency. Participants revealed their need to professionally lean on their PLC members and instructional coach for collaborating, reflecting, and discussing their learning as they tried new practices in their classrooms, as represented in Bobbi's statement:

Helpful supports come back to the training. People don't know what they don't know, and they are not going to change their behavior practice until they try it and see the results and they realize all the things that will come from this are good. The training has to be there, and teachers really need time to have those meaningful conversations. There needs to be time for play and practice and to have those heart-felt discussions and to share frustrations because it won't be perfect, and that's okay. (BobbiIP6-7)

In addition to learning from peers within the building who were piloting SBR practices, the majority of participants expressed the value of observing classrooms and networking with educators in school buildings where SBR is a priority. The ability to watch SBR in action enabled teachers to envision SBR for their own classrooms. For example, three participants identified their observations of differentiated math and flexible grouping in the elementary classrooms as turning points for their understanding and belief in SBR. Another participant discussed the growth he has experienced by interacting with educators on twitter and Skype who have either fully implemented or are transitioning to SBR.

Paramount to all twelve participants was a reporting tool congruent with SBR. A tool for traditional reporting system is generally organized by activities such as homework, classroom assignments, projects, quizzes, and tests. Each activity is assigned a percentage, leading to a culminating average of all scores at the end of a grading period. The final score

is then equated into a letter grade. Comparatively, a tool for SBR is organized by standards, and most recent evidence of a student's performance determines the level of proficiency regarding each of the standards. Thus, specific information is reported about each standard as opposed to an overall grade. Both focus group interviews generated discussion on the challenges of organizing student artifacts. Participants have been allowed to pilot a variety of organizational systems from managing a folder for each student to utilizing an electronic system such as Evernote.

Each of the participants expressed the importance of building confidence in articulating an understanding of SBR, including the ability to explain the research and advocate the need for SBR. Also discussed was the need for a safe culture to ask questions in order to increase one's understanding. All participants shared that the more they were able to talk, read, and learn about SBR, the more confident they were in communicating with others about it.

The summary table below presents the sub-themes underlying resources needed by teachers for successful transitioning and implementation of SBR.

Table 4: Theme IV: Necessary Resources

| Theme IV: Necessary Resources   | Sub-Themes of Theme IV  |
|---|---|
| IV. Resources such as time, professional literature, collaborating with peers, aligning rubrics with the curriculum, observing others implementing SBR, and adopting a reporting tool that is SBR friendly are essential components of support. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Time to learn, collaborate with peers, and try new practices in the classroom is essential.</li> <li>2. A successful transition to SBR is one that takes time to empower teachers with skills and understanding they need.</li> </ol> |

Table 4, continued

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | <p>3. Structured time for PLCs to identify Essential Learnings in the curriculum and generate rubrics that align with standards empowers teachers to intimately learn what their students will know, understand, and be able to do by the end of their course. Collaboratively, they define Beginning, Developing, Secure, and Exceeds regarding each standard. This sets the stage for successful implementation of SBR.</p> <p>4. Professional literature and structured book/article studies on research regarding grading and assessment practices are highly valued by teachers.</p> <p>5. Opportunities to observe and collaborate with others who are implementing SBR practices are important for moving teachers forward in their learning.</p> <p>6. Adopting a reporting tool that is SBR-friendly is essential for teachers' organization of student performance.</p> <p>7. Differentiated support for teachers to try new practices in their classroom based on their individual readiness and coupled with time to share with their PLC is a way to generate teacher ownership.</p> <p>8. Support from the Instructional Coach helps individual teachers and PLCs move forward in their learning, which ultimately benefits the students.</p> |
|--|---|

### Theme V: Standards-Based Practices

The fifth theme to emerge from the data centered on standards-based instructional practices. The participants shared their experiences with the following components in a standards-based classroom: formative assessment, differentiation, flexible grouping, use of rubrics, descriptive feedback and one-on-one conferring, reporting behavior separately from the academic performance, self-assessment by students, extra credit, independent practice and homework, and incomplete work. In both focus groups, participants asserted the transformation of their instructional practices as making the difference in learning for

students, leading to the need for SBR to accurately report out student performance. For example, Emily captured how all of these components impacted her growth as a teacher:

I'm a much better teacher than I was previously simply because all these components come into play: using data to guide instruction, differentiation, use of rubrics, descriptive feedback and one-on-one conferring, removing behavior from grades, students self-assessing, eliminating extra credit, providing retakes for one-hundred percent, and not grading homework. I'm not teaching the same way I was. I'm using standards-based reporting. Standards-based reporting actually came from teaching in a different way because I needed a different way to mark the students' performance instead of assigning a letter grade. I could do all of the differentiation and everything, but when it came time to mark that, it wouldn't have worked, so (standards-based reporting) was really a natural response to better teaching practices. (EmilyIIP13)

Each of the twelve participants discussed the dynamic process of formative assessment and their use of data to guide grouping in their classrooms. Assessment in their classrooms is no longer a one-time shot; rather, the process of assessing involves a collection of artifacts over time to guide instruction. Unless numerical data are analyzed to identify specific skills a student is missing, the assignment of a letter grade lacks important information regarding a student's proficiency levels as measured against the curriculum standards. Renae provided examples of such lack of clarity with traditional practices and how formative assessment provides meaningful information to the teacher as well as the students:

The meaningful feedback gleaned from formative assessment data helps both the teacher and the students in defining the level of clarity on where a student is in their learning and what instruction he or she needs next. A funny thought on using data to guide instruction is that numbers don't tell enough. I see that a lot. We really need to see the student's performance to make an instructional decision. If you say assign numbers and say just eight out of ten, okay well which two did the student not get? What if it's a writing piece in a language arts classroom or a science classroom? They have a C on this essay, but why did they get a C? Where are they lacking? Is it the writing skills? Is it the content? The part that's interesting about all this is that raw numbers just don't tell us enough. (RenaeIIP7)

Planning an instructional unit begins with the end in mind, according to the majority of the respondents. Ultimate learning goals from the curriculum are established as well as



how students will be summatively assessed, and teachers collaboratively work backwards in the unit to determine placement of formal and informal formative assessments. Formative data guides differentiated learning experiences, such as texts aligned with individual students' reading levels, as explained by Ann:

As we're writing our unit plans, we're using differentiated levels for our readers, so we're writing our formative assessment ahead of time. This way, we know when we're doing our little dipstick checks as we go along to guide our instruction. Our formative assessments are based right off of our standards, so this way we're making sure we get a true picture of our students' performance. (AnnIIP8-9)

Unanimously, all twelve participants described a standards-based classroom as one in which assessment is much more formative and ongoing than a classroom with more traditional grading practices, and the formative data guides flexible grouping and differentiation. Having transitioned to a standards-based classroom, the participants now expect and commit to each student making progress, whereas in their former classrooms with traditional grading practices, they moved from lesson to lesson and unit to unit whether or not all students learned. In addition, the participants have found their standards-based classrooms to have a foundation of clear learning targets, while their former classrooms focused on activities and lessons to be covered. In other words, the teachers applying traditional grading practices worried less about whether or not the students really "got it" and instead just moved forward.

The connection between differentiation, formative assessment, flexible grouping, and SBR was discussed during each individual interview and again in focus groups.

Unanimously, participants agreed on the interdependence of these instructional practices.

Once an instructional need is determined for each student as measured against the determined learning target, differentiated practices are necessary to meet students where they are on the

learning continuum. Consequently, a traditional one-size-fits-all approach is replaced by flexible grouping. Such grouping of students evolves on an ongoing basis with guidance from formative assessment data. For example, Emily mirrored the reflective thoughts of the participants regarding the integral role of differentiation, formative assessment, and spiraling of the curriculum with SBR:

There is a lot more differentiation that has to happen because it suddenly becomes very clear where your students are, and you can't ignore the fact that some students are still at the beginning level whereas other students are already at the secure level. You really have no choice but to differentiate. There is also a lot more formative assessment that I think happens. When I was doing traditional letter grades, I would give a pretest for the entire chapter. I would group the kids at the point and I'd be like, 'Okay, here is where you are for the entire chapter.' That has changed a lot because now I realize how fluid students' learning can be, so I'm just going to pre-assess one or two concepts at a time and then constantly be rechecking to see what they know. With standards-based reporting, it's a lot of cyclical teaching and assessing. Previously it would be like, 'I'm done with chapter three, so we're moving on to chapter four. If you didn't get chapter three, I'm sorry but we're on chapter four now,' whereas now it may be, 'The concept is integers, and we struggled with that in chapter three, so let's come back to it again in chapter four and see if we can reintegrate it. Let's come back to again in chapter five and see if we can reintegrate it, and even though we're still moving on to a new chapter, we keep coming back to those concepts and allowing those kids multiple opportunities to learn it.' (EmilyIIP7)

Another example was when Larry highlighted his instructional practices as the major difference when comparing his standards-based classroom with his former classroom:

In a standards-based classroom, it's the instruction for me that's different when compared to a classroom with traditional grading practices. There is a lot less instruction upfront because we get into our small groups based on our pre-assessing. And then we can go back over what was taught to the entire class but break it down if we need to for a lower level group, or extend it if it's a higher functioning group. So, it's a lot less information upfront coupled with flexible grouping – that's the meat and potatoes of it. (LarryIIP8-9)

The summary table below presents the sub-themes underlying the theme of standards-based practices in the classroom.

Table 5: Theme V: Standards-Based Practices

| Theme V: Standards-Based Practices  | Sub-Themes of Theme V  |
|---|--|
| V. Formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiation are instructional practices that naturally lead to SBR. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="824 331 1383 457">1. Teacher knowledge and implementation of the formative assessment process naturally leads to SBR as traditional grading practices become discordant.</li> <li data-bbox="824 478 1383 604">2. Teacher knowledge and implementation of flexible grouping naturally leads to SBR as traditional grading practice become discordant.</li> <li data-bbox="824 625 1383 751">3. Teacher knowledge and implementation of differentiated instruction naturally leads to SBR as traditional grading practices become discordant.</li> <li data-bbox="824 772 1383 787">4. Formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiation are interdependent of one another.</li> </ol> |

### Theme VI: Inclusion of Stakeholders

The sixth theme to emerge from the data was the need for opportunities to educate parents and effectively communicate with stakeholders regarding the transition to and implementation of SBR.

Unanimously and across the board during individual and focus group interviews, the participants expressed the importance of articulating information pertaining to SBR with competence and confidence. The ability to effectively communicate SBR improved over time for the participants through their active engagement in structured conversations with one another. Additionally, engaging in professional readings and implementing SBR practices in their classrooms empowered them with the ability to share with stakeholders specific examples of instruction and cite research from experts in the field.

A common frustration expressed by eight of the participants was the parent side of PowerSchool, the web-based student information system endorsed and implemented systemically in this particular school district. Overall, the participants were happy with the instructor side of PowerSchool that is specifically designed for SBR because it allows for

organization of and reporting of each standard. In addition, teachers have the capability of uploading rubrics for parents and students to view. The parent side of PowerSchool seems more frustrating because parents need to navigate around the site to find what they are seeking. Put simply, the participants believe that PowerSchool is not parent-friendly.

Additionally, a lack of understanding pertaining to SBR within a segment of the parent community presented an initial challenge for the participants. Although parent classes were offered throughout the transitional period with the purpose of sharing what teachers were learning about grading and practices, and since letters had been mailed directly to the families of middle school students during the transition to inform them of the process, there still remained some parents who expressed frustration with the plan to implement SBR. Having been the product of traditional grading practices in their own schooling, and perhaps not having been involved in the parent classes on SBR practices, some parents did not understand the value of SBR to increase student learning. Bobbi depicted the responses of the other eleven participants when she highlighted parent education as a component of support for transitioning successfully to SBR. “The parent education piece is huge because the parents know what they’ve experienced in school, and they know the typical grading or the traditional grading system.” (BobbiIIP7)

As time has passed, according to all twelve participants the parent community has become more understanding of SBR and its positive impact on student learning. An informational wiki was developed for the community, and grading and assessment classes continue to be offered to parents through Community Education. Three of the participants recalled a handful of parents during parent/teacher conferences expressing resistance to SBR since full implementation had taken place. Over time, SBR in this particular school,

according to all twelve participants, has transformed predominantly into a culture of unremarkable commonplace.

Imperative to sustained success in implementation was the baptism of newly hired teachers into the SBR culture of the school. This topic of hiring surfaced in three individual interviews and then was explored with more depth with focus groups. When the researcher explored hiring in focus group interviews, all twelve participants communicated the importance of selecting teachers who are SBR-friendly. In other words, candidates would need to demonstrate philosophical beliefs supporting SBR such as providing students with the opportunity to retake tests for full credit and expressing that a letter grade should accurately represent a student's academic performance. Once hired, ongoing, job-embedded professional development is crucial for mentoring and sustaining new teachers' growth and implementation of SBR.

The summary table below presents the sub-themes supporting the theme of including stakeholders in the process and educating parents.

Table 6: Theme VI: Inclusion of Stakeholders

| Theme VI: Inclusion of Stakeholders  | Sub-Themes of Theme VI   |
|--|--|
| VI. Opportunities for parent education and effective communication with stakeholders are imperative. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The ability for teachers and administrators to confidently and competently articulate SBR is crucial.</li> <li>2. Parent education is paramount throughout the process.</li> <li>3. Expect pushback from some stakeholders.</li> <li>4. A reporting tool for SBR that is parent-friendly is important for effective, ongoing communication.</li> <li>5. Staff development embracing newly hired teachers in the SBR process is essential for sustained success in implementation.</li> </ol> |

## Summary

Chapter Four presented and discussed the findings of this study as generated from individual, in-depth interviews and focus group interviews of twelve teachers. The themes were visually presented in a summary table at the end of each section. The six fundamental themes that emerged regarding the implementation of SBR included a grade accurately representing a student's academic performance as well as the heightened clarity that teachers achieve in regards to what their students know, understand, and do. Support from administration and honoring a slow, active process that is respectful of teacher readiness are important components when transitioning to SBR. Equally important is differentiated professional development addressing standards-based practices such as formative assessment, differentiation, and flexible grouping as these practices naturally warrant the need for SBR. Finally, opportunities for parent education and effective communication with stakeholders are imperative.

