

SCHOOL LEADER BELIEFS REGARDING SCHOOL-WIDE GRADING PRACTICES: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Matthew Czaplicki

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University, Lynchburg VA

Graduation Year 2023

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the beliefs regarding school-wide grading practices held by school leaders employed by Central Pennsylvania schools. The theory guiding this study was Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) as it explains how behaviors (and subsequent beliefs) are shaped from past experiences, environment, and social interactions. This qualitative study utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach to understand common or shared beliefs held by school leaders regarding grading practices. Ten school leaders from Central Pennsylvania were selected for the study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and vignette responses. The data gathered from each of these sources was then compared to determine if there was consistency among the themes. The major themes emerging from this study were that school leaders believed that gradings should be meaningful, grading should not be used as a punitive measure, and that student work ethic is valued. Additionally, the participants shared some knowledge of non-traditional grading practices that promote accuracy and equity, the recognition that there are problems associated with traditional grading, and that their grading beliefs were developed during their teaching career and shaped by their administrative role. Finally, participants shared that grading reform is not a top priority and a reluctance to pursue such a reform if it was. Empirical and theoretical implications in relation to social cognitive theory are presented. Implications for policy and practice are also discussed.

Keywords: grading, school leaders, beliefs, grading, grading reform

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my creator, from whom all good things flow!

To my wife, Nicole, who supported and encouraged me throughout this journey.

To my children, Autumn, Ashton, Matthew, and Mary. Follow your dreams!

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to those who supported me through the dissertation process; Dr. Wheeler, Dr. Hernandez, and my administrative colleagues.

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List of Abbreviations

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Standards-based grading (SBG)

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Grading has always been a core component of the teaching profession. The social implications of grading are significant. All stakeholder groups in the educational system are impacted by grading decisions. Unfortunately, it has become widely known among the educational research community that traditional grading practices that have stood the test of time for decades, and in some cases, a full century, consist of several flaws (Feldman 2019; Guskey, 2018). Despite this reality, traditional grading practices remain intact in many schools across the United States (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the historical, social, and theoretical contexts encompassing the issue of grading reform. An in-depth description of the social context surrounding grading is critical, especially in its relation to grading reform. From a theoretical standpoint, there have been major developments in the field of psychology that have shed light on the flaws of traditional grading practices. Despite the existence of a growing body of research in support of grading reform, change has been slow. Therefore, it is important to consider key research findings on school leadership that may provide some insight into the lack of progress in addressing fundamental problems embedded in traditional grading practices. This chapter will also introduce and elaborate on the research question and sub-questions in this study. Finally, this chapter includes definitions of the key constructs found in this study.

Background

The background of the study consists of a historical, social, and theoretical context surrounding grading practice beliefs held by school leaders. From a historical standpoint, many grading practices have been developed over a century ago, with many of those same practices

still in use today (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019). Educational research has shown many of these traditional practices to be flawed (Feldman, 2019; Guskey, 2020) and have provided information on alternative grading methods that are accurate (Guskey, 2020), equitable (Feldman, 2019) and supportive of the teaching and learning process (Townesley et al., 2019). An understanding of the historical context surrounding grading is critical given the social context; grading impacts multiple stakeholder groups and has serious implications for students and their futures (Goos et al., 2021; Klapp, 2017). Finally, it is important to understand how grading beliefs are shaped by previous experiences and social influences (Kunnath, 2017) and how the construct of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) can impact grading reform initiatives.

Historical Context

Reporting student progress has always been a central role of educators. During the 19th century it was customary for teachers to go to a child's home and provide oral reports on student learning to parents (Brookhart et al., 2016). In the early 1900's, the number of students attending high school rose dramatically, which led to many high schools to adopt a percentage scale to report student progress (Brookhart et al, 2016). The primary focus during this period was to identify a student's natural ability to determine his or her career trajectory (Feldman, 2019). During this time intelligence tests were developed and employed across the country, the results of which were reported on a normal distribution or "bell curve" (Feldman, 2019). The intelligence normal distribution became the basis for grading; grades were reported as percentages or on an A-F scale denoting placement(s) along the curve (Feldman, 2019). This system of grading stood the test of time and continues to be utilized across the United States today.

Problems with traditional grading began to surface in the 1980s when several states began implementing high stakes testing to determine if students could move on to the next grade level or graduate regardless of the grade they received in their courses (Hursch, 2013). The emergence of private schools and competition among schools have resulted in the inflation of student grades. This occurrence has given an unfair edge to private schools who receive disproportionate acceptance rates into higher education over public schools (Nata, 2014). Grade inflation also made its way into postsecondary education, which have led to questions about graduate readiness even from the most distinguished universities (Boleslavsky & Cotton, 2015). Skepticism over grading as an accurate representation of student knowledge became a byproduct of these circumstances.

Investigations about potential biases in grading began in the 1980s where researchers have found that grade decisions were influenced by student characteristics such as gender (Bradley, 1984). Subsequent studies revealed that biases could be unconscious (Malouff et al., 2014) or conscience (Malouff, 2008) with the latter often the result of past experiences with the student or based upon student classification of gifted or learning disabled (Malouff & Thorsteinsson, 2016). Over the same course of time, biases relating to race and socio-economic status have also become more recognizable (Fergusson, 2003).

The response to these biases involved changing grading practices. The use of barcodes, for instance became a common procedure at the college level to assure student anonymity and reduce bias issues (Jae & Cowling, 2009). Evidence of grading reform in k-12 schools began emerging at the elementary level with standard-based grading (SBG). This method involves evaluating students based on academic standards entirely with non-academic factors reported separately (Townesley et al., 2018). SBG has generated some interest from secondary schools,

more so in larger cities with diverse student populations. By in large, SBG remains relegated to elementary schools with far less implementation interest from middle and high schools (Zalaznick, 2022). As it currently stands, complete autonomy remains with teachers in terms of grading decisions in many schools (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019).

Social Context

The social context surrounding grading procedures is expansive, particularly as they relate to students. Grades carry significant weight in determining class placement, college acceptance, and scholarships. It therefore should not come as a surprise that grades cause many students to experience increased anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, the need to compare oneself with others, and the fear of failure (Chamberlin et al., 2018). In addition, grading practices have been found to impact growth mindset development (Dweck, 2016) and student motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Grading procedures impact student relationships with teachers and with each other. Grading practices that lack clarity tend to cause student confusion and mistrust towards teachers. Grades have also been used by teachers as a mechanism for rewarding and punishing student behaviors unrelated to academic achievement, thus creating a negative classroom climate (Williams et al., 2019). These factors are more pronounced with marginalized students who may already struggle with trusting adults within the school setting (Williams et al., 2019).

School-wide grading policies are uncommon leaving grading as an autonomous practice that may differ from teacher to teacher within a given building. Pre-service training on effective grading is minimal in most teacher preparation programs, leaving teachers to rely on what they believe to be most effective based on their own personal and professional experiences. Teachers do not take grading practices lightly; many have reported pressure from school leaders when

there are too many failing grades and shoulder weight of grading decisions in terms of how they impact future opportunities for students (Kunnath, 2017).

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of school leaders to ensure that grading practices within their respective buildings are fair and accurate. Increased conversation regarding equity in education have principals considering several educational practices through an equity lens. Principals are typically the ones tasked with ruling over disputed grading decisions. These situations are becoming increasingly more tenuous with more of these disputes landing in court (Link & Kauffman, 2021).

Theoretical Context

Traditional grading practices remain rooted in many schools despite inherent flaws. The rationale for this situation may be found in Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986) which explains how learning happens in a social context with ongoing interaction among the individual and his or her environment with particular focus on social influence. This theory considers how individuals develop and maintain behaviors as well as the impact of social environment and previous experience on behaviors (Behavioral Change Models, 2018).

Regarding grading, studies have shown that teacher beliefs about grading are linked to their own experiences as students (Jenkins, 2017). Furthermore, teacher beliefs are often shaped by the social influences surrounding them within the school setting (Guskey & Link, 2019). In both instances, environment and social interactions are key elements. Most school leaders began their careers in education as teachers and therefore their grading beliefs may be shaped in a similar way. Therefore, school leaders may embrace traditional grading practices in a comparable way that many teachers do.

School leaders may see the need for grading reform if their own experiences and social

interactions (by virtue of their balcony view) lead them to this conclusion. Grading reform is a challenging pursuit met with a great deal of resistance as it provokes deeply held beliefs (Feldman, 2019). It should be noted here that self-efficacy, or one's confidence in his or her ability to perform a behavior influenced by both personal and environmental characteristics (Behavioral Change Models, 2018), is a key construct of SCT. School leader self-efficacy has been studied as it pertains to leader work engagement/ job satisfaction (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012), impact on collective teacher efficacy (Hallinger et al., 2018), school culture (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008), and management of instructional programs/organizational redesign (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). The current study would add to the existing research on school leader self-efficacy but in a specific categorization of school improvement-grading.