Chapter Five discusses the alignment of the findings with the research questions. The implications for the results of this study and recommendations for future research also are presented.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to examine the understandings and changes related to practices that teachers in a Midwestern suburban middle school have when transitioning from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting (SBR). Described changes of the participants in this qualitative case study can serve as a model for other middle school teachers and administrators embarking on the implementation of SBR.

Chapter Four presented an analysis of in-depth interviews with twelve sixth-grade teachers in their first year of full implementation of SBR as a result of transitioning from traditional grading practices. Central themes that emanated from the participants' responses also were presented. This chapter includes a summary of the results regarding the study's original research questions as well as a discussion of the meaning of the results and their implications for middle schools transitioning to SBR. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion of Research Questions**

The following sections describe the findings of the study, connecting themes that emerged to the original research questions. Celebrations and turning points described by the participants also are included, as are connections to relevant research and practitioner literature.

Discussion of the research questions is supported by exemplar quotes from participants' individual and focus group interviews. Experiences described by participants, supports identified by participants as necessary for successful implementation of SBR, and clarity achieved by participants as it pertains to what students know, understand, and are able to do, are mirrored in the literature presented in Chapter Two (see, e.g., DuFour, DuFour,

Eaker, & Many, 2006; Guskey, 2011; Marzano, 2010; O'Connor, 2009, 2010; Popham, 2008; Reeves, 2011a; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006; Tomlinson, 2010, 2011; and Wormeli, 2006, 2011).

**Question One: What understandings related to practices do middle school teachers have as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?**

Research Question One focused on the understandings and changes related to practices of teachers as they transitioned from traditional grading practices to SBR. This section presents the historical perspective leading to the transition of SBR at this particular school site, followed by the emergent themes of *necessary resources*, and *standards-based practices* that relate to this particular research question.

The process of transitioning from traditional grading practices to SBR at this particular research site did not actually begin with SBR as an end goal. Instead, the journey toward SBR began because teachers in the building recognized a need for professional development focused on grading and assessment practices. What began as a school with traditional, inconsistent grading and assessment practices and letter grades that did not accurately represent students' academic performance transformed into a professional learning community where all students were measured against specific curriculum standards and were provided instruction based on their individual needs. Steps of the journey included studying the research, engaging in substantial professional reading, embracing opportunities to try and refine different approaches in classrooms, and having ongoing conversations at the individual, team, and building levels. Collectively, these learning experiences led to teachers' and administrators' joint decision to implement SBR practices. The twelve participants in



this study described the transition process that occurred over the last few years as an exciting one that generated a culture of expectations in which each student will learn at high levels. One of the most significant changes for the participants was their transformed focus to what students were actually learning as opposed to just covering the material. A focus on how students perform as a result of the instruction now guides the teachers regarding next steps in the learning process.

#### Theme: Necessary Resources

As participants described their understandings of SBR transition, a number of resources were cited as necessary for successful implementation of SBR. Time was an important theme that resulted from the teacher interviews. The resource of time allowed other resources to come to fruition, including a school-wide book study, structured conversations with PLCs, collaborative identification of essential learnings in the curriculum, differentiated professional development, peer observations, a reporting tool that was congruent with SBR, and teachers' confidence in articulating components of SBR.

A slow but steady process allowed for teachers to learn and collaborate at a pace that honored their readiness. As a result, teachers gradually began to change how they graded and assessed students. Systemic collaboration among teachers and administrators generated common grading and assessment principles and guidelines to be practiced in all classrooms, as reflected in the literature of O'Connor (2009) and Wormeli (2006; 2011). Examples include separation of behavior and academic performance in grades, accountability of students for completing assigned work instead of getting a zero, removal of extra credit options, cessation of the practice of weighting homework into a grade, use of most recent evidence and artifacts to determine students' grades, and opportunities for students to redo

work and retake assessments for full credit. Such changes in grading and assessment naturally led to implementation of practices congruent with SBR such as formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiation. As Emily, one of the interviewees, expressed:

I'm a much better teacher than I was previously simply because all these components come into play: using data to guide instruction, differentiation, use of rubrics, descriptive feedback and one-on-one conferring, removing behavior from grades, students self-assessing, eliminating extra credit, providing retakes for one-hundred percent, and not grading homework. I'm not teaching the same way I was. I'm using standards-based reporting. Standards-based reporting actually came from teaching in a different way because I needed a different way to mark the student's performance instead of assigning a letter grade. I could do all of the differentiation and everything, but when it came time to mark that, it wouldn't have worked, so (standards-based reporting) was really a natural response to better teaching practices. (EmilyIIP13)

A book study of *Fair Isn't Always Equal*, by Rick Wormeli, stimulated conversations among colleagues and provided time for them to reflect and question their current practices. All twelve participants revered the book study as pivotal in moving the staff forward. As

Bobbi noted:

The book study brought up great conversations of things that I knew were struggles for gifted learners. Homework, for example. Why do we have certain homework assignments that don't seem to have a purpose? Why are we doing units that don't fit into the curriculum? What does an A mean? What does a B mean? As the discussions continued and people learned more about these things, they started to change their practices while evaluating themselves along the way. Then it became essentially, 'Why don't we do this? We all believe this is a better way,' so then it was just a matter of figuring out how to move forward and do it right. (BobbiIIP2-3)

Emily cited the book study as a critical influence that caused her to reflect on current practices, perpetuating what she experienced as a student in school:

A turning point for me would be reading the Rick Wormeli book. That really opened my eyes to things that I had done previously as practice and I was like, 'Well, that just doesn't make any sense. I wonder why I've been doing that.' And I know why I did that. I engaged in previous practices because that's what I grew up with, and that's all I knew, so I just continued to perpetuate them. (EmilyIIP5)

In tandem with professional development in the areas of grading and assessment, professional learning communities (PLCs) became intimately familiar with their board-approved curriculum and identified essential learnings, those standards most essential for students to know, understand, and do, as guided by the literature of DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010). PLC members collaboratively and collectively generated rubrics to align with the essential standards, specifically defining performance levels of Beginning, Developing, and Secure. Exceeds often was left defined with an individual student's needs in mind. Furthermore, teachers in support positions such as English as a Second Language collaborated with peers to design rubrics for specific students based on their needs. Ongoing PLC work caused teachers to realize that discussions pertaining to the meaning of each standard and revision of rubrics resulted in an ongoing process that never truly ends. This open-ended process was necessary because students and their needs were always changing.

The urgency for differentiated professional development that focused on instructional and assessment practices was brought forth with the adoption of *Everyday Math* at the sixth grade level as a result of district-wide curriculum review. The implementation with fidelity of *Everyday Math* called for standards-based practices such as ongoing formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiated instruction. A step in the learning process for the math teachers prior to implementation of their new curriculum involved observing elementary classrooms where standards-based practices abounded. As they discovered the meaning of formative assessment data in guiding instruction, the teachers found it difficult to reconcile the use of formative data with their assignment of traditional letter grades. These cognitive

struggles were reduced when they began to report out students' performance based on standards instead.

Over time, teachers from other content areas in the building observed their peers teaching *Everyday Math* and began collaborating with each other. As collaborative behaviors increased, momentum built to a point where, collectively, the faculty determined that SBR would be the most effective way to communicate and report student learning. A dual system of SBR with traditional letter grades was incongruent for teachers in their quest to ensure that a grade truly reflected students' proficiency levels as measured against the standards.

Honoring the resources of a professional learning community as well as the value of time empowered participants within a collaborative culture to face barriers and frustrations together throughout the process of transitioning from traditional letter grades to standards-based reporting. For example, as they discovered the challenges of SBR in PowerSchool, their electronic communication tool with parents, the district took the necessary steps in revising the teachers' side of PowerSchool so teachers could organize the reporting system and grade book according to the standards, as recommended by O'Connor (2009) and Marzano (2010). Second, while each of the participants advocated for more instructional time to meet the needs of their learners, they continued to support one another in refining their skills in the areas of differentiation and assessment. Third, initial criticism from a number of parents created anxiety for some teachers. With time, communication, and educational opportunities, parents demonstrated a better understanding and greater support for SBR. Time and ongoing collaboration empowered teachers with the skills to articulate the importance of SBR and justify the need for it at the middle school level.

Over and over again, participants in this study communicated the importance of time in order to transform their practices to SBR. Time allowed for components of change to be addressed in a manner which respected the readiness, voice, and needs of teachers.

#### Theme: Standards-Based Practices

The twelve participants in this study experienced a philosophical shift in their thinking as well as improved job satisfaction when they gradually replaced traditional grading and assessment with standards-based practices such as formative assessment, differentiation, flexible grouping, and the replacement of zeros with the expectation that students would instead complete their work. Participants unanimously agreed that SBR, while not easier, was better for accountability in student learning because both teachers and students had a greater understanding of expected proficiency for each standard. Additionally, assessing what students know, understand, and can do in relation to each standard called for an instructional response designed specifically for individual learners as opposed to standing in front of the large group and lecturing.

Across the board, participants viewed themselves as more effective teachers with the use of standards-based practices because formative assessment guided their grouping and differentiated instruction, as reflected in the work of Chappuis (2009) and Tomlinson (2010). Letting go of control in the classroom was a scary, yet metamorphosing experience for the participants across the board as they transformed instruction from teaching to the large group with a one-size-fits-all approach to differentiated instruction with flexible grouping. Dana reflected on this personal experience as one of letting go of control to empower students in their learning:

Just the word control, though, would lend itself to power. Who has the power? I think what happened with me is I am no longer the sage on the stage and am now the guide on the side. It's letting go of the control to say to the learner, 'If you're willing to learn this you need to be able to have some of that control. I don't know everything that I need to know for you but you can help me know that,' and I mean that's it...letting go of the power. It's not a power struggle, it's not I'm in charge of you or do all that I'm telling you need to do. It's you tell me what you need through assessment and the new go through the journey together. (DanaFBP6)

Furthermore, transforming grading practices such as replacing a zero with "Insufficient Evidence" begged the expectation for students to do their work, as warranted in the literature of O'Connor (2009) and Wormeli (2006). No longer could a student "win" by accepting a zero because students were held accountable for their learning. Participants shared their personal calling for collecting evidence of student learning as measured against the standards. Sophia captured this accountability for student learning with commitment to SBR practices:

With standards-based reporting, it's easier to know your students and where you need to go with them. It's definitely harder in the preparatory side in thinking about what to give each of the individuals as well as to keep track of frequent formative assessments for each of the standards. I would say, sure, it would be easier to go back to traditional grading practices and just give a test over the unit, call it good, and move on whether the students learned or not. With standards-based, whenever you spiral back to something, you continue focusing on what students are learning in relation to each of the standards, and you're having to keep track of artifacts and update records. It's a lot more work on the teacher's part but provides so much more for the students. (SophiaFGP2-3)

Linette connected the commitment for teachers to ensure accountability of students with giving students ownership in the learning process:

Students should have a hold of who they are as learners. It's not up to us to hold the key to their learning journey and their success and their understanding of it. It's not fair. You're not the king of your classroom. You're just a facilitator of source. You're not the only one, so it's a better fit for everyone. If it were meant to be easy, I wouldn't want to be here. I don't want to click the easy button because it's not a better fit. (LinetteFGP8)

Throughout the study, participants were unshakable in their position that SBR alone did not ensure students learning at high levels. Rather, it was the instructional practices in tandem with reporting of students' performance. Emily synthesized this actual change in practices leading to SBR as the force behind improved student learning:

When we educate others about SBR, it's not the reporting that makes a difference in our kids' learning. It's the standards-based practices we're doing in the classroom – the formative assessment process, the differentiation, the small group instruction, the workshop model to gradually release responsibility, using rubrics that align with the standards. The reporting is just the communication piece. Anyone who is thinking about standards-based reporting may think it's a quick fix to everything. It's not a quick fix because as a teacher you're transforming your instructional practices that naturally lead to the reporting of how students are performing on the standards. (EmilyFGP21)

Put simply, the culmination of standards-based practices cemented support for SBR, particularly because of evidence tied to student learning. Examples included an increase in Measure of Academic Progress scores, growth on IEP students' progress monitoring graphs, students' writing samples, students' improved abilities to articulate their learning during one-on-one conferences, and an increase in students' reading levels. A turning point expressed by a number of participants was the discovered evasiveness in traditional letter grades and the inability to communicate what students were learning during parent/teacher conferences. The confusing process, for example, of reviewing a grade book to identify A pluses on homework, Cs on tests, and Ds on projects to culminate to an A in the course because the student did extra credit, became a pinnacle for teachers in discovering their inability to hone in on the student's performance in relation to the learning targets.

To summarize, teachers' experiences in transitioning to SBR were enriched with learning and applying standards-based practices in their classroom, such as differentiation, formative assessment, and flexible grouping. As teachers began to see evidence of student

success, they struggled with the utilization of traditional letter grades, thus generating a greater need for SBR.

**Question two: What kinds of supports do teachers need as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?**

Research Question Two focused on the supports needed by teachers as they transition to SBR. The emergent themes of *administrative involvement*, *necessary resources*, and *inclusion of stakeholders* all pertained to issues of teacher support.

Theme: Administrative Involvement

Support to implement SBR was defined by the twelve participants as trust, encouragement, and active engagement from peers, especially when modeled by the administration. While support was necessary from colleagues such as PLC members, the instructional coach, and the extended learning teacher, the participants felt strongly that the administration set the interpersonal tone for nonjudgmental, responsive support.

A culture of support encouraged risk-taking and learning based on teacher readiness without the fear of being judged or criticized. This concept of a supportive culture aligns with the PLC work of DuFour et al (2010). Rachel spoke to the power of supportive involvement from administration:

It's the learning support – the instructional support from administrators – and the willingness to catch us when we fall. It's just feeling like we're okay to try stuff in our classrooms and having a safety net of administrative support. We knew it was okay to give something a shot. It's not just the support to give something a shot, though, because I've known administrators who are what I would call 'rubber stampers' where it's like, 'Yeah, sure it sounds good, so go ahead and try it.' They may come to you with an idea and say, 'Go ahead and do this,' but then there's no follow-through. What matters is having somebody in administration who follows through and reflects with us. It's, 'What do you think about this? About this?' Then I go try it, and the administrator comes back and asks, 'How did it go?' If an administrator doesn't ask how it went, they're just rubber-stamping and letting people



do whatever they want. There's no accountability or support. It's also seeing the administrators actively involved. Our administration has been part of the reflective cycle and an active part of communicating. They created the wiki for parents and taught parent classes and met with parents when some teachers weren't comfortable communicating about SBR yet. As teachers, it felt really good to us. I mean, it was very heartening to see that SBR meant just as much to the administrators as it did to us. It wasn't a message from administration, 'Just do this stuff.' It was, 'We're all doing this together, and we're leading the charge because it's that important.' So that was it – it was the support of seeing the administrators take a hold of it when we needed them to. (RachelIIP11-12)

Dana expressed the value in time as a resource when provided by supportive administration:

Definitely a lot of support was obvious from administration at the building and district level, and the understanding that this cannot be a fast process. Even though we knew it was best for kids and we wanted to move fast, we knew we needed to take the time to do it right. And I feel like I'm very flexible with change, and I don't usually resist things, so I mean I think you need to consider the people that are going to be a lot more resistant. The slower the process, the better. The administrators didn't say, 'Here's a book. Read it.' They said, 'Let's read this together.' We were able to process it together and engage in professional development and spend time learning about standards-based reporting. The administration realized that people were at different places, so they differentiated support for us. (DanaIIP6)

The participants in this study asserted that support from administration must be active throughout the transition to SBR. The concept of "tight and loose" was an important leadership approach to the teachers. While administration was tight in the expectation of professional learning around grading, assessment, and standards-based practices, the expectation was loose in that teachers were allowed to move forward in their learning based on their individual readiness and skills.

#### Theme: Necessary Resources

Specific resources were communicated unanimously by the participants as necessary for successful implementation of SBR. For example, pillars of support needed by teachers for a smooth transition from traditional grading practices to SBR were found in the commitment

of time that embraced a slow process, differentiated professional development, a school-wide book study, and the interdependence of a professional learning community.

The twelve participants consistently prioritized the resource of time as a necessary component for transitioning from traditional grading practices to SBR. The time to which they referred was set at a pace to allow for teachers to generate shared ownership of the process and implement SBR practices with fidelity. Rather than being given a directive to implement SBR coupled with the absence of time to learn professionally, the participants shared the value of an organic, grassroots approach in empowering them to get behind the philosophy of SBR practices.

Time was colored with differentiated professional development based on teacher readiness and enriched with resources and professional readings supported by research, as well as structured time to allow for collaborative, reflective conversations among colleagues. Such time lent itself to the transformation of instructional practices that naturally led to SBR because teachers had time to try new ways of grading and assessing in their classroom. For example, with the support of *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, teachers had time to collectively identify essential learnings in their curriculum and generate rubrics that align with them. They had time to gradually revise their grading practices by separating the reporting of behavioral and academic performance, dismissing extra credit options, and providing opportunities for students to retake tests and redo work for full credit. Additionally, they had time to learn and develop the necessary skills pertaining to the interdependent process of formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiated instruction.

A school-wide book study of *Fair Isn't Always Equal*, by Rick Wormeli, allowed for structured conversations among PLCs and provided opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own practices while learning innovative approaches to grading and assessment.

Samantha highlighted the book study coupled with a slow process as essential for empowering teachers:

I think the book study was crucial, and looking back at the time and thinking about the process and how long it took – I would not change any of that. I would go very slow, and I think that's what got all teachers on board, and really made them understand, and understand why this was best for kids. Had we not taken the time we did, we maybe would have lost some teachers, and teachers would not be at the deep understanding they are now. (SamanthaIIP8)

Bobbi explained the need for time intertwined with professional learning and time for PLC conversations:

Helpful supports come back to the training. People don't know what they don't know, and they are not going to change their behavior practice until they try it and see the results and they realize all the things that will come from this are good. The training has to be there, and teachers really need time to have those meaningful conversations. There needs to be time for play and practice and to have those heart-felt discussions and to share frustrations because it won't be perfect, and that's okay. If it's perfect, then I would worry. Nothing is perfect. How do we always improve? It's the importance of the PLC really functioning to the level it's intended to function. (BobbiIIP6-7)

Honoring a slow process with time allowed for a natural progression of phasing in transformative practices while building a capacity of SBR believers. Time also allowed for opportunities to observe and connect with others who are implementing SBR. Essentially, teachers learned with and from one another by sharing experiences, reading together, and implementing practices that organically led to SBR. Participants overwhelmingly expressed the importance and impact of learning from one another and connecting with other teachers who were implementing SBR practices in their classrooms.

### Theme: Inclusion of Stakeholders

Inclusion of stakeholders was imperative for a successful transition from traditional grading practices to SBR according to the participants in this study. While this particular research study focused on the experiences of teachers, this section addresses the participants' exposure and involvement with stakeholders.

Throughout the process of change, according to all twelve participants, resistance was expected by some stakeholders, particularly because their schema was based on traditional grading practices; therefore, a proactive plan for openly communicating and responding was recommended. Examples shared by participants included parent education classes, letters to parents, electronic resources, and a commitment to meet individually with parents as needed to address their unique questions and concerns. Additionally, the value of time empowered teachers with confidence to articulate an understanding of SBR so they could clearly explain the research and need for it. Renae expressed the importance of having the ability to talk about SBR with others:

You have to be comfortable and you have to be confident, and you have to know enough research to justify what it is you are doing. And I think it's also helpful to ask questions because I experienced traditional grades as a student myself, and then as a parent. It's interesting to watch parents when you ask them that question why they don't seem to like standards-based reporting, and you ask them what they don't like about it. In the conversation they'll admit, 'I don't really know what it means.' And then I say, 'When your student got an A on something, what does that mean? We don't really know. It doesn't guarantee that your child learned everything. And when they got a B, what does that mean?' When you ask these questions and get them thinking about it, they realize letter grades really don't tell us very much. (RenaeIIP9)

The important recognition of newly hired teachers as stakeholders begged the task of hiring applicants that presented a philosophical stance congruent with standards-based practices, especially considering they were not a part of the collaborative learning process

and history of celebrations and challenges. The incorporation of professional development with a focus on SBR was an essential component of orientation process for newly hired faculty.

Communication with stakeholders seemed to be an important component to a successful transition to SBR, whether the stakeholder was a long-standing community member or a newly hired employee in the district. Participants said that consideration should be given to educational opportunities and communication venues so that needs and concerns of stakeholders can be addressed.

**Question three: Is there a change in teachers' clarity regarding what their students know, understand, and do as they transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based reporting?**

Research Question Three sought to determine whether there was a change in teachers' clarity regarding what their students knew, understood, and could do as they transitioned from traditional grading practices to SBR. Without hesitation, each participant expressed that they achieved greater clarity in this particular area as their transition from traditional grading practices to SBR ensued. Emergent themes *position on grading, achieving clarity in student learning, necessary resources, and standards-based practices* all relate to this research question.

Theme: Position on Grading

The first step in the process of achieving clarity in student learning was the separation of behavior from academics in a student's grade. This initial stage was followed by gradual implementation of other alternative grading practices such as allowing retakes for one-hundred percent, cessation of grading homework, removal of extra credit options, and

replacement of zeros with “Insufficient Evidence.” These changes in grading practices resulted in participants discovering their heightened awareness of responsibility for moving students forward in their learning because of the achieved clarity in instructional needs.

A professional learning focus enriched with a variety of resources on grading and assessment practices, including O’Connor (2009) and Wormeli (2006), led the twelve participants to viewing a grade – or mark – as a form of communicating a student’s performance in relation to the board-approved standards, thus removing behavior as a component of the grade. Essentially, the grade identified and clarified what a student knew, understood, and could do. In direct contrast, traditional grading practices averaged together a number of items such as behavior, homework, behaviors, quizzes, tests, participation, and projects, ultimately culminating as one grade that did not represent what and if the student learned. The achievement of clarity found with SBR when compared to traditional practices positively impacted students throughout the learning continuum. A special education teacher, for example, had the ability with SBR to drill down to specific skills through pre-teaching and re-teaching in support of her IEP students as opposed to merely focusing on work completion with the absence of identified standards of learning. A teacher of English Language Learners explained the difficulty she experienced when attempting to assign a grade to a student new to the country and possessing few if any English-speaking skills, whereas now she can collaborate with content-area teachers to create rubrics that are individualized for specific students’ needs. Furthermore, a teacher of gifted learners shared her experiences connected to students who demonstrate proficiency at the onset of instruction, increasing accountability for the teacher to respond instructionally to move the student forward in their learning. In contrast, a traditional grading system would have

reflected an A for a letter grade, and the student would probably have sat idle or disengaged for the remainder of the lesson.

According to the participants, SBR has magnified their responsibility in holding students accountable for their learning by empowering them with the specific information needed to respond instructionally. For example, a student who earned eight out of ten generally did not cause a concern for a teacher with traditional grading practices, and the teacher naturally went on to the next activity. On the other hand, with SBR, the teacher accepted responsibility for identifying which two items were missed and whether they aligned with one or more standards.

Each participant in this study supported the practice of offering students the opportunity to retake assessments for full credit. Valuing the individuality of each learning included the recognition that students' understandings of a particular learning target were on a continuum at any given moment on any given day. Since the ultimate goal was for each student to be at least proficient on the learning targets, it was expected that students be given opportunities to address nonproficient areas with support of the teacher and be reassessed in those particular areas. Offering a cap of eighty percent on a retake, for example, did not accurately represent a student's academic performance if the student performed at a proficient level on 100 percent of the assessment.

According to a number of participants, the term, "homework," was replaced with, "independent practice." The transition to SBR called on many teachers to reflect on the purpose and meaning of the work assigned to students. The clarity of the curriculum standards helped determine purpose.

The twelve participants were adamant in regards to extra credit not having a place within SBR practices, whereas it would have been an option in their former classrooms with traditional grading practices to inflate a student's grade. The utilization of the formative assessment process that enveloped a clear focus on learning targets and data to guide differentiated instruction and flexible grouping was not congruent with the idea that a student could do extra credit to improve her grade. Since a grade in a standards-based classroom represented what a student knew, understood, and could do in relation to the curriculum standards, extra credit would have inflated the grade and created dishonest information about her proficiency levels. A number of the participants recalled extra credit options that never aligned to their curriculum, such as offering ten points to bring in a box of Kleenex. With standards-based practices, students were assigned purposeful work that connects with the curriculum, and the expectation was that they would do it. By assessing students' performance on meaningful work required of them to complete, grades truly reflected their proficiency levels.

The implementation of SBR did not allow for a student to receive a zero for not doing her work. The twelve participants reported that with traditional grading practices, they assigned zeros in their grade books when students did not do their work. The philosophical shift that emerged as the teachers transformed their grading practices was one of high expectations for each student to learn. Collectively, they determined the best consequence for a student not doing their work was to do their work, so they replaced zeros with a mark of "Insufficient Evidence" until the student completed the assigned work. Additionally, the teachers determined the reason for the incomplete work and responded according to the unique needs of the student. In contrast, assigning a zero essentially let the student off the



hook and excused her from learning, and averaging in a zero ultimately compromised the grade's representation of what she knew, understood, and could do. Renae offered a temperature analogy:

Incomplete work is a behavior issue, so what was the reason for the incomplete? You can't average in a zero with everything else. I go back to the temperature example with that, you know if you are recording the temperature all week in the summer, and you forget one day. If you put a zero in for that one day, what's that going to do to your average? You really can't do that and have it accurately represent the average, typical summer day. (RenaeIIP9)

The separation of behaviors and academic performance set the stage for teachers to achieve clarity in what their students knew, understood, and could do in relation to the curriculum. Consequently, the focus of grading practices transcended from teachers' grading policies and percentages to what each student learned as a result of the instructional process.

#### Theme: Achieving Clarity in Student Learning

This particular section delves deeper into the separation of behavior from the academic grade, as well as the use of rubrics and specific feedback to guide students forward in the learning process. The clarity that teachers had about their students' performance levels and instructional needs provided more job satisfaction even though SBR demanded more work on their part as teachers.