Problem Statement

Research on grading has led to suggestions for improvement, yet little has changed. Many practices that were developed decades or even a century ago have endured the test of time and continue to be widely used today (Feldman, 2019). The problem is that many schools continue to utilize traditional grading practices despite the mountain of evidence showing that traditional practices are flawed (Feldman, 2019; Guskey, 2020). While teacher perceptions that reinforce the usage of traditional grading practices have been well-documented (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019), less is known regarding the perceptions about grading held by school leaders. The purpose of this study is to investigate the beliefs about grading practices held by school leaders, considering that school leaders are the ones responsible for recognizing school needs and facilitating school-improvement initiatives. Gaining these insights could assist in developing pathways to successful school-wide grading reforms.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the beliefs about grading practices held by school leaders in public schools located within the Central Pennsylvania region. At this stage in the research, grading beliefs will be defined as grading procedures considered to be best practice based on school leader experiences. Understanding grading beliefs held by school leaders can provide insight into how school leader beliefs on grading have been shaped based on their experiences as teachers and as school leaders. An understanding of the extent to which school leaders believe grading reform to be a priority and the extent of their willingness to take on such an initiative can also be obtained. This knowledge can be utilized to support grading reform efforts on a broader scale.

Significance of the Study

The benefits of successful grading reform are far-reaching. Developing a school-wide grading policy based on accuracy and equity can lead to improved student emotional health, as well as improved teacher-student relationships, and student-student relationships (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). In addition, equitable and accurate grading practices align with the Danielson Rubric, which is based on best-practice research and is used to evaluate teachers across the state of Pennsylvania. Successful implementation can generate pervasive use of grading and reporting procedures at the distinguished level that could result in school-wide improvements in teaching and learning.

Finally, this study has theoretical significance as it relates to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). According to SCT learning happens in a social context with ongoing interaction among individuals and their environment with particular focus on social influence (Bandura, 1986). This theory considers how individuals develop and maintain behaviors as well as the

impact of social environment and previous experience on behaviors (Behavioral Change Models, 2018). Investigating school leadership grading beliefs can provide insight into how these beliefs are influenced by the beliefs of teachers and fellow administrators, the current school culture, and personal and professional experiences with grading.

Theoretical Significance

The aim of this study from a theoretical standpoint is to determine whether grading practice beliefs held by school leaders are influenced by ongoing interactions and social influences within their respective environments. These influences are key constructs of SCT (Bandura, 1986). In addition, this study will seek insight on how self-efficacy, another key construct of SCT (Bandura, 1986), influences school leader willingness to pursue a grading reform initiative. Overall, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge pertaining to SCT as it pertains to the field of educational leadership.

Empirical Significance

Teacher beliefs regarding classroom grading practices is a topic that has received considerable attention by educational researchers. However, there is comparatively little research investigating beliefs about grading held by school leaders. Atkins (2016) investigated the perceptions of high school principals regarding traditional grading, effective grading, and leadership behaviors promoting grading reform using survey data. Garland (2021) studied school leader perceptions about standards-based grading and the subsequent impact of these perceptions on policy development. While these studies contribute to the topic of grading beliefs held by school leaders within their own specific contexts, neither address how existing beliefs have been shaped by past experiences and social influences. The current study aims to address these areas using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, followed by focus group

interviews and participant vignette responses. The goal is to gain more in-depth knowledge on how beliefs about grading practices held by school leaders have been shaped over time, thus contributing to existing research on this burgeoning topic.

Practical Significance

The knowledge generated from this study can help guide school leaders in the Central Pennsylvania region with grading reform initiatives. This process involves school leaders reflecting upon their own beliefs about the grading practices occurring within their respective schools, as well as how these beliefs have been shaped by their interactions with others as well as surrounding social influences. This process can help school leaders establish a vision for grading reform (Atkins, 2016) and propel initial reform efforts in a positive direction (Garland, 2021). It may also challenge school leaders to contemplate reluctance in pursuing grading reform even if they believe grading reform is a worthy endeavor (Guskey, 2021). Finally, the knowledge produced from this study may help school leaders in anticipating potential barriers to grading reform initiatives (Guskey, 2021).

Research Questions

The phenomenological study is guided by one central research question and two sub-questions.

Central Research Question

What are the beliefs commonly held by school leaders regarding grading practices?

Sub-Question One

How do the past experiences of school leaders contribute to their beliefs on grading?

Sub-Question Two

What challenges do school leaders face when overseeing grading procedures within their respective districts/buildings.

Definitions

1. *Belief* – Belief is the mental acceptance or conviction in the truth or actuality of some idea (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2006).
2. *Grading* – Grading is the process of evaluation and subsequent reporting of student learning (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019)
3. *School leader* – A School leader is a school employee with supervision responsibilities, such as an assistant principal, principal, curriculum director, assistant superintendent, or superintendent.
4. *Standards-based grading*- Standards-based grading involves making a judgement on student learning based upon clearly defined objectives using 3-4 indicators (Nolan, 2016).
5. *Traditional grading*- Traditional grading involves the use of a one-hundred-point grading scales to communicate student learning, assigning grades to guided practice, formative assessment, and summative assessment, and assigning zeros for missing assignments (Feldman, 2019).

Summary

Many of the grading practices used today have been developed a century ago, and despite inherent flaws, remain intact in many schools across the United States. Standards-based grading was developed as a means of more accurate reporting of student learning, yet its use is non-pervasive and relegated mostly to elementary schools. The reality is that grading has a profound

impact on students, especially in terms of students' futures. The legal ramification for inaccurate grades is becoming a mounting pressure faced by schools. Despite this reality, schools remain reluctant to pursue grading reform. The reasoning for this lack of action may connect to past experiences and social influences of teachers and school leaders within their respective schools (hallmark constructs of SCT). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of school leader beliefs regarding school-wide grading practices. Gaining insights on school leader grading beliefs can inform professional development and change efforts that can ignite pervasive grading reform across k-12 schools.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Despite the many issues stemming from traditional grading practices, they continue to be widely used in school systems across the U.S. This literature review synthesizes the research surrounding school leaders' beliefs around grading that contribute to current practices. The goal is to gain insight as to why there have been little has changes in this area of the educational system despite a mountain of evidence debunking traditional grading practices. While there may be many reasons for this lack of progress, it is sensible to look in the direction of school leadership, the ones who determine school improvement initiatives, for answers.

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the topic of grading practices. This review is comprehensive in that it addresses a broad spectrum of concepts and ideas surrounding grading practices. Multiple theoretical frameworks can apply depending upon one's position. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) and mindset theory (Dweck, 2016) are relevant in terms of how students perceive and react to grading practices. Social cognitive theory (Bandura,1986) and mindset theory (Dweck, 2016) align more with teacher and administrator grading beliefs.

This literature review synthesizes the research on school leaders' beliefs about grading. Several studies investigate how school leaders' beliefs have been shaped by their administrative experiences and past experiences as teachers. This review also synthesizes the research on teacher beliefs about grading that contribute to current practices, since these beliefs may stay with educators who choose to transition into administrative roles. It is important to identify traditional grading practices and to understand the historical background to develop an understanding of the rationale behind these practices. Therefore, this review provides a synopsis

on how grading practices came to be in the United States over the course of a century. Likewise, it is important to understand the inherent flaws that exist within traditional grading practices and how these flaws lead to outcomes that are negative and counterproductive. This review addresses this need with a synthesis of recent studies on the detrimental impact of traditional grading practices on student outcomes. An understanding of more effective grading practices also falls within the scope of this study. It is important for the reader to understand grading practices that are considered accurate, equitable, and supportive of teaching and learning best practices. Therefore, this review includes a summarization of grading best practices along with recent corresponding studies.

Multiple theoretical frameworks are discussed as these theories relate to various stakeholder groups, but the primary focus is social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986) as the framework for understanding how grading beliefs and attitudes are developed in school leaders. Recent literature on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on teaching learning is also presented as it relates to grading practices. This auxiliary section is included within the scope of this overall review since it is an undeniable fixture in the current educational landscape and may have some impact on school leader beliefs regarding grading. A synthesis of literature will also be presented on challenges with grading reform initiatives. The purpose is to develop a foundation for understanding why traditional practices continue to stand the test of time despite their inherent flaws, whether school leaders see grading reform as priority initiative, and to determine areas in need of further study to support the grading reform effort.

Theoretical Framework

A comprehensive study on the topic of grading and grading reform requires a discussion of underlying theory. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) offers a framework for

understanding teacher beliefs about grading as well as the propensity for embracing grading reform. This theory also provides a framework for understanding school leader beliefs about grading and a rationale for their willingness (or lack thereof) to pursue a grading reform initiative.

Social Cognitive Theory

According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (1986) learning happens in a social context with ongoing interaction among the individual and his or her environment with particular focus on social influence. This theory considers how individuals develop and maintain behaviors as well as the impact of social environment and previous experience on behaviors (Behavioral Change Models, 2018). Self-efficacy is a critical construct of SCT, which is defined as one's confidence in his or her ability to perform a behavior and can be influenced by both personal and environmental characteristics (Behavioral Change Models, 2018).

Recent studies show that teacher efficacy (individual and collective) has proven to be an essential element in not only keeping educators in the profession, but also in positively effecting student achievement (Fancara, 2016; Shahzad & Naureen, 2017). These factors require thorough consideration when schools are contemplating grading reform. Teachers need to develop awareness of traditional grading inequities and develop an understanding of counterintuitive, equitable practices that may conflict with deeply held beliefs. In addition, teachers need to develop confidence in applying new methods of grading and will require patience and support from school leaders as they work towards this goal. The challenges are that teachers are already faced with a complex set of work demands that are emotional and interpersonal in nature that can lead to emotional exhaustion, especially in instances where teacher self-efficacy is lacking (Tuxford & Bradley, 2015).

These circumstances have become widely apparent as schools struggled to support students through the recent pandemic, where teachers were required to develop new skills and adjust to new policies and procedure in unusually short order (Kaden, 2020). At almost the same time, the pandemic has also exposed (and even exacerbated) inequities in the educational system (Lucena Rodriguez et al., 2022). The current educational landscape requires school leaders to consider the timing of school improvement initiatives, particularly ones that involve the uprooting of deeply held beliefs. It is reasonable to state that teacher self-efficacy is required when sizeable reforms are undertaken. School leaders must ask themselves whether their teachers possess the self-efficacy needed to undergo further changes on the heels of the pandemic after teachers were required to adopt many new practices in astoundingly short order.

Schools that create structures to support valued teacher practices have been found to increase teacher self-efficacy (Xiang et al., 2020). For this reason, teachers need space, support, and the opportunity to learn from one another to implement new grading practices and develop confidence in their practices. This is especially true during the initial phases when schools are adjusting to new procedures (Feldman, 2019). School leaders need to be mindful of these needs as they move forward with school improvement initiatives.

School Leader Self-Efficacy

The concept of self-efficacy pertaining to teacher effectiveness and student learning has been widely studied by educational researchers, and there is a growing body of research involving self-efficacy and its implications for school leadership. Research has shown the impact that school leaders have on the process of teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). It is through their influence on teacher expectations, instructional quality, and school climate that school leaders impact student learning outcomes (Supovitz et al., 2010).

School leader self-efficacy represents a set of beliefs that allow one to execute policies and procedures that advance school effectiveness and guide the leader's actions and behaviors that impact expectations for students and teachers (Versland & Erickson, 2017). School leader self-efficacy is therefore critical as it governs belief in their ability to positively influence learning outcomes within their schools (Lyons & Murphy, 1994). Research has shown a positive correlation between school leader self-efficacy and school leader work engagement and job satisfaction (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012).

School leader self-efficacy has a positive impact on school outcomes. Research has shown school leader self-efficacy as having an impact on collective teacher efficacy (Goddard et al., 2021; Hallinger et al., 2018), school culture (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008), and overall school success (Işık & Gümüş, 2017). Furthermore, noteworthy connections have been made between school leader efficacy and aspects of instructional leadership such as management of instructional programs and organizational redesign (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). High self-efficacy empowers school leaders to effectually solve complex organizational problems and persevere in leading in complex, emotionally charged situations (Swain, 2016). Finally, efficacy beliefs have been found to impact the decisions regarding the types of initiatives school leaders choose to pursue to promote student achievement (Versland & Erickson, 2017).

It is important to consider how school leaders develop self-efficacy through their respective pathways. Individuals who enter leadership roles as assistant principals have been shown to develop self-efficacy through the support of the leaders above them (Swain, 2016). Lucena Rodriquez et al. (2022) summed up the level of self-efficacy need by school leaders given the current educational landscape stating that “in the face of disconcerting situations, of great changes and high levels of stress such as those caused by the health crisis, it is necessary to

have leading principals with strong and adjusted identities to achieve school progress and success” (p.47).

The results of these studies are a demonstration of how SCT can provide a useful framework for understanding how school leaders’ beliefs around grading are shaped. The concept of self-efficacy can provide some insight regarding school leader willingness (or lack thereof) to pursue grading reform initiatives. The complexities of the current educational landscape, in addition to influences from surrounding stakeholder groups, may usher the concept of leader self-efficacy further into the forefront.

Related Literature

Grading is an integral component to the educational process and is considered a primary responsibility in the teaching profession. The topic has garnered the attention of educational researchers over the last several decades (Brookhart et al., 2016). Research on grading has led to suggestions for improvement, yet little has changed (Guskey, 2020). Many practices that were developed decades or even a century ago have endured the test of time and continue to be widely used today (Feldman, 2019). For example, the one-hundred-point grading scale, a remnant of the Industrial Revolution, remains intact in schools at all levels (Feldman, 2019). A discussion of how human nature and social dynamics has allowed these practices to remain intact is necessary to help school leaders and teachers embrace a grading paradigm shift.

Traditional Grading Practices

To understand what constitutes grading practices that are traditional, one only needs to consider how he or she was graded as a student. Many have grown accustomed to being evaluated based on a one-hundred-point scale with grades being reported by way of percentages (Feldman, 2019). The cutoff for a passing grade typically falls between sixty and seventy

percent. This scale can also be converted to letter grades (an A equates to 100-90% and so on).

The table below denotes a grading scale used by a middle school located in the Central Pennsylvania region.

Table 1
Traditional Grading Scale

Percentage Grade	Letter Grade
100% - 93%	A
92% - 86%	B
85% - 77%	C
76% - 70%	D
69% - below	F

Teachers typically have discretion in terms of what is graded. Tests, quizzes, projects, homework, classroom, class participation, and preparation are all fair game and result in significant variability from teacher to teacher (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Under this system, it is customary to enter zeros into a gradebook when assignments are not completed, determine quarterly grades based on a percentage of total points, and averaging quarterly grades to determine a final grade. In many cases, teachers rely on grading programs to do these calculations (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019).

The Impact of Grading on Students

Despite these variations, grades continue to be used to make decisions that can impact students' futures. Retaining students based on grades continues to be a popular practice, despite research questioning its effectiveness (Goos et al., 2021). Grades are also used to determine class placements (Tyson & Roksa, 2017) and remain a key component to the college admission

process (Galla et al., 2019), decisions that have an impact on a student's educational, socioeconomic and health outcomes (Alm & Colnerud, 2015).

While secondary schools are assumed with the task of developing college readiness skills in their students, the competitiveness of college admissions have caused students to focus more on the grade than on the process of learning. Verrell and McCabe (2015) conducted a study involving seven hundred students from a western U.S. university to gauge student perceptions of their college readiness. Only 20% of participants shared that they felt prepared for college. In addition, 37% of respondents shared that they lacked study skills and 34% reported that their high schools inadequately prepared them for deeper learning required at the college level. It is for this reason that Conley (2015) proposed an overhaul of the current traditional grading system to increase "conceptual understanding" and "deeper learning" (p. 5).

While grades are used in determining future opportunities, the psychological impact of grades are more immediate. Research shows grades can lead to increased anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, the need to compare oneself with others, and the fear of failure (Chamberlin et al., 2018). The impact is pronounced with struggling students who have been found to develop a negative academic self-concept and experience decreased motivation to make improvements after receiving low grades (Klapp, 2017). In addition, the way students are graded in the present has been shown to influence the amount of effort they put forth on future academic tasks (Keller, 2016).

Problems With Traditional Grading Systems

Unfortunately, the flaws of traditional grading practices are often overlooked. Research has demonstrated the problems with grading that are typically in the form of vague assessment performance criteria, conflicting implementation of assessment criteria, and teacher bias (Riley

& Ungerleider, 2019). Elements of these problems are evident in a study conducted by del Carmen Gomez (2018) where secondary students reported that they did not have a solid understanding of how their grades were being determined in secondary science classrooms. The frequently used one-hundred-point system is the normal distribution curve, but often more than two-thirds of the curve is attributed as a failing grade in many schools (Feldman, 2019). This imbalanced ratio works unfavorably against students, especially those who struggle with challenging content and creates more incentive for teachers to include non-academic factors into grades to buffer students from failure (Guskey, 2020).

Issues exist with traditional grading in terms of how they are computed and what they represent. Guskey (2015) demonstrated how a report card grade with a single percentage grade that represents multiple aspects of a student's performance is an inaccurate depiction. Furthermore, under a traditional system, teachers tend to rely on grading software to calculate percentage grades. This process involves entering points into an electronic gradebook and allowing the program to generate the final grade. Relying on gradebook software eliminates the opportunity for teachers to use their professional judgement in determining where students stand with the academic standards (Guskey, 2015).

One of the most problematic aspects of traditional grading involves what teachers decide should be included in grades. The inclusion of nonacademic factors such as homework and class participation, make grades a misrepresentation of a student's achievement level (Guskey & Link, 2017). Nowruz (2021) conducted a study to explore the factors teachers used when making grading decisions. The results showed that teachers assigned the highest point values to nonachievement factors such as effort, improvement, ability, and participation when determining grades, while grading based on mastery of learning objectives and academic performance was

comparatively limited (Nowruzi, 2021). These findings are common across cultures, with teachers from Canada, Iran, and China reporting similar beliefs regarding grading (Cheng et al., 2020; Nowruzi, 2021).

Several problems have been identified with including multiple factors in the grading process. This hodgepodge method of grading has been identified as the reason for grade inflation, which can result in unforeseen and problematic consequences for student and teacher class placements, social interactions within the school, and educational policies and outcomes (Arsyad-Arafii, 2020). In terms of educational outcomes, using a hodgepodge of grades has been found to create a disconnect between classroom grades and high stakes testing when evaluating student achievement levels (DeLuca et al., 2017).