The twelve participants shared the clarity in student learning that emerged when the behavior component was removed from that academic grade (O'Connor, 2009; Wormeli, 2006). As the teachers collectively arrived at the philosophical belief that a grade should represent a student's proficiency level as measured against each standard, they realized they could no longer include behavior as a part of the grade, such as penalizing a student's academic grade for handing in late work or omitting problems in an assignment. Instead,

participants reported behavior separately with rubrics that measured behaviors such as respect and responsibility in the classroom. This practice provided meaningful, specific information to teachers, students, and parents. Before SBR, for example, a student with a C in math could be, perhaps, a high level student who needed to be challenged academically yet lacked responsibility for completing work. Educators would not have a clear picture of this students' educational programming needs, preventing them from seeing clarity beyond an "average" student who earned a C. By identifying the function behind a behavior, such as a student whose material is either too easy or too difficult, the teacher could respond appropriately with the academic and behavior support that an individual student needs to learn at high levels.

Many of the participants shared their witness to students in SBR classrooms as having the skills to clearly articulate their proficiency levels. Specific, ongoing, formative feedback in regards to where students were performing within a rubric provided both students and teachers with instructional information on where they were, where they are now, and where they need to go next. This clarity also empowered teachers to communicate to parents their students' specific strengths and areas for growth as measured against the curriculum. Ultimately, the conversations focused on what specifically the students learned rather than the activities and work assigned by the teacher. Bobbi spoke of the value of specific feedback and learning-focused conversations they had with students in their standards-based classrooms:

It's so important for a learner to hear immediately what he or she has done well, what is the next step, and it needs to be descriptive. I remember when I was in elementary putting smiley faces on the paper, a star, or a sticker, or 'great job.' What was great about it? I never told my students, and I don't know if I could even articulate that because we didn't have any rubrics that defined it or categorized it out. Again, I was

just doing the very thing I experienced as a kid. I got a star, a sticker, a note that said, 'good job,' and that's what I was then giving back. The descriptive feedback we give now says, 'Here's what you've done well, here is what we're going to work on next,' and it brings focus to the student's learning. (BobbiIP12)

Overall, the twelve participants held strong positions regarding the clarity they now have with SBR in regards to what students know, understand, and are able to do. Rose synthesized this clarity for both teachers and students:

There is no doubt in my mind that standards-based reporting is good for kids, and it's also good for teachers. Education is at its best with standards-based reporting because it takes us down to the point. There is no fluff. This is what kids need to know, this is how we're going to go about it, and this is where we're going. There is no gray area. It's about deciding what is essential for them to know, understand, and be able to do, and defining specifically what it takes to make that happen. (RoseIIP18)

Finally, Linette captured the concept of working smarter with standards-based reporting:

The sad truth is that people who are stuck in traditional grading practices would be so much more comfortable with standards-based reporting. It's much clearer than the traditional system. It's much more comfortable. It's working smarter, while the traditional system is just the opposite. There is clarity with standards-based reporting. You can see it. I mean it's just like, we've been looking through the mud the entire time until now. And now we're looking through glass that's ridiculously clear when it comes to what we know about our students and what they need instructionally. It's absolutely ridiculous that we spent all that time on traditional practices. It's time and students wasted. We wasted time and potential for us and the kids. (LinetteIIP16)

During focus group interviews, participants echoed one another's responses in regards to SBR as being harder, yet necessary, practices for teachers to improve student learning. Ann captured the perspectives of her peers:

Mentally, I'm as at ease in my classroom as more stressed. (Standards-based reporting) is not easy. I mean, every single aspect of it is harder, but I can go about my day feeling more comfortable with what I'm doing because the reporting matches the assessment matches the instruction whereas before it didn't. (AnnFGP6)

Simply put, according to the participants in this study, SBR provided greater clarity for them as teachers. They viewed SBR practices as more student-centered than traditional grading practices, clearly showcasing what individual students knew, understood, and could do.

#### Theme: Necessary Resources

Time to get to know the curriculum with breadth and depth was a resource needed for participants that lend naturally to clarity of student learning. Such time included PLC collaboration and sharing.

The process leading to implementation of SBR immersed the teachers into the curriculum. All twelve participants confidently expressed their intimate knowledge of the curriculum with SBR when compared to the use of more traditional practices. Ongoing PLC discussions regarding curriculum standards, collaborative generating of rubrics to align with the standards, and sharing of student artifacts measured against the standards provided immense clarity pertaining to student learning. Specifically, the teachers had the ability to consistently diagnose the individual student in relation to what she knew, understood, and could do as measured against specific standards.

#### Theme: Standards-Based Practices

Greater clarity was achieved in regards to students' performance levels and instructional needs when standards-based practices were implemented in the classroom according to the participants in this study. For example, formative assessment and differentiation naturally surfaced as a result of collaborative, proactive planning of learning progressions among PLCs.

The formative assessment process emerged as a strong presence within the implementation of SBR for the twelve participants, particularly because of the need to design instruction based from where students demonstrated levels of proficiency in relation to the standards. The fundamental nature of formative assessment was to offer meaningful, specific feedback to teachers and students to guide logical, relevant next steps in the instructional process, aligning with the work of Chappuis (2009). Renae shared the clarity of SBR in knowing where the student was performing as measured against specific learning targets, as compared to assigning a traditional letter grade which did not provide any information on the student's performance as measured against specific learning targets:

The meaningful feedback gleaned from formative assessment data helps both the teacher and the students in defining the level of clarity on where a student is in their learning and what instruction he or she needs next. A funny thought on using data to guide instruction is that numbers don't tell enough. I see that a lot. We really need to see the student's performance to make an instructional decision. If you say assign numbers and say just eight out of ten, okay well which two did the student not get? What if it's a writing piece in a language arts classroom or a science classroom. They have a C on this essay, but why did they get a C? Where are they lacking? Is it the writing skills? Is it the content? The part that's interesting about all this is that raw numbers just don't tell us enough. (RenaeIIP7)

A practice which emerged for the teachers during the process leading to SBR was beginning with the end in mind when planning for student learning, reflecting the work of Popham (2008) and Tomlinson (1999; 2010). The collaborative work of a PLC in identifying learning targets and how the students would be summatively assessed became the essential step in commencing a learning progression. Once the end had been determined, the learning progression came to fruition by working backwards to design purposeful formative assessments and differentiated learning activities, all of which aligned with the learning targets. Instruction was driven by formative data, which was used immediately and

throughout the unit to assess how students were performing against the standards. The twelve participants recalled their traditional practices as delivering a unit with a primary focus on one-size-fits-all activities that culminated to a unit test. Throughout the unit, the teachers specifically did not know where each student was in relation to each curricular standard because of the absence of formative assessment practices. Without formative assessment, they did not have the necessary information that would have guided them to differentiate learning activities for the students. As a result, the unit test came and went, and the teachers moved on to the next unit regardless if all students demonstrated a minimum of proficiency on the learning targets.

Essentially, learning progressions that encompass the formal assessment process and differentiation provided the road map to clarity in regards to what students know, understand, and can do in relation to the curriculum as reported by the participants. Purposeful planning with standards-based practices empowered teachers to know their students better as learners while proactively providing strategies for instructional response based on the needs of students.

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

The intention of this research was to learn about the understandings and changes related to practices of teachers in a Midwestern suburban middle school as they transitioned from traditional grading practices to SBR. An analysis of in-depth individual and focus group interviews with twelve teachers produced findings that suggest that SBR can be more effective than traditional grading practices for both teachers and students when it comes to ensuring that each student learns at a high level. The suggestions of these findings are anchored in the work of Guskey (2011), O'Connor (2010; 2009), Reeves (2008), Scriffiny

(2008), Stiggins and DuFour (2009), and Wormeli (2006), which centers on standards-based practices such as separating behavior from academic performance in a letter grade, using a student's most recent evidence of learning to determine a grade, implementing the formative assessment process to guide differentiated instruction and flexible grouping, and collaborating with peers in a PLC. Multiple implications arise from the interview and focus group data collected for this study.

First and most paramount is the commitment of time and embracing a slow, multi-year process that honored teacher readiness, as unanimously emphasized by the teachers interviewed for this study. This concept of a slow and steady process is supported by the literature regarding PLCs, where teachers with a range of experiences and skills come together to collaborate support one another's growth in ongoing, job-embedded professional development (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Time is the component such that without it, no other component of SBR can successfully survive. Time paves the way for building a culture of believers in SBR and generating capacity of skills in SBR practices. Time is rooted in the organic ownership from teachers in the transition process from traditional grading practices to SBR. Time allows for teacher autonomy to "play" with new practices and refine their art in the SBR process. With time, the concept of "work slowly now to work fast later," comes to fruition.

Second, trust and support from within the system is crucial (Buhle & Blachowicz, 2009; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Guskey 2009). Active engagement from the administration and other instructional support positions, such as an instructional coach, are monumental in assisting teachers in their transition to SBR. Systemic support ranging from within one's content-area PLC to administrative involvement

from the district office eliminates the possibility of isolated feelings and pressure of, “You do this,” and instead demonstrates to each teacher, “We’re in this together,” while maximizing human resources. This systemic support directly relates to the research of PLCs that warrants active engagement from all stakeholders within the system to generate a results-oriented culture where members are interdependent of one another (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Third, differentiated professional development honors teacher readiness and structured time for colleagues to collaborate. Providing teachers with differentiated opportunities to move forward in their own learning supports the work of Guskey (1999; 2000; 2010) which recognizes that an essential component of successful implementation of SBR is contingent upon what happens at the classroom level. Therefore, adult learning must be supported by research and infused with professional readings from a number of experts in the field. Learning targets addressing both theory and practice move teachers from philosophical beliefs to skill development on how to implement SBR practices in the classroom such as differentiation, formative assessment, flexible grouping, and feedback (Black & Wukuanm 1998; Cash, 2011; Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007; Davies, 2007; Dodge, 2009; Popham, 2009; Reeves, 2011a, 2011b; Tomlinson, 2010, 2011; Wormeli, 2006, 2011). For example, the fundamental purpose of formative assessment is to improve student learning according to the participants in this study as well as Popham (2009). The participants shared that once teachers truly believe formative assessment data provides information to help move all students forward, they could improve their practice and adjust instruction based on the formative assessment process. The participants’ unanimous assertion that merely assessing the students was not enough is congruent with the work of



Popham (2009). It was the act of responding to the current evidence of students' mastery levels in relations to the learning target that made a difference. In other words, it was finding the instructional match and deploying strategies that aligned with students' readiness levels that moved learning forward for each student.

Fourth, differentiated support in transforming grading and assessment allows for teacher autonomy to pilot practices that are aligned with their individual areas of interest and levels of readiness. Senge (1990) discussed how the transformation of any organization is dependent upon the action that takes place at the smallest level, thus, actively involving teachers in the process by honoring their voice and needs is crucial. The gift of time to "play" with grading practices over a couple years, while weaving in professional readings and structured opportunities for teachers to share and collaborate along the way, led the staff to a collective stance of systemic grading and assessment principles and guidelines, as communicated by the participants. Examples of action steps resulting from teachers' learning included those presented by O'Connor (2009) such as reporting students' behavioral and academic performance separately, removing extra credit as an option, replacing zeros with insufficient evidence and holding students accountable for completion, using criterion-referenced performance standards as point of reference in determining a grade, determining the aspects of a student's grade from her individual achievement, using samples of a student's performance instead of all scores to determine a grade, and using a student's most recent work to determine a grade as opposed to averaging in work from the beginning of the term.

Fifth, support for PLCs to "roll up their sleeves" and immerse themselves in structured conversations about the curriculum empowers participants to expand their lens

vertically and horizontally regarding what students are expected to know, understand, and do, as warranted by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006, 2010). In this study, the identification of essential learnings, the particular standards most essential for students to learn and achieve, as guided by *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, by DuFour et al (2010), was collectively agreed upon by PLC members, followed by collaborative work in generating rubrics aligning with the essential learnings. Within each rubric, the curriculum standard was deemed Secure, and a task of the PLC was to define Beginning, Developing, and Exceeds. In most cases, the definition of Exceeds was refined and solidified according to an individual student's needs. It was imperative to the participants that teachers in support positions such as those who serve gifted students, students with IEPs, and students identified as English Language Learners were involved in this process as they offered a level of expertise for differentiating to meet the needs of all learners.

Sixth, teachers involved in a transition to SBR practices benefit from access to a reporting tool that is SBR-friendly (i.e., one that was organized by standards). Formal training on how to maximize the potential of the reporting system alleviated anxiety for the teachers in this study as they transitioned from their former traditional system of reporting on homework, tests, quizzes, projects, participation, and activities. This need for a reporting tool congruent with SBR mirrors the work of Marzano (2010) and O'Connor (2009) in that a teacher's grade book should be organized by standards instead of activities.

Seventh, a proactive plan for including teachers with parents throughout the process builds a foundation for the expected resistance that will surface from some parents along the way. Educating parents early on about initial changes in grading and assessment practices

and providing opportunities for them to ask questions and seek clarification offers a relevant lens to the school district by honing in on what is important to the community that exists outside of the school walls. Ongoing, fluid communication can build trust for many stakeholders according to participants, whether it is more formal such as community education classes and school newsletters, or more informal such as taking the time to meet with parents on an individual basis as unique questions arise. Most parents were raised with traditional grading practices so, even if they are included in the process of transitioning to SBR, it is a natural response for some to resist. Others, through the journey of learning with the educators, supportively will ask the question, “How can we not implement SBR?” The teachers in this study noted that as they became more competent and confident in articulating SBR, the inclusion of parents in the process contributed to conversations between home and school that were more learning-focused instead of the familiarity of traditional grades.