Too often, grades are utilized as a means of rewarding student compliance and punishing challenging behaviors (Feldman, 2019). This carrot-and-stick approach is believed to motivate students to behave appropriately and to engage in the learning process (Bonner & Chen, 2021; Guskey & Link, 2019; Shepard et al., 2018). The prospect of being awarded points and the threat of losing points often is a source of extrinsic motivation (Feldman, 2019). Under these conditions, many students tend to comply if tasks are easy (Ryan & Deci, 2020). However, researchers have shown that these conditions do not motivate students intrinsically to engage and persevere through tasks that involve problem-solving and creativity (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In a study conducted by Iamarino (2014) involving more than five hundred students, the author found that students being evaluated via a traditional grading system were more concerned about earning a high grade than they were about actually learning how to improve their writing skills.

Grading that consists of a subjective compilation of all a student does in a classroom also undermines a growth mindset. Such grading practices lack clear criteria for improvement and

often leave students confused about how the grade is calculated and questioning whether it is an accurate representation of what they know. (Feldman, 2019). Under these circumstances, students see grades as a reflection of who they are as people (intelligent, stupid, diligent, or lazy) and not a measure of their knowledge or understanding in each subject (Dweck, 2017). This phenomenon facilitates a fixed mindset within students who then make conclusive judgements such as “I’m just an average student” or “I’m no good at math” instead of believing that they are capable of high achievement through perseverance (Dweck, 2017).

Both mindset and SCT theorists acknowledge that the way students perceive goals has an impact on motivation (Feldman, 2019; Pink, 2011). Mastery goals are goals that are aimed to reach an external target, while performance goals involve the need to display competence as compared to others (Feldman, 2019; Pink, 2011). The former promotes intrinsic motivation to pursue mastery of a learning target (speaking Spanish), while the latter motivates an individual to pursue tasks that are easy as a demonstration of compliance (Feldman, 2019; Pink, 2011). Teachers can promote either mastery goal or performance goal thinking in their students based on their grading practices (Feldman, 2019). Traditional grading practices that involve assigning points for everything a student does in the classroom will influence students to pursue performance goals, or goals pursued through extrinsic motivation, for the purpose of complying with teacher demands, looking better than others in the class, and getting a good grade (Dweck, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). This scenario provides no opportunities to support intrinsic motivation or a growth mindset, but instead perpetuates extrinsic motivation and fix-mindset thinking.

There is also evidence that traditional grading practices undermine productive student interactions within the classroom. Burleigh and Meegan (2018) found that performance-based

grading practices creates a competitive classroom environment where students are less inclined to work collaboratively with classmates. The authors explained the detrimental impact of classrooms with fewer cooperative interactions, including reduced acquisition of knowledge by students, reduced opportunities to develop social and emotional skills, and disengagement from school.

Based on this evidence, it should not come as a surprise the mounting discontent shared by students, parents, and teachers regarding traditional grading practices (Guskey & Link, 2019). Negative attitudes toward grading practices could be attributed to limited knowledge of effective practices, which strengthens the need to hold onto familiar grading methods (Adu-Mensah, 2018). Therefore, it is important that schools adopt policies and provide training on grading procedures that facilitate positive teacher-student relationships and offer a culture of hope to effectively reach all students (Williams et al., 2019).

Grading That Perpetuates Inequity

School equity is a movement that has gained considerable attention in recent years. More emphasis has been placed on providing effective educational opportunities for marginalized groups of students including racial and ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, individuals living in poverty, women, and the LGBTQT community (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018). Multiple facets of educational institutions have been evaluated through the equity lens with this focus in mind, including school funding (Dhaliwal & Bruno, 2021), student discipline (Gregory et al., 2021), and instructional practices (Rubel, 2017).

Grading has recently come under scrutiny as a mechanism contaminated by implicit teacher biases resulting in the perpetuation of inequity (Feldman, 2019). Malouff and Thorsteinsson (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of twenty studies that sought to determine the

influence of bias on grading practices. The meta-analytic effect was 0.36 indicating that biases have a significant impact on grading. These results are consistent with findings of studies that investigated biases in non-academic areas (Guskey & Link, 2017). This meta-analysis provides robust evidence that grades are subjected to grader biases as do later studies. For instance, Riley and Unngerleider (2019) found that when presented with report cards and demographic information, teacher perceptions of students' external attributes such as gender, ethnicity, and English language learner status, impacted decision making on class assignments.

The grading of non-academic factors has been shown as a mechanism for perpetuating gender biases. Angelo and Reis (2021) demonstrated that varied grading procedures address non-cognitive skills differently, suggesting that the choice in grading procedure at varying grade levels can impact the gender gap found in student achievement. Furthermore, it is typical that final grades are determined based on teacher evaluation of both academic and non-academic competencies. Teachers consider a wide range of factors to determine grades inclusive of non-cognitive skills. Factors like emotional development, empathy, and interpersonal skills can influence students' behavior and tend to be demonstrated more by girls than by boys resulting in teachers being more prone to reward girls with higher grades (Angelo & Reis, 2021). Subsequent studies have resulted in similar findings. Di Liberto et. al. (2021) found that boys are graded less favorably than girls in mathematics and language arts at both the elementary and middle school levels.

Traditional grading has also been found to maintain other forms of inequalities. Modell and Gerdin (2021) conducted a study on the experiences that students had with grading in physical education class. They found that that grading practices in physical education classes involved in the study were driven more by cultural-cognitive factors aligning with the norms and

values of competitive and club sports than the standards included within the curriculum. Thus, in these classes, grading was more favorable to students involved in sports and placed students not involved in sports at a disadvantage. These findings support the argument that traditional grading practices result in unfair outcomes and provide support for the argument that schools need to seek out bias-resistant grading practices. Thus, successful grading reform requires clear articulation from school leaders on how incorporating factors of achievement, behavior, responsibility, and effort result in grades that are ambiguous and confounding and in turn promote economic and social inequities (Guskey, 2020).

The importance of establishing positive teacher-student relationships is well documented in educational research (Roorda et al., 2017; Quin, 2017) and should be the purpose of every professional educator. However, the points system described above can have a negative impact on relationships between teachers and students, particularly as it relates to students facing disadvantages (Williams et al., 2019). Many students living in poverty have heightened challenges of mistrust that carry over into the classroom setting (Feldman, 2019). These students often develop the sense that they are doomed to fail and that their teachers are against them (Feldman, 2019). This is especially the case when students do not have the resources and supports in their home setting to complete homework assignments, such as a lack of food, parent involvement, or internet. These students experience an unfair disadvantage when their grades consist of points-laden assignments that are expected to be completed outside of school (Feldman, 2019).

Accurate, Effective & Equitable Grading Practices

Given the multiple problems associated with traditional grading practices, an understanding of effective grading practices is necessary to grasp the size and scope of grading

reform. It is important to understand why grading reform is needed in many schools based on research that supports effective grading practices. This concept should be viewed in terms of practices that have a positive impact on students. Koenka et al. (2021) analyzed the impact of grades and feedback on academic motivation. The authors distinguish motivation as being either intrinsic or extrinsic. The authors found that grades without constructive teacher feedback had resulted in significantly increased levels of external motivation, or desire to earn a good grade (Koenka et al., 2021). Conversely, the authors found that when constructive teacher feedback was included with a grade, it had a positive and significant impact on internal motivation, or internal drive to pursue learning (Koenka et al., 2021). This positive impact was even found in situations where grades were not assigned as long as teacher feedback was present (Koenka et al., 2021). The value of this study cannot be overstated in how it relates to the concepts of intrinsic extrinsic motivation as described by Dweck (2017) and Deci and Ryan (2020). Schools need to recognize the impact that grading has on motivation and adopt grading practices that enhance intrinsic motivation.

Research has shown traditional grading practices to be unreliable measures of students' knowledge, while grading systems based on pre-determined competencies are more reliable for reporting progress toward academic goals (Pollio & Hochbein, 2015). Standards-based grading (SBG) has gained momentum across all grade levels in response to the recognized problems of the traditional grading system (Townesley et al., 2019). This practice relies on the professional judgement of teachers of the extent to which student understanding of key academic standards or strands (O'Conner et al., 2018). Proponents of (SBG) recommend four to five levels to communicate student understanding (ex-mastery, approaching, requiring significant support, not measurable) as opposed to relying on miniscule increments of the one-hundred-point scale

(O’Conner et al., 2018). Non-academic factors such as class participation and homework completion are reported separately from knowledge of standards using three to four increments (ex- always, sometimes, rarely) (Townsend, et. al, 2019). By reporting non-academic factors separately from summative assessment performance, grading becomes a more accurate snapshot of student performance on key standards without becoming skewed by non-academic factors (Guskey, 2020).

SBG is based on clearly defined objectives and emphasizes the progress of learning, over just the grade (Nolan, 2016). The goal of SBG is to effectively prepare students with the knowledge and skills that are required in school, higher education, and the workforce. It is expected that students reach proficiency in each learning standard, and if they do not, they receive corrective instruction and academic support to help them meet the standard (Assessment, 2015).

Procedures for reassessing student learning become a critical practice in SBG (Feldman, 2019). This process involves allowing students to re-take summative assessments to demonstrate their learning after periods of corrective teaching if they did demonstrate understanding of key standards during the initial instructional periods. Differentiating assessments and reassessing key standards (or portions of the summative assessments) are also key components of reassessment procedures typically part of SBG (Guskey, 2020). Allowing students additional opportunities to demonstrate their learning removes the need for teacher to include non-academic factors in order to hide poor summative assessment scores (Guskey, 2020). When mastery is the goal of learning, assessment redoes become a valued practice of teachers (Fernandez, 2021).