Eighth, when a school community embraces the initiative of SBR comprehensively to the point where it is no longer an initiative but rather embedded into the culture, the task of hiring new faculty calls for seeking applicants who have the ability to continue moving the organization forward. The screening process surfaces those teachers with philosophical beliefs that support SBR such as separating behavior from academics in grading, as well as experience with practices leading to SBR such as formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiation. Participants in this study recommended an orientation for new teachers provided by the district that included structured professional development on SBR. This recommendation for professional development is congruent with the work of Whitney, Culligan, and Brooksher (2004) asserting that teachers new to the profession are ill-equipped to create and implement a grading system that is accurate, effective, and justifiable. Without

support in SBR practices, new teachers would be likely to fall back on what was done to them and apply such traditional practices in their own classroom (Guskey, 2004b). In addition to the implication for hiring brought forth by the data in this study, it is suggested that university faculty who oversee teacher preparatory programs deliver and require coursework focusing on SBR practices.

The teachers in this study are happier and more satisfied with their work in moving students forward in their learning when implementing SBR due to evidence that shows students learning at higher levels as well as teacher clarity in what students need instructionally. The success of the implementation of SBR is, in all reality, due to the practices that naturally lead to SBR such as formative assessment, flexible grouping, feedback, and differentiation. Coupled with such changes in instructional practices is a collaborative culture embracing high expectations for each learner. Although SBR requires more work for the teachers as compared to traditional grading practices, there is more clarity in their students' proficiency levels and needs so they can confidently and competently respond instructionally. Ultimately, students then learn and achieve at higher levels.

### **Limitations**

The results of this study had limitations regarding generalization to different populations of teachers who transitioned from traditional grading practices to SBR. The results could have limited applicability to other districts, schools, people, or situations. Furthermore, this study did not examine the experiences of students, parents, administrators, or community members involved in the process of transitioning from traditional grading practices to SBR. The perceptions and thoughts of the sixth grade teachers at this particular site not invited to participate in this study are unknown.

Another limitation of this study was that, although the district selected has two middle schools, only one was selected for participation and within the selected school, only some teachers were selected as participants. While the middle school was comprised of grades six through eight, participants were sixth grade teachers. Since the scope of research was limited to one grade level in one school, it is recommended that the findings not be applied to similar contexts. The experiences of teachers in one grade level, school, or district could vary greatly when compared to those of another grade level, school, or district. According to Creswell (2009), conducting case study research in one grade level from one school can, in fact, be perceived as a delimitation. This qualitative case study was delimited to the anecdotal data that was generated from twelve teachers in a Midwestern, suburban middle school as well as the boundaries within this study.

The data collection process presented an additional limitation to the study. Information gleaned from the interviews depended on the interviewee and what he or she was willing to share, and the nature of this data was confined by his or her personal perspectives and lived experiences. It is important to note, however, that the triangulation of evidence through individual and focus group interviews helped validate the findings and support the prominent themes that emerged.

Another limitation was the researcher's professional connection to the participants. Although the researcher was no longer the participants' direct supervisor, the fact that she previously supervised them could have possibly influenced their willingness to be completely honest about their experiences, perhaps by trying to please the researcher or generating biased responses. However, a delimitation of this point is that trusting relationships existed between the researcher and participants, so it was not difficult for them to accept the

researcher's immersion into their experiences. Controls for bias were employed throughout the research process by maintaining the context of data communicated by the participants.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations emerged for future research. Some of the following recommendations may remedy some of the limitations and delimitations presented above. Currently, few studies of SBR at the middle school level exist. Qualitative and quantitative approaches could be used in tandem to fortify findings within methodological diversity. Both research paradigms are necessary to strengthen a knowledge base regarding SBR at the middle school level.

The themes found in this study could be used as hypotheses for studies in settings other than the research site where this study took place. Multiple suggestions for future research are recommended below.

A qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with parents of students who are products of SBR practices at the middle school level would provide another dimension of experiences when transitioning to SBR. While this particular research study centered on experiences of teachers, a study of parents' experiences would offer greater awareness and understanding of their roles and needs as stakeholders in their children's education within a system of SBR practices. Similarly, a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with students who are products of SBR practices at the middle school level would offer meaningful insight into students' personal accounts as learners. For example, teachers in this particular study believe student engagement is higher and students' accountability for learning is greater in a classroom infused with SBR practices. Honing in on the students' experiences would provide insight into their own perceptions and beliefs around learning and

achievement. Furthermore, a study comparing intrinsic motivation between students who are products of SBR and students who are products of traditional grading practices would provide data on students' empowerment in the learning process and their personal understanding of what they know, understand, and can do in relation to the learning targets.

The results from this particular study suggest the need for supporting teachers new to the school in order to sustain successful implementation of SBR. A qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with newly-hired teachers to schools who are implementing SBR would offer school districts information regarding the specific supports needed in the area of professional development. This type of study could also offer suggestions regarding necessary qualifications in future candidates for employment.

A qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with teachers on how they organize and assess student artifacts when implementing SBR would provide clarity on organizational systems most helpful and efficient for teachers. In this particular research study, participants explored a number of organizational systems through trial and error as well as individual preference. Honing in on systems teachers find to be most successful would offer valuable insight to schools and districts beginning the transition process to SBR.

A qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with students who are products of a dual system of letter grades and SBR at the middle school level would show the degree to which students integrate feedback in their learning when such feedback is presented in tandem with a letter grade. The majority of participants in this particular study submit that when provided both a grade and feedback, students generally focus their attention on the grade. As a result, students' engagement in applying feedback in their learning is lessened when overshadowed by a grade.

An additional recommendation for future research that encompasses a dual system is a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with educators who implement letter grades with SBR. A study of teachers at the middle school level would offer data regarding the degree of congruence within the dual system as it pertains to clarity of what a student knows, understands, and is able to do.

A qualitative analysis of administrators' experiences when implementing SBR at the secondary level would offer insight into the leadership challenges and pathways for successful transition. As more school districts turn to SBR practices as a means of increasing student learning, administrators can learn from one another's experiences. For example, information gleaned from other administrators can guide a district administrative team in planning professional development as well as designing opportunities for inclusion of stakeholders.

A comparison of teachers implementing SBR due to a directive from administration with teachers implementing SBR because they initiated a desire to improve their grading and assessment practices would provide clarity on teacher ownership and empowerment in the SBR process. Teachers in this particular study strongly suggested that a slow, steady process and an active voice in the transition to SBR generated a capacity of believers, contributing to their ability to implement SBR practices with fidelity. What is not known is teachers' beliefs and ownership in SBR when given a directive to implement such practices in their classrooms.

An empirical study of why schools do not implement SBR would offer insight on potential barriers and resisting forces to change. Additionally, these data could suggest implications for professional development, the teacher evaluation process, and budgetary



planning. For example, perhaps professional development is needed to support the certified staff in their limited ability to differentiate instruction, or perhaps the teachers are not held accountable during the evaluation process to show evidence of student learning. It is also feasible that teachers have been resistant to transform their instructional practices because they have not been provided budgetary support for resources in their classrooms.

A comparison of student achievement data between students who are products of SBR and students who are products of traditional grading practices at the middle school level would provide evidence regarding which system makes a greater impact on students' academic success. Additionally, an empirical study of the overall effectiveness of college students who are products of secondary institutions implementing SBR would provide evidence of the long term impact of SBR on one's ability to experience academic and behavioral success at the post-secondary level. Since few research studies exist at the secondary level involving SBR, extensive knowledge is lacking regarding the potential influence SBR can have on college success.

### **Conclusion**

The process of transitioning from traditional grading to a standards-based reporting system is an arduous one, especially given the fact that for years public schools at the secondary level have utilized letter grades to label students' performance levels (Guskey & Bailey, 2010; Whitney, Culligan, & Brooksher, 2004). Community members, parents, students, and teachers often are faced with a variety of anxieties if grading practices change. Some, for example, view a SBR system as one that reduces accountability and motivation among students as well as one too complicated to manage for teachers, yet there is no research to suggest any of these claims (Staly, 2011). Challenging such norms in order to

ultimately increase student learning takes collective commitment, results-focused celebrations, ongoing communication, vulnerable reflections, trusting teamwork, shared vision and beliefs, and a hunger for continuous growth and learning (Eaker & Keating, 2011; Hagen, 2009; Oliver, 2011). Changing practices involves empowering others and distributing leadership to ensure all students learn at high levels.

Given the limitations of traditional grading practices, many educators have advocated for their replacement with SBR schemes instead (O'Connor, 2009). Formative assessment data has the capacity to empower teachers on a day-to-day basis to differentiate instruction so that it is appropriately rigorous and relevant within the structure of flexible grouping (Wormeli, 2006). When implemented with fidelity, teachers in this study found that SBR creates intimate familiarity for them regarding the individuality of their students as learners.

The middle school teachers in this study who transitioned to SBR from traditional grading practices held strong beliefs that SBR is more effective in ensuring that all students learn at high levels. These particular teachers asserted that SBR is a natural result that emerges from embracing six core factors.

First, at its core, SBR warrants time as the most powerful component for successful implementation. Such time allowed for the teachers in this study to learn together, collaborate, try new instructional practices, and build capacity as it pertains to SBR practices. It should be expected that successful transition from traditional practices to SBR will take three to five years.

Second, trust and active engagement in the process of learning and implementing SBR from the administrators and other instructional support positions provides teachers with feelings of assurance as well as confidence to take risks without the fear of failure and being

negatively judged. The data from this study suggest that trust was naturally generated as a result of active engagement from the administrators and instructional coaches.

Third, according to the teachers in this study, differentiated professional development honoring teacher readiness is crucial in empowering each adult learner to move forward, regardless of where she is on the performance continuum. Professional development must be infused with an abundance of professional readings by numerous experts in the field, as well as structured time for colleagues to collaborate and share their readings while reflecting on current and past practices. Finally, professional development must address theory and practice. In addition to the theory behind SBR, teachers must be given the support to develop their skills in grading, formative assessment, flexible grouping, feedback, and differentiation. It is important to note that a natural starting point for a staff that is embedded with traditional practices is to engage in a book study on grading and assessment practices and to encourage teachers to try different concepts and approaches that emerge from shared readings and discussions.

Fourth, a reporting tool and grade book that is teacher-friendly is essential, one that is categorized by the standards. As noted by teachers in this study, the inability to organize and report student performance by standards would be incongruent to the delivery of SBR practices in the classroom.

Fifth, it is imperative to have a proactive plan for including teachers in educating, communicating with, and obtaining feedback from stakeholders on SBR. Examples include culminating an advisory committee on grading and assessment, creating an information wiki or website, generating newsletters, distributing an electronic survey, facilitating town hall meetings, and offering community education classes. Commitment to meeting individually

with parents who express questions and concerns is an important step throughout the process in strengthening the partnership between home and school in regards to SBR. Over time, teachers become more confident and competent in articulating the essence of SBR as evidenced by the participants in this study.

Sixth, as the transition to SBR is underway, hiring faculty who believe in the SBR philosophy is crucial in keeping the organization moving forward. Additionally, the orientation process for new hires should include professional development with a focus on SBR. Examples shared by teachers in this particular study included a structured workshop during new teacher orientation as well as ongoing, job-embedded support with teacher mentoring.

The in-depth interviews from this study generated numerous topics for discussion. Many of these topics were unrelated to teachers' experiences pertaining to the implementation of SBR. For example, many of the participants expressed the positive impact of having an instructional coach on their teaching practices. Additionally, most of the teachers communicated concern pertaining to their district's reporting tool, Power School, as not being parent-friendly. Finally, it is important to note the teachers who participated in this study demonstrated a fierce passion for their work. They enthusiastically embrace their professional calling to relentlessly ensure that each and every student learns at a high level.

The results of this study invoke consideration of SBR practices at the secondary level. Further exploration of teachers, administrators, students, and parents into their experiences of SBR at the secondary level is necessary. Responding to summon of SBR practices has the potential to increase student learning for all students.