By allowing students the opportunity to be re-assessed after a period of corrective teaching, teachers are promoting a growth mindset in their students (Feldman, 2019). Adopting

practices that develop a growth mindset is critical based upon the research by Carole Dweck. Students who believe that they can learn and grow despite initial challenges and believe that they can expand their intelligence are demonstrating a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016). While it is believed that a mindset is an integral component of one's personality, parents and teachers can foster a growth mindset in children using certain practices (Dweck, 2017). A growth mindset is not a quest for perfection, rather it is a personal commitment to continual improvement that, over time, will result in significant outcomes (Dweck, 2017).

Proponents of SBG argue that when academic and behavioral factors are separated, grade reports become more accurate information for parents, teachers and students that can be used to improve both learning and behavior (Schimmer, 2016; Vatterott, 2015). SBG provides clarity for students, which in turn can reduce anxiety towards school (Kelly, 2020). Standards-based grading aligns precisely to what Guskey (2021) described as the purpose of grading, to “accurately represent how well students have mastered articulated learning goals (p. 195).

Research indicates several benefits of SBG experienced by teachers. Teachers have reported that SBG has made conversations with parents and students easier and less prone to conflict (Kelly, 2020). Teachers have reported having to spend less time overall with grading (Linhart, 2019). The research also showed that teachers who use SBG feel more effective in their roles and found their work to be more a more pleasurable experience (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Based on these findings, it is feasible that educators may be more prone to explore SBG practices if they understood the positive impact that it has on their work.

While SBG is more commonly established in elementary schools, it is gaining popularity at the secondary level (Peters et al., 2017). Research has shown that secondary students found SBG to provide more clarity and fairness than traditional grading methods and found SBG to be

a more accurate reflection of their knowledge than traditional grading (Peters et al., 2017). Furthermore, secondary students took on more ownership of their learning as the result of ongoing formative feedback (Peters et al., 2017). In a study exploring secondary teacher perceptions on the impact of SBG on planning, instruction, assessment, and classroom management, Knight, and Cooper (2019) found the transition to SBG in a secondary school resulted in instruction that was clearer and more purposeful, more effective in addressing student needs, and more promotive in developing a growth mindset in students. Post-secondary institutions are recognizing the value of SBG and have demonstrating willingness in accepting transcripts inclusive of standards-based reporting (Riede, 2018).

The benefits of standards-based grading have also been observed at the postsecondary level. Buckmiller et al. (2017) investigated college student attitudes and experiences regarding SBG practices. The authors found that, once students moved past initial anxiety of the paradigm shift and new work requirements, they began to view SBG as more transparent and fairer. In addition, students reported that they stopped "playing the game" of earning points for a grade and engaged more meaningfully in course content. Based on routine feedback from their instructors, students began to take more ownership of their learning. Most participants found SBG more beneficial and defensible, and reflective of their knowledge than traditional grading practices. Based on this conglomeration of research supporting SBG at all levels of the educational continuum, it should be expected that larger scale grading reform take hold in the k-12 setting and beyond.

Even for schools who are not prepared or not interested in implementing a standard based grading system, small-scale adjustments such as accepting late assignments for full credit, applying minimal grading, excluding zeros from the gradebook, and removing non-academic

factors from grading criteria can promote a more equitable school environment (Feldman, 2019). Alternative practices such as self-grading and peer grading has been shown to have a positive effect on student learning at both the primary and secondary levels (Sanchez et al., 2017). Guskey (2021) argued that with any grading reform initiative, school leaders must clearly define the purpose of grading as well as tailor instruction and assessment to clearly defined learning goals early in the process to increase the chances of success. Whether school leaders are pursuing SBG or some other scaled-down version of grading reform, it is clear that there are multiple steps that need to be taken to ensure success that could cause leaders to experience some hesitancy about embarking on such a journey.

Despite the abundance of education research in support of SBG, there remains a considerable number of misperceptions among stakeholders about SBG, how it is implemented and its impact on student learning and teacher practice. For example, a common argument that allowing reassessment without penalty will not prepare students for the real world and results in a lackadaisical attitude towards testing if students know that they can get a second chance; an argument grounded in teacher beliefs about student motivation (Knight & Cooper, 2019). This lack of understanding adds to the difficulty of grading reform given that teachers, parents, and students all have similar experiences with traditional grading (Percell & Meyer, 2021). Grading reform initiative often experience fidelity issues during the preliminary stages of implementation (Knight & Cooper, 2019), which could affirm preconceived notions. With traditional grading being engrained with the fabric of society over the course of generations, questions have been raised as to whether grading reform is even possible (Peters et al., 2017). School leaders who have experienced similar types of resistance from stakeholder groups may be reluctant to pursue

grading reform, even if they recognize the need and the potential benefits it will have on all stakeholders.

The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Grading Practices

When considering the current educational landscape and its implications for school improvement decisions, the Covid-19 pandemic occupies much of this panorama. It behooves school leaders to question what changes schools need to make in the wake of the pandemic (Zalaznick, 2022). As educational systems are beginning to move past the procedures that were in place during the height of the pandemic, there lies the temptation to return to the status quo (Zalaznick, 2022). However, it does not take long to recognize the problems within the educational system that have always existed and have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This reality may compel educational leaders to pursue reform at a time when stakeholders are weary from the challenges of the last two years.

The prominence of online learning, for example, was the result of the pandemic. Existing research on the overall effectiveness of online learning as compared to traditional learning was mixed prior to the pandemic, but research shows that face-to-face instruction to have more of an edge when it comes to more challenging subjects such as algebra (Heissel, 2016). Students who have demonstrated prior academic achievement, self-discipline, and strong technical skills have fared comparatively better with online learning (Heissel, 2016). When evaluating student engagement in online learning environments, research as shown that at-risk learners experience a distinct disadvantage (Dynarski, 2018). Many educators struggle with online pedagogy in addition to processes relating to assessment and grading; factors which continue to have a negative impact on student engagement (Heidari et al., 2021). These circumstances should elicit

questions about the accuracy and fairness of traditional grading practices on the part of school leaders.

Educational researchers have begun to study the experiences of teachers during remote learning (Wyse et al., 2020). Teachers were required to use new forms of technology on short notice and, in many cases, with little support and training (Badiozaman, 2021). In addition to needing technical training, teachers needed guidance on how to develop relationships most effectively with students and address their social, emotional, and academic needs remotely (Borup & Evmenova, 2019). Kaden (2020) concluded from his study on the experiences of secondary educators during the pandemic that applying the usual engagement and discourse strategies to online learning is a mistake but that the need to use remote learning also has led to new opportunities. During the pandemic, schools demonstrated greater flexibility and offered students more choices with academic tasks and assessments (Kaden, 2020). When considering the impact that grading practices have on teacher-student relationships (Roorda et al., 2017; Quin, 2017) and on student social-emotional wellbeing (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Keller, 2016; Klapp, 2017), it is sensible that school leaders pursue grading policies that have positive effects on these areas.

Mental and emotional struggles among children became a recognizable problem during the height of the pandemic (Gazmararian et al., 2021). School closures have resulted in learning loss for many students regardless of background, which has led to the identification of being behind for many students (Mann et al., 2021) Students who have been labeled as being behind typically suffer from a poor self-image, experience anxiety over perceived pressure to catch up, have difficulty staying motivated, and often wind up falling even further behind (Shifrer, 2013). It is also important to recognize that using terminology such as “behind” to describe a student’s

academic standing lacks objectivity and is socially constructed (Mann et al., 2021). As schools attempt to rebound from the negative impact of the pandemic, a clarion call has been made for schools to avoid a return to the status quo and to pursue foundational changes to the educational system that support the learning of the whole child (Mann et al., 2021). This includes the adoption of district and school-wide grading policies that promote intrinsic motivation and student ownership of their learning.

Research on the adverse impact of the pandemic on students with existing disadvantages is beginning to mount. Extended school closures have been reported to have adverse social and health effects on children living in poverty and contribute to pre-existing inequalities (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Factors such as social distancing, limited healthcare access, and part-time employment further exacerbate pandemic inequality (Kaden, 2020). Covid-19 related closures are also expected to increase learning gaps between lower and higher-income families (Reich et al., 2020). The beginnings of this achievement gap may be attributable to a lack of resources available to students facing disadvantages such as poverty. For example, students who do not complete homework may not have parent support at home, may be dealing with food insecurity, or may not have digital tools to complete assignments, all of which are factors outside of students' control (Feldman, 2019). Teachers place an unfair limitation on students facing these challenges when they grade homework (Feldman, 2019). These issues have become more readily apparent to school leaders in the wake of the pandemic and should propel them to adopt grading practices that promote and equity and fairness for all students post-pandemic.

Many schools experienced an overwhelming increase in course failures during this period, which have caused many districts to rethink grading procedures. As schools moved to remote learning, many school districts across the country made significant changes to grading

policies to simplify grading for teachers and make grades more equitable for students (Guskey, 2021). Many schools allowed greater flexibility in selecting evidence of student learning and reduced the weighting for non-academic factors when determining student grades; changes that exposed problems with existing grading policies (Guskey, 2021). As schools began to return to in-person learning, many districts considered the possibility of addressing problems with traditional grading through grading reform initiatives (Guskey, 2021).

The pandemic has propelled many schools to standards-based grading to address the disconnect between grades and student performance that became increasingly obvious during the pandemic (Zalaznick, 2022). Given the growing scrutiny surrounding traditional grading practices, an investigation into the effects of grading practices on student motivation and mindset during remote learning and subsequent in-person instructional periods is a worthy pursuit. Furthermore, an investigation on teacher and school leader beliefs about grading in the wake of the pandemic is an area worthy of investigation. Researchers must ask if schools are willing to embrace new methods based on their experiences with grading along with what they learned regarding student experiences during the various phases of the pandemic.

Educator Beliefs About Grading

Grading has long been tied to deep-rooted beliefs held by educators (Kunnath, 2017). Beliefs about what is fair and how students should be graded often trace back to the experiences that teachers themselves have experienced as students (Kunnath, 2017). In a study conducted by Olsen and Buchanan (2019), teachers shared that they were subjected to traditional grading and were high-achieving students while in high school, and therefore adopted the same grading approaches that they experienced as students. In addition, preservice teacher programs typically give minimal attention to grading practices leaving preservice teachers to rely on their own

perceptions (Battistone et al., 2019; Bergman, 2018; Bonner & Chen, 2021). The lack of preservice training around grading practices has left it to be a largely concealed, personal experience for many teachers (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). In a study conducted by Ado-Mensah (2018) teachers were found to have a negative attitude toward grading practices that could be attributed to scant knowledge of effective practices and the replication of some poor grading practices they experienced as student.

Although beliefs regarding grading run deep and firmly entrenched, great variation may exist among teachers regarding how grades should be generated. In fact, it is common for grading practices to differ from teacher to teacher within the same building when there is not a grading policy in place (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). The varied structure of grades may be rooted in teacher beliefs that behaviors supportive of learning are components of academic achievement, especially at the elementary level (Chen & Bonner, 2016). In a study of teacher beliefs regarding grading conducted by Nowruzi (2021), the majority of teachers shared that grading non-academic factors enhanced learning, that academic and non-academic factors were difficult to separate, that grades were a “payment” that students earned for their effort, and that grading of non-academic factors can be used to motivate students.

There is a lack of consensus among educators regarding the extent to which homework, classwork, participation should be part of the grade calculation (Brookhart et al., 2016). Research has shown that many teachers hold the belief that it is necessary to include student effort and engagement in grading. This belief is consistent with the constructivist paradigm that learning is a process instead of a result (Bonner & Chen, 2021). There could be a relationship between constructivist beliefs and the need to consider effort and engagement into the grading process

(Chen & Bonner, 2017). Many use grades as a means of student motivation and to control student behavior (Shepard et al., 2018).

Behavioralism is another belief system that may drive teacher grading practices (Chen & Bonner, 2017). Positive and negative reinforcers are key components that are used to shape school-related behaviors both inside and outside of school. Teachers who embrace behaviorist beliefs may be more inclined to issue grades based upon student conduct (Bonner & Chen, 2017).

Including non-achievement factors in a grade can be tied to teacher beliefs regarding fairness in that teachers may not want to assign low grades to students who have shown effort despite not reaching competencies (Brookhart et al, 2016). Therefore, the inclusion of non-achievement factors is a way for teachers to reconcile the ethical dilemma of where low grades may have a negative influence on students. It is reasonable to conclude that grade variation exists among teachers in the same school in the absence of a school or district grading policy or if teacher contracts consist of a clause that protects teacher grading autonomy.

While grading beliefs can be attributed to personal and professional experiences, there is some research indicating that grading decisions are, to some extent, influenced by external factors. In the study conducted by DeLuca et. al. (2017), teachers reported feeling pressure from parents and administrators, especially in situation where high school students were applying to colleges. A similar finding was shared by Nowruzi (2021) who explained that teachers felt pressure from parents, students, and administrators.

Research also show that grading beliefs are based upon genuine care that teachers have for their students. Deluca et al. (2017) found that teachers grappled with grading that is fair for

all their students and that some were more inclined to grant higher grades to boost chances for students to get admitted into college or study abroad.

School Leader Grading Beliefs

School leader beliefs have been the subject of researcher inquiry as they pertain to various aspects of the teaching and learning. From this research, two broad categories have emerged; teacher-oriented beliefs and student-oriented beliefs have been identified (van den Boom – Muilenburg et al., 2021). With teacher-oriented beliefs, teachers take on the responsibility of managing student learning processes (Meirink et al., 2009). Student-oriented belief involve the student taking responsibility for his or her learning, and teaching is more of a partnership between teacher and student (Meirink et al., 2009).

With the ever-growing complexity of schooling and with new initiatives routinely being thrust upon schools, there are multiple facets to educational programming where school leaders need to apply their beliefs. In a study conducted by Dayal et al. (2020) the beliefs that a group of principals had regarding the use of various forms of assessment varied significantly. In another study, the previous experiences leaders had with instructional coaching shaped their coaching beliefs, which in turn allowed greater capacity in determining how coaching should be utilized within their schools (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). School leader beliefs also have been found to influence the administration of school policies that are then passed on to faculty and staff. Sense-making of school policies falls within a variety of contexts and is steered by beliefs and values (Anderson, 2020). Furthermore, school leader handling of school policies is shaped by their own professional experiences (Carraway & Young, 2015), professional networks (Jennings, 2010), existing organizational culture (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017), and professional identities (Mizrahi-Shtelman, 2021).

It is expected that an educator's beliefs about successful education practice would evolve of the course of a career. Those who enter supervisory preparation programs, for example, may develop a broader vision of a successful educational program. Within these programs, individuals typically learn about leadership approaches, the most common are transformational leadership, instructional leadership, distributed leadership, and leadership for learning. An evaluation of how time is spent as principal can provide some insight into one's leadership style. Principals, for example are required to complete a variety of tasks many of which are managerial, but time spent on micro-level tasks can be attributed to bigger picture goals, such as improving school culture and improving the process of teaching and learning which can be attributed to a leadership approach (Coenen et al., 2021).

Numerous studies have been conducted in recent years regarding teacher perceptions of grading practices (Guskey & Link, 2019; Jenkins, 2017; Shields, 2021), but very few address principal perceptions. Kunnath (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study involving 254 teachers in a large urban school to investigate influences, rationale, and practices of the grading decision making process. One key finding was that some teachers felt pressure from principals to avoid assigning too many failing grades. In this study, a principals' perceptions about grading are implied but not directly investigated.

Recent studies have been published that address school leader roles in grading reform and overall beliefs about grading. Redman (2019) conducted a study to explore the most effective practices principals should employ to successfully lead a school to standards-based grading. The assumption is made that all the principals in the study are proponents of standards-based grading, but their perceptions regarding SBG are not explored.

Atkins (2016) conducted a study that investigated the perceptions of high school principals regarding traditional grading, effective grading, and leadership behaviors promoting grading reform. The results of survey data from this study show that 95% responded in favor of research-based practices over traditional ones. The author found that more experienced principals of larger schools were more in favor of research-based practices than were less experienced principal of smaller schools. The data from this study was collected through surveys, and therefore lacks the deeper insights on principal grading beliefs that can be achieved through a qualitative design.

Garland (2021) used a qualitative design to answer the research question of how administrators', principals', and teachers' perceptions of SBG shape the implementation of an elementary SBG grading policy. Principal perceptions were addressed in terms of policy implementation, but perceptions regarding which parts of SBG grading considered most important were not identified. In addition, this study involves SBG, which is the most significant level of change on the grading reform continuum. While there are studies that address the transition to SBG implementation, there are no studies that address other types of grading reform. In addition, there are no qualitative studies that address principal perceptions regarding their school's grading practices which give insight into principal knowledge of effective practices and their beliefs about where grading reform is placed on a list of priorities. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap in literature by focusing on principal beliefs regarding grading in schools located in Central Pennsylvania.

Challenges to Grading Reform

There is no questioning the challenges associated with grading reform. Unfortunately, it is all too common for grading reform initiatives to fail despite the mountain of evidence

supporting the need for change. It is important to recognize the enormity of such a reform.

Knight and Cooper explained that grading reform is more than making changes to a gradebook; “it requires systemic modifications to teachers’ planning, instruction, assessment, and classroom environment” (p. 85).

School leaders often run into unforeseen problems and significant resistance from parent and teacher groups that derailed grading reform initiatives (Guskey, 2021). Stakeholders typically remain committed to traditional grading practices because they are not aware of the problems these practices create (Guskey, 2021). It is important that school leaders explain the flaws that exist within traditional practices and provide a clear explanation as to why reform is needed (Guskey, 2021). In addition, school leaders need to make stakeholders aware of the growing dissatisfaction that many students and parents are experiencing with traditional grading practices (Guskey & Link, 2019). School leaders often fail to recognize the importance of communicating the basic purpose of grading and the rationale for grading reform, which often results in stakeholder resistance at the outset of a reform initiative (Brookhart, 2011; Guskey, 2020).