## APPENDIX A

Source: Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching, second edition*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

### Domain 1: Planning and Preparation Component 1f: Designing Student Assessments

**Elements:** Congruence with instructional outcomes • Criteria and standards • Design of formative assessments  
• Use for planning

| ELEMENT                                       | Level of Performance  |  |  |   |
|---|---|--|--|---|
|   | UNSATISFACTORY  | BASIC  | PROFICIENT   | DISTINGUISHED   |
| <b>Congruence with instructional outcomes</b> | Assessment procedures are not congruent with instructional outcomes.            | Some of the instructional outcomes are assessed through the proposed approach, but many are not.               | All the instructional outcomes are assessed through the approach to assessment; assessment methodologies may have been adapted for groups of students. | Proposed approach to assessment is fully aligned with the instructional outcomes in both content and process. Assessment methodologies have been adapted for individual students as needed. |
| <b>Criteria and standards</b>                 | Proposed approach contains no criteria or standards.                            | Assessment criteria and standards have been developed, but they are not clear.                                 | Assessment criteria and standards are clear.   | Assessment criteria and standards are clear; there is evidence that the students contributed to their development.  |
| <b>Design of formative assessments</b>        | Teacher has no plan to incorporate formative assessment in the lesson or unit.  | Approach to the use of formative assessment is rudimentary, including only some of the instructional outcomes. | Teacher has a well-developed strategy to using formative assessment and has designed particular approaches to be used.                                 | Approach to using formative assessment is well designed and includes student as well as teacher use of the assessment information.  |
| <b>Use for planning</b>                       | Teacher has no plans to use assessment results in designing future instruction. | Teacher plans to use assessment results to plan for future instruction for the class as a whole.               | Teacher plans to use assessment results to plan for future instruction for groups of students.   | Teacher plans to use assessment results to plan future instruction for individual students.   |

**Domain 3: Instruction**  
**Component 3d: Using Assessment in Instruction**

**Elements:** Assessment criteria • Monitoring of student learning • Feedback to students • Student self-assessment and monitoring of progress

| ELEMENT   | Level of Performance  |   |  |   |
|---|---|---|--|---|
|   | UNSATISFACTORY  | BASIC   | PROFICIENT   | DISTINGUISHED   |
| <b>Assessment criteria</b>                                | Students are not aware of the criteria and performance standards by which their work will be evaluated. | Students know some of the criteria and performance standards by which their work will be evaluated.                   | Students are fully aware of the criteria and performance standards by which their work will be evaluated.                              | Students are fully aware of the criteria and performance standards by which their work will be evaluated and have contributed to the development of the criteria.                                       |
| <b>Monitoring of student learning</b>                     | Teacher does not monitor student learning in the curriculum.  | Teacher monitors the progress of the class as a whole but elicits no diagnostic information.                          | Teacher monitors the progress of groups of students in the curriculum, making limited use of diagnostic prompts to elicit information. | Teacher actively and systematically elicits diagnostic information from individual students regarding their understanding and monitors the progress of individual students.                             |
| <b>Feedback to students</b>                               | Teacher's feedback to students is of poor quality and not provided in a timely manner.                  | Teacher's feedback to students is uneven, and its timeliness is inconsistent.   | Teacher's feedback to students is timely and of consistently high quality.   | Teacher's feedback to students is timely and of consistently high quality, and students make use of the feedback in their learning.   |
| <b>Student self-assessment and monitoring of progress</b> | Students do not engage in self-assessment or monitoring of progress.                                    | Students occasionally assess the quality of their own work against the assessment criteria and performance standards. | Students frequently assess and monitor the quality of their own work against the assessment criteria and performance standards.        | Students not only frequently assess and monitor the quality of their own work against the assessment criteria and performance standards but also make active use of that information in their learning. |

## APPENDIX B

Source: DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work, second edition*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

### Cultural Shifts in a Professional Learning Community

#### A Shift in Fundamental Purpose:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| From a focus on teaching...   | to a focus on learning  |
| From emphasis on what was taught...   | to a fixation on what students learned  |
| From coverage of content...   | to a demonstration of proficiency   |
| From providing individual teachers with curriculum documents such as state standards and curriculum guides... | to engaging collaborative teams in building shared knowledge regarding essential curriculum |

#### A Shift in Use of Assessments:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| From infrequent summative assessments...   | to frequent common formative assessment  |
| From assessments to determine which students failed to learn by the deadline...    | to assessments to identify students who need additional time and support.  |
| From assessments used to reward and punish students...                             | to assessments used to inform and motivate students  |
| From assessing many things infrequently...   | to assessing a few things frequently   |
| From individual teacher assessments...   | to assessments developed jointly by collaborative teams  |
| From each teacher determining the criteria to be used in assessing student work... | to collaborative teams clarifying the criteria and ensuring consistency among team members when assessing student work |
| From an over-reliance on one kind of assessment...                                 | to balanced assessments  |
| From focusing on average scores...   | to monitoring each student's proficiency in every essential skill  |

#### A Shift in the Response When Students Don't Learn:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| From individual teachers determining the appropriate response... | to a systematic response that ensures support for every student         |
| From fixed time and support for learning...                      | to time and support for learning as variables                           |
| From remediation...  | to intervention   |
| From invitational support outside of the school day...           | to directed (that is, required) support occurring during the school day |
| From one opportunity to demonstrate learning...                  | to multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning                       |

**A Shift in the Work of Teachers:**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| From isolation...   | to collaboration   |
| From each teacher clarifying what students must learn...                  | to collaborative teams building shared knowledge and understanding about essential learning      |
| From each teacher assigning priority to different learning standards...   | to collaborative teams establishing the priority of respective learning standards                |
| From each teacher determining the pacing of the curriculum...             | to collaborative teams of teachers agreeing on common pacing                                     |
| From individual teacher attempting to discover ways to improve results... | to collaborative teams of teachers helping each other improve                                    |
| From privatization of practice...   | to open sharing of practice  |
| From decisions made on the basis of individual preferences...             | to decisions made collectively by building shared knowledge of best practice                     |
| From "collaboration lite" on matters unrelated to student achievement...  | to collaboration explicitly focused on issues and questions that most impact student achievement |
| From an assumption that "these are my kids, those are your kids"...       | to an assumption that these are "our kids"   |

**A Shift in Focus:**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| From an external focus on issues outside of the school...   | to an internal focus on steps the staff can take to improve the school   |
| From a focus on inputs...   | to a focus on results  |
| From goals related to completion of projects and activities...                                      | to SMART goals demanding evidence of student learning  |
| From teachers gathering data from their individually constructed tests in order to assign grades... | to collaborative teams acquiring information from common assessments in order to (1) inform their individual and collective practice, and (2) respond to students who need additional time and support |

**A Shift In School Culture:**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| From independence...                   | to interdependence  |
| From a language of complaint...        | to a language of commitment   |
| From long-term strategic planning...   | to planning for short-term wins   |
| From infrequent generic recognition... | to frequent specific recognition and a culture of celebration that creates many winners |



**A Shift in Professional Development:**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| From external training (workshops and courses)...   | to job-embedded learning   |
| From the expectation that learning occurs infrequently (on the few days devoted to professional development)... | to an expectation that learning is ongoing and occurs as part of routine work practice |
| From presentations to entire faculties...   | to team-based action research  |
| From learning by listening...   | to learning by doing   |
| From learning individually through courses and workshops...   | to learning collectively by working together   |
| From assessing impact on the basis of teacher satisfaction ("Did you like it?")...                              | to assessing impact on the basis of evidence of improved student learning              |
| From short-term exposure to multiple concepts and practices...  | to sustained commitment to limited, focused initiatives                                |

## APPENDIX C: DEFINITION OF TERMS

**Assessment:** Assessment refers to the tools used to evaluate to what level students have mastered the skill at hand, and using this information to adjust instruction to meet students where they are.

**Differentiation:** Differentiation is the designing of instruction that values each learner, recognizing that he/she can take a different path to reach learning goals.

**Efficacy:** Efficacy refers to the degree of quality in regards to being successful I producing a desired result. It is the capacity for yielding an intended result or effect. It is production of effectiveness.

**Everyday Math:** Everyday Math is a curriculum developed by the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project and published by McGraw-Hill Education. This comprehensive math curriculum is written for Pre-K through sixth grade.

**Feedback:** Feedback is the meaningful communication provided to students in regards to their individual performance. It refers to timely, specific, and understandable responses to students' work, both strengths and weaknesses. Such feedback allows students the opportunity to revise and reflect upon their work.

**Independent Practice:** Independent Practice refers to a risk-free opportunity for a student top experiment with new skills being taught so they can practice, reinforce, elaborate, prepare, and extend their understanding.

**ITBS:** This is the acronym for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, which is a norm-referenced test.

**MAP:** This is the acronym for the Measures of Academic Progress, which is a criterion-referenced test generated by the Northwest Evaluation Association.

**Mastery:** A student has reached mastery of a targeted skill or standard when he/she is able to demonstrate a thorough understanding as evidenced by doing something substantive with the content beyond merely echoing it.

**Progress Report:** A progress report is a detailed report showing a student's progress toward end-of-year course objectives using proficiency indicators.

**Standard:** Standards specify what all students should know, understand, and be able to do. Standards represent specific learning goals.

**Standards-Based Reporting:** Standards-Based Reporting involves measuring students' proficiency levels using well-defined course objectives. It is the process of reporting students' progress as measured against specific standards or learning targets while, in tandem, using students' proficiency levels and to guide instruction. The fidelity of this

process is grounded in and dependent upon formative assessment. Standards-Based Reporting is also referred to as:

- SBR (Standards-Based Reporting)
- SBAR (Standards-Based Assessment and Reporting)
- Standards-Based Grading
- SBG (Standards-Based Grading)

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW DOCUMENTS

### Interview Guide Implementation of Standards-Based Grading at the Middle School Level

[Participant],

Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me at this time. I know you have an extremely busy schedule and I appreciate your willingness to participate in this important project.

For ease of note-taking, at this time I would like to ask permission to record our phone conversation. The tape made from this recording will be kept confidential and in a safe place. If at any time you would prefer that I turn the recorder off, please let me know and I will do so immediately. Do I have your permission to begin taping our discussion?

-Start tape recording if applicable-

Thank you. I have several main questions to ask you today. As we talk, I may think of follow-up questions as well. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question, or would like to end the interview, please let me know. I anticipate that our conversation will take about 45 minutes and probably will be shorter than that.

1. Did you receive the consent form that I mailed you a few weeks ago [*if form was not received, read consent form to the participant at this time*]? Do you give your consent at this time to participate in this study? Do you have any questions for me at this time?
2. Would you confirm that you have given permission for me to tape this conversation [*if participant has done so*]?

(A) May I first confirm that you are a teacher? [*If not, end the interview, and thank this person for their time*].

1. What content(s) and grade level(s) do you teach?
2. How long have you worked in this school?
3. What is the student population?
4. What are the student demographics (race, gender, SES)?
5. How many teachers do you have in your school?
6. How many administrators do you currently have?
8. Do you have any other descriptions of your school that I should know about?

(B) I would next like to talk about the process that led to the implementation of Standards-Based Grading. Describe the process from your perspective.

1. What is your current philosophy on grading practices? How has this changed over your career?
2. How do you define Standards-Based Grading?
3. How did the process to implement Standards-Based Grading begin at this school? (*four years ago*)
4. When the process began, was it the intended result to implement Standards-Based Grading?
5. Was it directed from administration or did it start with the teachers?

(C) What have been your experiences as you transition from traditional grading practices to Standards-Based Grading?

1. What are some celebrations you have experienced along the way?
2. What are some frustrations you have experienced along the way?
3. What are some turning points for you that happened along the way that brought you to where you are today in regards to implementation of Standards-Based Grading?

(D) What kinds of supports are needed to allow you to implement Standards-Based Grading?

1. How do you view yourself as an adult learner?
2. What professional development have you received relating to grading practices in the last four years?
3. What other types of support have you received?
4. What supports have been most helpful to you?
5. What supports would be most helpful to you?
6. What kinds of supports are most necessary for teachers beginning this process?
7. What are the barriers to implementing SBR?
8. What help would be needed to break down these barriers?

(E) Describe your efficacy as a teacher with Standards-Based Grading. (*Efficacy defined as the capacity for producing a desired result; effectiveness; quality of being successful in producing an intended result*)

1. How is this the same as or different from traditional grading practices?
2. What does classroom instruction look like when utilizing Standards-Based Grading? How is this the same as or different from traditional grading practices?
3. Please speak to your experience with the following components and their relationship with the implementation of Standards-Based Grading:

- a. Knowledge and practice of formative and summative assessment.
- b. Using data to guide instruction.
- c. Differentiation.
- d. Rubric development.
- e. Descriptive feedback.
- f. One-on-one conferring.
- g. Reporting of behaviors.
- h. Self-assessment by students.
- i. Parent communication.
- j. Reporting of student progress via online gradebook (i.e. Power School, Infinite Campus)
- k. Grading and assessment principles:
  - i. Differentiation (it is necessary)
  - ii. Behavior
  - iii. Extra credit
  - iv. Ongoing formative assessments
  - v. How to determine proficiency
  - vi. Independent practice and Homework
  - vii. Incomplete work
- l. Ability to engage in conversation on Standards-Based Grading with parent, community member, etc.
- m. Ability to speak to research around Standards-Based Grading
4. Have you grown as a teacher since implementing Standards-Based Grading?
  - a. If yes, what evidence do you have to support this statement?
  - b. If no, why not? What would have helped you grow?
5. Has the implementation of Standards-Based Grading helped your students grow as learners?
  - a. If yes, what evidence do you have to support this?
  - b. If no, why not? What would help them grow?

(F) What evidence do you have to show your efficacy regarding clarity in students' proficiency levels?

1. How is this the same as or different from when using traditional grading practices?
2. How is teacher efficacy impacted by Standards-Based Grading

(G) Conclusion: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experiences with Standards-Based Grading?

- 1) What are "next steps" regarding your implementation of Standards-Based Grading?
- 2) What guidance would you give to a teacher and/or a school as they prepare for implementation of Standards-Based Grading?

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. I appreciate your time today. After I look over the transcript of our conversation [*or my notes, if permission is not given to record*] may I contact you if I have further questions?

Thank you. If you have any further questions for me, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time.  
Do you have my contact information?

Thank you. Have a great day.

---

*[Follow-up questions may be asked after any or all of the primary questions, depending on participant's responses]*

### **Focus Group Interviews**

\*\*Thank participants for their time.

\*\*Explain that these focus group questions surfaced from analysis of themes from individual interviews.

\*\*Ask permission to record.

- 1) Academic performance and behaviors are “separate components” with SBG practices, and yet they are “interdependent.” Please tell me more about this.
  
- 2) SBG is “easier” for a teacher and yet “more work.” Please tell me more about this.
  - How does SBG provide you with more clarity as the teacher?
  
- 3) Please tell me more about your process with the following components and the support that’s needed for successful implementation of SBG:
  - Grading reporting system (Power School)
  
  - Management of artifacts
  
  - Letting go of “control” from traditional classroom teacher
  
  - What if a student doesn’t do his/her work?
  
- 4) How are students more actively engaged in the learning process with SBG? What evidence do you have that they are intrinsically motivated with SBG?
  
- 5) You’ve shared many components that are included with SBG practices: differentiation, flexible grouping, reporting behavior separately, creating rubrics that align with curriculum, intimate knowledge of vertical curriculum, spiraling of



skills/concepts, specific & descriptive feedback, and the formative assessment process. How necessary are these for successful implementation of SBG?