Challenges continue to surface during the implementation phase. This process takes a significant amount of time and requires working through implementation dips that can result in additional frustration for parents, teachers, and students (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Their districts abandoned reforms and resumed traditional grading practices, leaving the credibility of reform leaders tarnished and with traditional grading procedures even more firmly established (Guskey, 2021). There have even been cases where grading reform attempts were so damaging to the reputations of school leaders that they felt the need to either resign from their school or retire from the profession altogether (Cregan, 2013). These failed attempts are often led by capable,

seasoned administrators with a sharp vision and support from knowledgeable consultants (Guskey, 2021).

Traditional grading practices has been engrained in the educational systems for over a century (Feldman, 2018). Transitioning from what is known to what is unknown leads to uncertainty and discomfort, which often serves as a catalyst for resistance (Guskey, 2021). Resistance can come from various stakeholder groups. Grading beliefs are deeply entrenched in teachers based on their experiences as students (Kunnath, 2017), a lack of in-service training and professional development (Olsen & Buchannon, 2019), personal beliefs about teaching and learning (Bonner & Chen, 2017), and the influence from fellow teachers (Townesley et al., 2019). Beliefs about grading are as deeply entrenched in parents as well, who are accustomed to grading practices bestowed upon their children based upon their own experiences as students (Franklin et al., 2016). Schwartz (2019) observed that both teachers and parents often resist grading reform initiatives, believing that school should be experienced the same way as when they experienced it themselves. In many cases, stakeholders remain committed to traditional grading practices because they do not recognize the flaws in these practices or how they promote inequities (Guskey, 2021). However, it is also important to note that those who oppose grading reform are often coming from a place of legitimate concern for their students and their children (Frankin et al., 2016). Teachers, especially those who view grades as an incentive, sometimes worry that alternative grading practices will negatively impact student motivations and willingness to work hard (Guskey, 2021). In addition, teachers who are inclined to include behavioral factors with grading often do so based on the belief that they are educating the “whole child” (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Parents of high school students have demonstrated concern that alternative

grading and reporting measures will negatively impact college admission, scholarship opportunities, and job offers (Guskey, 2021).

The existence of these deeply held beliefs are considered a formidable obstacle for educational leaders who desire grading reform (O'Connor et al., 2018). In fact, school improvement initiatives that focus on grading reform are often met with great resistance generated by faculty members (Townsend et al., 2019). The phenomenon of faculty members shaming fellow colleagues who are attempting to implement alternative grading practices has been identified (Guskey, 2021), giving more credence to the incensing nature of grading reform. Even in circumstances where grading policies have been established in their schools or districts, there is evidence that teachers continue to determine grades based on varied beliefs (Bonner & Chen, 2021). Olson and Buchanan (2019) found that high school teachers in the U.S, seldomly adhered school grading policies, often based their grades on non-comparable student samples, and leaned on their own, personal established criteria for evaluating student work.

Making the shift to accurate and equitable grading practices has been categorized not only as grading reform, but educational reform as it demands comprehensive premutation that impact multiple stakeholder's beliefs and practices (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Nevertheless, grading reform has been identified as the "right kind of work" for educational leaders to take on in the pursuit of continuous school improvement (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Information is available to educational leaders to increase the likelihood of successful reform (Guskey, 2021; Knight & Cooper, 2019). However, grading reform is a long journey consisting of multiple obstacles. The possibility of failure is significant. Just as significant are the ramifications of a failed initiative on the reputations of school leaders who have chosen this path. Thus, several key questions emerge from this literature review. First, while there is evidence to support the need

for grading reform, do school leaders see it as the right kind of work to pursue given the current educational landscape, as well as their own beliefs about grading shaped by their experiences and interactions with stakeholders? Secondly, even if school leaders do see grading reform as a worthy endeavor, are they willing to take on such an initiative given the potential obstacles, especially in the form of stakeholder resistance?

Summary

Traditional grading practices used during the industrial revolution continue to be used today despite inherent flaws. Grading practices tend to vary significantly among teachers and is an area where teachers generally receive little to no training and direction from school leadership. Teachers typically grade according to their own belief systems that often stem back to their own experiences as students. Despite this lack of training and differing approaches to grading, the reality is that grades have a significant impact on student outcomes, as grades continue to be used for future class placement decisions and admittance to college. Grades also have a psychological effect on students in terms of motivation, engagement, and persistence.

Research has shown there to be numerous flaws surrounding traditional grading practices, but, unfortunately, these practices remain deeply rooted in the educational system and, in large part, remain unchallenged. Traditional practices have been shown to undermine intrinsic motivation and the willingness for continuous personal growth, which are key components of self-determination theory (Bandura, 1986) and the theory of mindset (Dweck, 2016) respectively. In addition, traditional practices are often inclusive of implicit biases held by teachers, which work unfairly against students of marginalized groups. The legitimacy of traditional grading practices has come under further investigation with the proliferation of research on alternative methods such as standards-based grading (O'Connor et. al., 2018) and the impact of the Covid-

19 pandemic (Wyse et. al., 2020). A body of research exists on teacher beliefs regarding grading, but there is little research addressing the beliefs of school leaders on this topic. Given the current state of education in the United States, studies are needed develop an understanding of school leader grading beliefs and how their grading beliefs have been developed. In addition, insights are needed pertaining to the challenges that school leaders face when overseeing school-wide grading practices that may influence the pursuit of grading reform initiatives.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Grades continue to have major implications for students' futures. Therefore, it is critical that grades are issued with fairness and are an accurate representation of student knowledge. Despite the importance of accurate and fair grading, grading procedures continue to vary within many schools, and the process of which is based upon what teachers believe to be fair and accurate (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Hence grading decisions are determined based on what educators believe is fair and accurate based on their personal and professional experiences (Kunnath, 2017). School leaders can establish grading procedures that create consistency and are based upon best practice, yet grading procedures remain unchanged. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the beliefs about grading held by school leaders in public schools located in Central Pennsylvania. In this chapter, the methods of this study were clearly articulated as to allow replication. Five main sections were included: research design, researcher positionality, procedures, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs of school leaders regarding grading students. Qualitative research “involves an interpretive, and naturalistic approach to the world” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.7). It requires researchers to make observations in natural settings and explain phenomenon based on meanings assigned by those experiencing the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, a qualitative design was used in this study as it seeks to inductively gain insight into school leader beliefs on a phenomenon (grading practices within their schools) based on their experiences with grading and the meanings they assign based on these experiences. Utilizing the transcendental phenomenological approach was most appropriate

given that the purpose of the design is to “understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.79). Gaining an understanding of lived experiences could lead to the creation of policies or practices that can strengthen organizations and improve the lives of others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Gaining a deeper understanding of school leader beliefs about grading could provide insight into why there has been such a slow rate of change around grading reform. A deeper understanding may also provide direction for school leaders in creating grading policies that promote accuracy and equity within the current educational context.

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology has its roots in the field of philosophy and is a term that has been used as early as the 18th century by Kant and later by Hegle. In fact, it was Hegle who defined it as “knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p.26). Transcendental phenomenology as a research design can be credited mostly to Husserl (Moustakas, 1994). This form of qualitative research has infused within it a philosophical approach that can lead to insights about human experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of this form of inquiry is to capture the all-around essence gained from reducing the experiences of several individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Intentionality is a core component of phenomenological research. Moustakas (1994) referred to intentionality as the “internal experience of being conscious of something” (p.28). This construct includes underlying factors such as burgeoning judgements, nascent desires, and underlying amusements (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, intentionality involves consciousness that is

always directed towards a particular object (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An object's reality is "is inextricably related to one's consciousness of it" (p.76).

Intuition is also a principal element of phenomenological research. Moustakas (1994) described intuition as "the beginning place in deriving knowledge of human experience, free of everyday sense impressions and the natural attitude" (p.32). It is here that the concept of epoch becomes relevant. This concept, originated by Husserl, is the suspension of one's thoughts, beliefs, and judgements that could potentially lead to biases (Moustakas, 1994). The process of bracketing has been created where researchers "set aside their experiences as much as possible to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under investigation" (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this transcendental phenomenology. This study was guided by one central research question and two sub-questions.

Central Research Question

What are the beliefs commonly held by school leaders regarding grading?

Sub-Question One

How do past experiences of school leaders contribute to their beliefs on grading?

Sub-Question Two

What challenges do school leaders face when overseeing grading procedures within their respective districts/buildings?

Setting and Participants

When determining participant eligibility, it is required that all participants experience the phenomenon of the study (Moustakas, 1994), and site selection often revolves around the chosen research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Setting

The setting for this study encompassed public schools located in the Central Pennsylvania region. Elementary, middle, and high schools were represented in this study. Central Pennsylvania schools encompass schools in both rural and urban areas. All of the school were considered public schools and shared a similar leadership structure in that they were governed by an elected school board, employ a district superintendent and building principals. Several differences in leadership structure existed between the schools, as some employed assistant superintendents, curriculum directors, and assistant principals, while others did not. There were no specific parameters in terms of school size or demographics. Schools within this region are located in rural, suburban, and urban areas and vary in terms of student population and diversity. Central Pennsylvania schools were selected for this study due to their close proximity to the researcher. In addition, Central Pennsylvania schools were part of consortium that provides professional development activities. Any professional development on the topic of grading and reporting offered by the consortium were available to all the schools in this study and may have impacted school leader grading beliefs.