- What is your reaction to the idea that these components, when implemented with fidelity, naturally lead to the arrival of and need for SBG?
- What supports for you – the teachers – helps get you to this place where you're confident and competent with all of these components for SBG implementation?
- What if you had to give a letter grade, too? What are the implications of a dual system (SBG and letter grades)?

6) Is there anything else you would like to share with me as it pertains to SBG?

## APPENDIX E: CONSENT DOCUMENTS

### Participant Selection Letter

L. Jill Urich  
514 NW Benjamin Court  
Ankeny, IA 50023

November 2011

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Laura Jill Urich and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University. As a teacher at Waukee Middle School, I would like to invite you to participate in my research project: *Standards-Based Reporting: A Qualitative Case Study*.

I would like to interview you to ask about your experience in the transition to and implementation of Standards-Based Reporting to replace a traditional letter grade system. As a participant in this study, you will be asked to share your celebrations and frustrations of your experience, including professional development and support you are receiving and lack thereof.

I would like to sit with you for one 60-minute audio taped individual interview and one 60-minute focus group interview. Please do not agree to participate if you will be leaving Waukee Middle School during this current school year.

There are no probable risks to participating in this research study. You will not be compensated for your participation.

If you would like to participate in this research study, please return the enclosed Informed Consent document with your signature to me by January 1, 2012.

If you have any questions now please contact me at 515-783-4827, or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Scott McLeod, at 707-772-7853.

Sincerely,

Laura Jill Urich  
Principal  
Northview Middle School  
Ankeny Community School District

## INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Title of Study:** *Implementation of Standards-Based Grading at the Middle School Level*

**Investigator:** *Laura Jill Urich, ISU doctoral candidate (with assistance from Dr. Scott McLeod, ISU Associate Professor)*

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of middle school teachers as they transition to implementation of Standards-Based Grading from traditional grading practices. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have been involved in this process since the transition began a few years ago at your particular school. Data collected will explore your experiences, the kinds of support necessary to implement Standards-Based Grading, and teacher efficacy.

### **DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate, Laura Jill Urich will interview you individually for no longer than 60 minutes. You will be presented with the interview guide ahead of time (see attached interview guide for complete list of questions). The full interview will be recorded on a digital voice recorder. You will be identified by a pseudonym for the study and your information will be protected before, during, and after this research project.

A second interview will take place with a focus group. Laura Jill Urich will interview you with five of your colleagues in a group setting, and this will last no longer than 60 minutes. You will be presented with the interview guide ahead of time. The full interview will be recorded on a digital voice recorder.

During the interview process, you may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Your participation will last for the amount of time that the interviews take. After the interviews, the audio recordings will be transcribed, and you will be presented with a copy of the transcripts for your review. This will be delivered in person or via an e-mail to the address that you provide to me.

After these steps, your participation will be over. At the conclusion of the dissertation research, you will be provided a write-up of the anonymous findings from the study.

## **RISKS**

There are no known or foreseeable risks for participation in this study.

## **BENEFITS**

If you decide to participate in this study, there are no personal advantages to participation. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit your school district's leadership team (including board of education). It also is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by adding to the body of research about how middle school teachers implement Standards-Based Grading, the kinds of support they need, and teacher efficacy.

## **COSTS AND COMPENSATION**

You will not have any costs related to participating in this study, other than the time you spend during the interview and reviewing the interview transcript.

## **PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may initially refuse to participate or stop participating in the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or detrimentally affect your relationship with the researcher, her major professor, and/or Iowa State University.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken:

1. Your interview will be recorded and transcribed but you will be identified in the transcripts and on tape with a pseudonym.
2. The data will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked room at all times.
3. The data only will be kept until the completion and publication of the study. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential. In publications related to this study, your school district and all participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms.

## QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions or express your concerns at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study, contact primary investigator *Laura Jill Urich*, 515-783-4827; or *Dr. Scott McLeod*, 707-722-7853.
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*

## PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature below indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given time to read this document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

## APPENDIX F: IRB DOCUMENTS

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4566  
FAX 515 294-4267

**Date:** 10/20/2011

**To:** Laura Jill Ulrich  
514 NW Benjamin Ct  
Ankeny, IA 50023

**CC:** Dr. Scott McLeod  
N231 Lagomarcino

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Implementation of Standards-Based Grading at the Middle School Level

**IRB ID:** 11-432

**Study Review Date:** 10/18/2011

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b).

The determination of exemption means that:

- **You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.**
- **You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application.** Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.

Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

**Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form.** A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. **Only the IRB or designees may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

FULL

|                     |   |  |                         |
|---------------------|---|--|-------------------------|
| For IRB<br>Use Only | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Research Per Federal Regulations | <input type="checkbox"/> No Human Participants   | IRB ID: 11-432          |
|                     | EXEMPT Per 45 CFR 46.101(b): 1                                | Minimal Risk <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Review Date: 10/10/2011 |

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)  
Exempt Study Review Form**

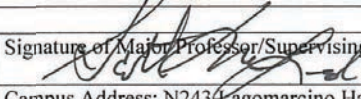
RECEIVED

SEP 15 2011

## SECTION I: GENERAL INFORMATION

By IRB

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Principal Investigator (PI): Laura Jill Urich   | Phone: 515-783-4827  | Fax: 515-965-9639  |
| Degrees: BA at UNI, Masters & Specialist Degree at Drake University   | Correspondence Address: 514 NW Benjamin Court, Ankeny, IA, 50023 |  |
| Department: Ed Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS)   | Email Address: jill.urich@ankenyschools.org                      |  |
| Center/Institute:   | College: Human Sciences  |  |
| PI Level: <input type="checkbox"/> Faculty <input type="checkbox"/> Staff <input type="checkbox"/> Postdoctoral <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Graduate Student <input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate Student |  |  |
| Alternate Contact Person: Scott McLeod  |  |  |
| Correspondence Address: N243 Lagomarcino Hall, Ames, Iowa 50011-3195  |  | Email Address: mcLeod@iastate.edu<br>Phone: 707-722-7853 |
| Title of Project: <i>Implementation of Standards-Based Grading at the Middle School Level</i>   |  |  |
| Project Period (Include Start and End Date): [10-01-11 to 08-30-13]   |  |  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>FOR STUDENT PROJECTS</b>   |  |
| Name of Major Professor/Supervising Faculty:<br>Scott McLeod  | Signature of Major Professor/Supervising Faculty:<br> |
| Phone: 707-722-7853   | Campus Address: N243 Lagomarcino Hall, Ames, Iowa 50011-3195   |
| Department: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies   | Email Address: mcLeod@iastate.edu  |
| Type of Project: (check all that apply)   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Research <input type="checkbox"/> Thesis <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Dissertation <input type="checkbox"/> Class project<br><input type="checkbox"/> Independent Study (490, 590, Honors project) <input type="checkbox"/> Other—Please specify: _____ |  |

## KEY PERSONNEL

List all members and relevant experience of the project personnel. This information is intended to inform the committee of the training and background related to the specific procedures that each person will perform on the project.

| NAME & DEGREE(S)  | SPECIFIC DUTIES ON PROJECT  | TRAINING & EXPERIENCE RELATED TO PROCEDURES PERFORMED, DATE OF TRAINING  |
|---|---|--|
| ✓ Laura Jill Urich: BA in K-12 teaching from University of Northern Iowa, Masters in Counseling from Drake University, Masters in Ed Leadership & Specialist Degree from Drake University | Principal investigator: Interviewing, Observing, Document Reviewing, and Data Analyzing; project management | Research experience in qualitative and quantitative research methods. Completed IRB Training 11-23-10 (certificate # 575241) |
| ✓ Scott McLeod<br>J.D., Ph.D.   | Major Professor   | Completed IRB training 11-08-10 (certificate # 38714)  |

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**FUNDING INFORMATION**

|  |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Internally funded, please provide account number:                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Externally funded, please provide funding source and account number:        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Funding is pending, please provide OSPA GoldSheet ID:                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Title on GoldSheet if different from above:                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: (e.g., funding will be applied for later, project not funded, etc.). |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Student Project—no funding or funding provided by student        |

**SCIENTIFIC REVIEW**

Yes  No Has or will this project receive peer review?

Although the assurance committees are not intended to conduct peer review of research proposals, the federal regulations include language such as “consistent with sound research design,” “rationale for involving animals or humans,” and “scientifically valuable research,” which requires that the committees consider in their review the general scientific relevance of a research study. Proposals that do not meet these basic tests are not justifiable and cannot be approved. If an assurance review committee(s) has concerns about the scientific merit of a project and the project was not competitively funded by peer review or was funded by corporate sponsors, the project may be referred to a scientific review committee. The scientific review committee will be an ad hoc and will consist of your ISU peers and outside experts as needed. If this situation arises, the PI will be contacted and given the option of agreeing that a consultant may be contacted or withdrawing the proposal from consideration.

If the answer is “yes,” please indicate who did or will conduct the review:

If a review was conducted, please indicate the outcome of the review:

**COLLECTION OR RECEIPT OF SAMPLES**

Will you be: (Please check all that apply.)

- Yes  No Receiving biological samples from outside of ISU? See examples below.  
 Yes  No Sending biological samples outside of ISU? See examples below.

Examples include: genetically modified organisms, body fluids, tissue samples, blood samples, pathogens.

**If you will be receiving samples from or sending samples outside of ISU, please identify the name of the outside organization(s) and the types of samples you will be sending or receiving outside of ISU:**

|  |
|--|
|  |
|--|

**ASSURANCE**

- I certify that the information provided in this application is complete and accurate and consistent with any proposal(s) submitted to external funding agencies.
- I agree to provide proper surveillance of this project to ensure that the rights and welfare of the human subjects or welfare of animal subjects are protected. I will report any problems to the appropriate assurance review committee(s).
- I agree that I will not begin this project until receipt of official approval from all appropriate committee(s).

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- I agree that modifications to the originally approved project will not take place without prior review and approval by the appropriate committee(s) and that all activities will be performed in accordance with all applicable federal, state, local, and Iowa State University policies.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

ISU's Conflict of Interest Policy requires that investigators and key personnel disclose any significant financial interests or relationships that may present an actual or potential conflict of interest. A conflict of interest can be defined as a set of conditions in which an investigator's or key personnel's judgment regarding a project (including human or animal subject welfare, integrity of the research) may be influenced by a secondary interest (e.g., the proposed project and/or a relationship with the sponsor). By signing this form below, you are certifying that all members of the research team, including yourself, have read and understand ISU's Conflict of Interest policy as addressed by the [ISU Faculty Handbook](#) and have made all required disclosures.

- Yes  No Do you or any member of your research team have an actual or potential conflict of interest?  
 Yes  No If yes, have the appropriate disclosure form(s) been completed?

#### SIGNATURES

Gill Ulrich 09/09/11  
 Signature of Principal Investigator Date  
Daniel C. Robinson 9/12/11  
 Signature of Department Chair Date

#### FOR IRB USE ONLY:

- Project is exempt.  
 Project is not exempt.  
 Project is not research according to the federal definition.  
 Project does not include human subjects as defined by the federal regulations.

Kenny A. Agrifoglio  
 IRB Reviewer's Signature

October 19, 2011  
 Date

## SECTION II: EXEMPTION CATEGORY

The following categories and sub-parts are eligible for exempt status review.

Check all applicable categories and sub-parts below. To select a category box, double-click on the check box.

PLEASE NOTE:

All procedures for all subjects in a project must be exempt in order for the project to be reviewed for exemption (i.e., all of the activities that participants will be asked to participate in must be found in one or more of the following categories).

Exemption does not apply if the targeted populations for the research will involve individuals who are legally incompetent, significantly mentally ill or impaired, or those who are vulnerable to extraordinary institutional coercion, such as prisoners, residents of 24-hour nursing facilities, or anyone who is involuntarily confined.

Investigators whose research projects involve procedures which do not fit within an exempt category will be asked to complete the ISU Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans.

Investigators conducting research that fits into the exempt categories of research are not required to obtain a volunteer's consent to participate using an informed consent document containing all of the elements of consent. However, the IRB requires that the following items be included in an informed consent document or letter of introduction: a statement that the project involves research; a statement that participation is voluntary; a statement that the participant may skip any questions they do not feel comfortable answering in a survey; and the measures that will be used to ensure confidentiality of data collected in the research.

- Education Practices:** Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings involving normal educational practices is exempt when:
- research is on regular and special education instructional techniques, or
  - research is on the effectiveness of, or the comparison among, instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
- Educational Tests:** Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement) is exempt if:
- in the researcher's private data (including field notes), as well as in any published material, information taken from these sources is recorded in such a manner that subjects *cannot* be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
  - the information, if disclosed outside of the research, could *not* reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subject's financial standing, employability, or reputation.

- Surveying or Interviewing:** Research involving, or interview procedures of, adult-aged subjects is exempt if:
- in the researcher's private data (including field notes), as well as in any published material, *responses are recorded anonymously* and in such a manner that the human subjects *cannot* be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; **or**
  - the responses, if disclosed outside of the research, could *not* reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subject's financial standing, employability, or reputation.

**This exemption does not apply if the subjects are minor children or other vulnerable participants.**

- Public Observations:** Research involving observation of public behavior is exempt if:
- in the researcher's private data (including field notes), as well as in any published material, information taken from these sources is recorded in such a manner that subjects *cannot* be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; **or**
  - the information, if disclosed outside of the research, could *not* reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subject's financial standing, employability, or reputation.

**This exemption applies to research involving minor children only when the investigator does not participate in the activities observed. Workplace meetings and activities, as well as classroom activities, are not considered "public behavior."**

- Public Officials:** All research involving educational tests, survey or interview procedures, or public observations is exempt when the respondents are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office. [*the school board members, not the superintendents*]

**Managers and staff in public agencies are not "public officials" in most cases.**

- Existing Data:** Research involving the collection of existing data, documents, records, pathological or diagnostic specimens is exempt if:
- these sources are publicly available, **or**
  - in both the researcher's private data and in any published material, the information is recorded by the researcher in such a manner that subjects *cannot* be identified, directly or through identifiers (e.g., ID codes, email addresses, etc.) linked to the subjects.
- Taste and Food Quality:** Research on taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies is exempt if:
- wholesome food without additives will be used, **or**
  - the food contains a food ingredient that is at or below the level found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

### SECTION III: PROTOCOL INFORMATION

1. Please describe the purpose of the study and how the data will be used.

The purpose of this study is to collect data about middle school teachers' experiences as these teachers transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based grading.

2. Please outline the study procedures. Include a complete description of how subjects will be involved and all data collection procedures (i.e., what participants will be asked to do). For studies using existing data, please describe the source of the data and whether or not it is available publicly.

**Additionally, please attach a copy of all data collection instruments, such as surveys, interview or focus group questions, etc.**

The study will consist of interviews as the data collection method. Participants are all certified teachers at a public, Midwestern middle school (Waukee Middle School). Participants will be contacted face-to-face to be asked about their study participation. During the course of the face-to-face meeting, they will be asked to review and sign the informed consent documents. The participants will be assigned a pseudonym to be used during the interview process such as "Teacher A." The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. The participants will be given a copy of the transcript to review and verify the content. Their participation will be complete at that time.

3. List characteristics of your study population (i.e., ages, student status, gender, ethnicity, etc.) and your rationale for choosing them for the study. (Studies with vulnerable populations such as children, adolescents, prisoners, or other institutionalized individuals are not eligible for exempt review.)

Ten middle school teachers from one midwestern middle school will be interviewed. This particular school began studying grading practices four years ago, and as a result, the teachers have experienced a grass-roots journey in the implementation of Standards-Based Grading. Instead of receiving a directive from administration to implement Standards-Based Grading practices, these particular teachers have led this work. Data collected in this study will describe their experiences, kinds of support necessary to implement Standards-Based Grading, and teacher efficacy.

4. Describe any potential risk and assess its level of likelihood and seriousness. *If you believe there are no risks, please explain why.* Describe the procedures to be used for protecting against or minimizing any potential risk, including any confidentiality measures used to minimize the risks related to disclosure of data. Risks could be physical, psychological, social, or legal and can include minor discomfort and/or embarrassment.

There are no potential or anticipated risks for the participants for this study. Participant information will be kept confidential to the extent possible by law. Any sensitive information gained will additionally be protected by participant pseudonyms. The name of the school and language that could be construed to identify individual school systems will be modified as necessary.

5. Describe the informed consent process to be used for the study. Attach copies of consent forms, information sheets, and/or letters of introduction that will be used. Also attach any documents that will be used for advertising or recruiting purposes.

The participants will be contacted face-to-face about their participation in the study. The attached informed consent documents will be thoroughly reviewed by the participants. They will also receive copies of the consent forms they sign.

## Interview Guide

### Implementation of Standards-Based Grading at the Middle School Level

[Participant],

Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me at this time. I know you have an extremely busy schedule and I appreciate your willingness to participate in this important project.

For ease of note-taking, at this time I would like to ask permission to record our phone conversation. The tape made from this recording will be kept confidential and in a safe place. If at any time you would prefer that I turn the recorder off, please let me know and I will do so immediately. Do I have your permission to begin taping our discussion?

-Start tape recording if applicable-

Thank you. I have several main questions to ask you today. As we talk, I may think of follow-up questions as well. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question, or would like to end the interview, please let me know. I anticipate that our conversation will take about 45 minutes and probably will be shorter than that.

1. Did you receive the consent form that I mailed you a few weeks ago [*if form was not received, read consent form to the participant at this time*]? Do you give your consent at this time to participate in this study? Do you have any questions for me at this time?
2. Would you confirm that you have given permission for me to tape this conversation [*if participant has done so*]?

(A) May I first confirm that you are a teacher? [*If not, end the interview, and thank this person for their time*].

1. What content(s) and grade level(s) do you teach?
2. How long have you worked in this school?
3. What is the student population?
4. What are the student demographics (race, gender, SES)?
5. How many teachers do you have in your school?
6. How many administrators do you currently have?
8. Do you have any other descriptions of your school that I should know about?

(B) I would next like to talk about the process that led to the implementation of Standards-Based Grading. Describe the process from your perspective.

1. What is your philosophy on grading practices?
2. How do you define Standards-Based Grading?
3. How did this process to implement Standards-Based Grading begin?  
(*four years ago*)
4. When the process began, was it the intended result to implement Standards-Based Grading?
5. Was it directed from administration or did it start with the teachers?

(C) What have been your experiences as you transition from traditional grading practices to Standards-Based Grading?

1. What are some celebrations you have experienced along the way?
2. What are some frustrations you have experienced along the way?
3. What are some turning points for you that happened along the way that brought you to where you are today in regards to implementation of Standards-Based Grading?

(D) What kinds of supports are needed to allow you to implement Standards-Based Grading?

1. How do you view yourself as an adult learner?
2. What professional development have you received relating to grading practices in the last four years?
3. What other types of support have you received?
4. What is and would be most helpful to you?
5. What kinds of support are most necessary?
6. What are the barriers?

7. What help would be needed to break down these barriers?

(E) Describe your efficacy as a teacher with Standards-Based Grading. (*Efficacy defined as the capacity for producing a desired result; effectiveness; quality of being successful in producing an intended result*)

1. How is this the same as or different from traditional grading practices?
2. What does classroom instruction look like when utilizing Standards-Based Grading? How is this the same as or different from traditional grading practices?
3. Please speak to your experience with the following components and their relationship with the implementation of Standards-Based Grading:
  - a. Knowledge and practice of formative and summative assessment.
  - b. Using data to guide instruction.
  - c. Differentiation.
  - d. Rubric development.
  - e. Descriptive feedback.
  - f. One-on-one conferring.
  - g. Reporting of behaviors.
  - h. Self-assessment by students.
  - i. Parent communication.
  - j. Reporting of student progress via online gradebook (i.e. Power School, Infinite Campus)
  - k. Grading and assessment principles:
    - i. Differentiation (it is necessary)
    - ii. Behavior
    - iii. Extra credit
    - iv. Ongoing formative assessments
    - v. How to determine proficiency
    - vi. Independent practice and Homework
    - vii. Incomplete work
  - l. Ability to engage in conversation on Standards-Based Grading with parent, community member, etc.
  - m. Ability to speak to research around Standards-Based Grading
4. Have you grown as a teacher since implementing Standards-Based Grading?
  - a. If yes, what evidence do you have to support this statement?
  - b. If no, why not? What would have helped you grow?

5. Has the implementation of Standards-Based Grading helped your students grow as learners?
  - a. If yes, what evidence do you have to support this?
  - b. If no, why not? What would help them grow?

(F) What evidence do you have to show your efficacy regarding clarity in students' proficiency levels?

1. How is this the same as or different from when using traditional grading practices?
2. How is teacher efficacy impacted by Standards-Based Grading

(G) Conclusion: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experiences with Standards-Based Grading?

- 1) What are "next steps" regarding your implementation of Standards-Based Grading?
- 2) What guidance would you give to a teacher and/or a school as they prepare for implementation of Standards-Based Grading?

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. I appreciate your time today. After I look over the transcript of our conversation *[or my notes, if permission is not given to record]* may I contact you if I have further questions?

Thank you. If you have any further questions for me, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time. Do you have my contact information?

Thank you. Have a great day.

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*[Follow-up questions may be asked after any or all of the primary questions, depending on participant's responses]*



### APPENDIX G: AUDIT TRAIL

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| October 20, 2011        | Received IRB approval to conduct research.  |
| November 7, 2011        | Contacted administrators from Waukee Community School District to discuss research procedures.                        |
| December 14, 2011       | Communicated with potential participants to explain study as well as communicate protocol and consent information.    |
| December 30, 2011       | Piloted interview questions with 2 teachers from Waukee Middle School who were not participants in this study.        |
| January 5 and 6, 2012   | Met with each participant individually to explain informed consent form and process. Conducted one-on-one interviews. |
| January 6 – 15, 2012    | Performed transcription and analysis process of all 12 interviews. Generated questions for focus group interviews.    |
| January 17 and 20, 2012 | Conducted focus group interviews  |
| January 18-21, 2012     | Performed transcription and analysis process of focus group interviews.   |
| January 17 – 25, 2012   | Provided participants opportunity to review their transcriptions.   |
| February – March, 2012  | Data analysis through transcript review.  |
| February – March, 2012  | Initiated peer review as findings and themes emerged.   |

## APPENDIX H: SUMMARY TABLE OF EMERGING THEMES

| Emerging Themes   | Sub-Themes  |
|---|---|
| <p>Theme I: Position on Grading</p> <p>A grade truly represents what a student knows, understands, and is able to do.</p>                           | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A grade communicates a student’s performance in relation to the board-approved curriculum standards.</li> <li>2. Behaviors are reported separately from academic performance.</li> <li>3. Opportunities to retake assessments are the norm, and students can earn up to 100% on a retake.</li> <li>4. Independent practice holds little to no weight in a student’s grade.</li> <li>5. Extra credit is nonexistent.</li> <li>6. Instead of assigning a zero for incomplete work, the first response for the teacher is to identify the function of the student’s behavior. If it is determined the assigned task is appropriate for the student, the student then earns “Insufficient Evidence” until meeting the expectation of completing the work.</li> <li>7. Implementation of SBR is incongruent with assigning traditional letter grades.</li> <li>8. Traditional grading practices did not communicate if and when the student actually learned.</li> </ol> |
| <p>Theme II: Teachers’ Clarity in Student Learning</p> <p>Teachers achieve clarity in what their students know, understand, and are able to do.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. SBR provides clarity where each student is in relation to a specific learning target, including gifted students, special education students, and English Language Learners.</li> <li>2. Teachers provide specific, ongoing feedback to individual students in relation to the learning targets.</li> <li>3. Students are actively engaged in their learning and can clearly articulate their learning targets, where they are in relation to the targets, and what they need to do to move from Beginning to Developing to Secure to Exceeds.</li> <li>4. Teachers view themselves as more</li> </ol>   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | <p>effective teachers with SBR when compared to using traditional grading practices, even though SBR requires more preparatory work for the teacher.</p> <p>5. Each student is held accountable for learning with SBR.</p>   |
| <p>Theme III: Administrative Involvement</p> <p>Active engagement, trust, and support from administration is valued and needed by participants.</p>   | <p>1. Trust is necessary between the teachers and administration.</p> <p>2. Taking the time to honor teacher readiness in the learning process around grading and assessment practices is essential for generating teacher ownership. The decision to move to SBR should not be a top-down decision; rather, it should be made collaboratively between teachers and administrators.</p> <p>3. Administrators and teachers actively learning in tandem about grading and assessment practices creates a safe culture of shared beliefs where teachers are comfortable taking risks.</p>   |
| <p>Theme IV: Necessary Resources</p> <p>Resources such as time, professional literature, collaborating with peers, aligning rubrics with the curriculum, observing others implementing SBR, and adopting a reporting tool that is SBR friendly are essential components of support.</p> | <p>1. Time to learn, collaborate with peers, and try new practices in the classroom is essential.</p> <p>2. A successful transition to SBR is one that takes time to empower teachers with skills and understanding they need.</p> <p>3. Structured time for PLCs to identify Essential Learnings in the curriculum and generate rubrics that align with standards empowers teachers to intimately learn what their students will know, understand, and be able to do by the end of their course. Collaboratively, they define Beginning, Developing, Secure, and Exceeds regarding each standard. This sets the stage for successful implementation of SBR.</p> <p>4. Professional literature and structured book/article studies on research regarding grading and assessment practices are highly valued by teachers.</p> <p>5. Opportunities to observe and collaborate with others who are implementing SBR practices are important for moving teachers</p> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | <p>forward in their learning.</p> <p>6. Adopting a reporting tool that is SBR-friendly is essential for teachers' organization of student performance.</p> <p>7. Differentiated support for teachers to try new practices in their classroom based on their individual readiness and coupled with time to share with their PLC is a way to generate teacher ownership.</p> <p>8. Support from the Instructional Coach helps individual teachers and PLCs move forward in their learning, which ultimately benefits the students.</p>   |
| <p>Theme V: Standards-Based Practices</p> <p>Formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiation are instructional practices that naturally lead to SBR.</p> | <p>1. Teacher knowledge and implementation of the formative assessment process naturally leads to SBR as traditional grading practices become discordant.</p> <p>2. Teacher knowledge and implementation of flexible grouping naturally leads to SBR as traditional grading practices become discordant.</p> <p>3. Teacher knowledge and implementation of differentiated instruction naturally leads to SBR as traditional grading practices become discordant.</p> <p>4. Formative assessment, flexible grouping, and differentiation are interdependent of one another.</p> |
| <p>Theme VI: Inclusion of Stakeholders</p> <p>Opportunities for parent education and effective communication with stakeholders are imperative.</p>                    | <p>1. The ability for teachers and administrators to confidently and competently articulate SBR is crucial.</p> <p>2. Parent education is paramount throughout the process.</p> <p>3. Expect pushback from some stakeholders.</p> <p>4. A reporting tool for SBR that is parent-friendly is important for effective, ongoing communication.</p> <p>5. Staff development embracing newly hired teachers in the SBR process is essential for sustained success in implementation.</p>  |

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