Participants

It is critical that the participants of this study all have experienced the phenomenon under investigation and can articulate their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, value is added to a qualitative study when reporting consists “of multiple perspectives that range over the entire spectrum of perspectives” (p.154). Recommendation on the number of participants in a phenomenological study range between 1 and 325 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants of this study were ten school leaders from public schools located in Central Pennsylvania. Participants were actively employed by a public school in one of the following roles at the time

of the study: assistant (vice) principal, principal, assistant superintendent, or superintendent. Male and female school leaders were eligible participants, and the researcher strived to have an equal number of male and female participants. Years of educational experience, including years of school leader experience varied, as did levels of formal education. Significant concerns may arise when data is collected from an organization where researchers have existing personal or professional involvement, including issues with data quality and the emergence of power imbalances between researcher and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because of this, none of the participants were employed by the same school district as the researcher.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher of this study has become engrossed in the topic of grading due to challenges he faced as a middle school principal in recent years. At the end of the 2020-2021 school year, there was an overwhelming number of students with course failures within the researcher's school. Data analysis revealed that almost 80% were students with IEP's, students living in poverty, and/or students receiving English-language services. After taking the time to study the topic of grading, the researcher as come to believe that grades serve one purpose, which is to communicate student learning. Student behaviors such as homework, classwork completion, class preparedness, and participation should not be included as part of a grade, since these behaviors are in no way a measure of what students know (Guskey & Link, 2017). Grades should not be used to motivate, reward, or punish, especially when it comes to students who lack resources outside of school (Feldman, 2018). Furthermore, the researcher believes that grading should be an accurate representation of student progress towards a learning goal to the greatest extent possible. While there will always be a level of subjectivity in the grading process, standards-based grading is the most accurate method. Based upon these experiences and the

knowledge gained by the researcher; he has decided to lead a grading reform initiative in his school.

Interpretive Framework

It is important that researchers consider the philosophical worldview that will influence their studies, as it will have an impact on the design that is chosen (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A worldview is described as “a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study” (p. 44). A constructivist worldview involves individuals assigning meaning to their lived experiences, especially meaning towards “certain objects or things” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 46). This was precisely the worldview that was brought into this study, as it delved into the experiences and corresponding beliefs of school leaders as they supervised grading practices with their respective schools. This worldview lends itself well to interviews that involved open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Philosophical Assumptions

It is critical for the researcher to disclose philosophical assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and ultimately set those assumptions aside to “suspend everything that interferes with fresh vision” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86) when conducting a study. Philosophical assumptions were presented as ontological, epistemological, and axiological in nature.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption involves the researcher embracing and reporting on the different realities of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is expected that the participants experience the reality of overseeing grading within their respective schools differently, and the reality that they experience may be shaped by their past experiences, current school setting, and interactions with other stakeholders. Therefore, the task of the researcher was to report on these

multiple realities in detail as themes develop.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption addresses what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is justified, what the relationship is between the researcher and that which is being researched (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since this study was qualitative, knowledge was based on the subjective experiences of the participants. Under this assumption, it is important that the researcher strive to minimize the distance between himself and that which is under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher in this study did not spend time in the field where the participants work, as field work was not conducive to the gaining information relating to school leader beliefs regarding grading. However, the researcher assumed all data collection procedures in this study. Firsthand involvement in data collection may reduce distance issues despite the lack of in-person observations in the field (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption involves the researcher acknowledging that research is steeped in values and that biases exist (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important to acknowledge the existing grading beliefs held by the researcher in this study. The researcher values grading practices that promote equity and that accurately reflect student learning. Those interviewed may or may not have shared these same beliefs. However, the goal of this study was to understand the beliefs that school leaders have regarding grading without impressing upon them the researcher's beliefs.

Researcher's Role

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the key instrument of investigation (Patton & Patton, 2002). The researcher in this qualitative study was responsible for collecting

and analyzing the data. The data analysis process in qualitative research involves “complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 43) on the part of the researcher. Reciprocating between themes and data to establish a complete set of themes is the purpose of the inductive process, while deductive thinking involves the development of themes that are continually being evaluated based on the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher in this study utilized inductive-deductive logic throughout the research process.

The researcher was in his fifth year serving as principal of a middle school located in a rural area of Central Pennsylvania at the time of the study. The researcher also had over twenty years of experience in public education where he served as special education teacher and special education director prior to his principalship tenure. All of the researcher’s public education experience was with the same school at the time of the study. The middle school that the researcher oversaw was undergoing a grading reform initiative that neighboring schools may have learned about. It was important throughout the research process that the researcher focused on learning the meaning of the problem held by participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the focus needed to be kept on the meanings brought forth by the participants of this study and not on the meanings derived from the researcher’s experiences and beliefs.

Procedures

Qualitative studies require clear articulation of procedures. The following section describes the procedures that guided this transcendental phenomenology. The procedures in this study included permissions, a recruitment plan, and a data collection plan.

Permissions

All necessary permissions were obtained to conduct this study. Approval for this study was granted from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (See Appendix A) to ensure

that data collections procedures were conducted ethically. Consent was obtained from each interviewee via a consent form signed by both the researcher and participant (See Appendix C). The researcher also obtained permission to receive vignette responses, all of which was included on the consent form. The IRB approval letter (See Appendix A) and interviewee participation consent (See Appendix C) can be found in the appendix section.

Recruitment Plan

A researcher must obtain a sample that will most effectively inform him about research problem under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling was used for this study, which involved generating a pool of participants through recommendations made by individuals who possessed the same qualities of research interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The recruitment plan for this study can also be considered as criterion-based sampling, which involves the selection of cases that meet a specific set of criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, all participants were school leaders employed by public schools located in the Central Pennsylvania region. Based upon the requirement set forth by Liberty University, the sample size included a minimum of ten participants. All participants signed an informed consent form (See Appendix c), which explained the procedures of the study and the rights of the participants and served as an acknowledgement that participants understood the procedures of the study and their participant rights (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection Plan

This study investigated the beliefs of school leaders regarding grading. The three methods of data collection used in this study were individual interviews, focus group interviews, and vignette responses. Data collection consisted of several integral steps designed to answer the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical considerations need to be made for each step

in the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Approval for this study was granted from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board to ensure that data collections procedures were conducted ethically.

Individual Interviews

The first method of data collection used in this study was one-on-one interviews with each of the participants to gain an understanding of the individual beliefs about grading. A qualitative interview “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.162). This method was conducted first, so that an understanding of individual school leader beliefs could be obtained without influences from peers. The dissertation committee reviewed the interview questions to ensure that the interview questions were germane to the research questions.

All participants were school leaders employed by public schools located in Central Pennsylvania. The researcher obtained a signed consent from each participant. Interviews were scheduled in advance and were conducted via Zoom. Interview appointments were made by phone or email. Accommodations were made to ensure interviews occur at convenient times for the participants.

A semi-structured approach with open-ended questions was utilized during the interview process. The researcher obtained permission to use a transcription application from the participants which was included on the consent form. Once transcribed, the interview data was stored electronically. An interview protocol was also created that included the interview questions, space to record responses and space for the researcher to bracket his own thoughts (See Appendix D).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position. CRQ
2. Describe your process for grading in your classes when you were still in the classroom. SQ1
3. Describe the extent to which the grading practice you used as a teacher were the result of peer or mentor influences. SQ1
4. What are your thoughts on considering effort when determining an end-of-quarter grade? CRQ
5. Describe how your beliefs about grading have changed since becoming a school leader. SQ1
6. What expectations do you have for teachers when it comes to grading? SQ2
7. Describe any pre-service or in-service training you received on grading procedures. SQ1
8. What challenges have you had to deal with as an administrator that pertain to grading? SQ2
9. What changes, if any, would you like to see in grading procedures used in your school? SQ2
10. Explain where grading reform falls on a list of priorities for your school. SQ2
11. What challenges do you foresee if you were to pursue grade reform? SQ2

Question one was intended to be an icebreaker (Moustakas, 1994) as well an opportunity to gain background information from the participants regarding their path to school leadership. Question two addressed sub-question one and sought to understand how current grading beliefs

may have been shaped by experiences as classroom teachers. Question three addressed sub-question one to gain an understanding of how participant beliefs about grading may be shaped by peer or mentor influences. Question four addresses the central research question to understand school leader beliefs on whether non-academic factors should be included in grades. Question five addressed sub-question one by exploring how the role of school leader influenced grading beliefs. Question six addressed sub-question two by gaining insight on how school leader grading beliefs were applied to faculty supervision. Question seven addressed sub-question one and sought to understand the extent to which pre-service training influenced grading beliefs. Question eight addressed sub-question two with the purpose of understanding school leader efficacy in addressing problems related to grading. Questions nine and ten addressed the central research question by gauging school leader positions on whether reform was needed based on their beliefs and grading practices common within their respective schools at the time of the study. Question eleven addressed sub-question two to gain insight on whether school leaders were willing to pursue grading reform based on their beliefs about grading practices and the grading practices that they oversaw within their respective buildings.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

It is important to note the data analysis began at the outset of the data collection process. Avoiding analysis until all data collection could otherwise result in the loss of critical analytical insights (Patton & Patton, 2002). Therefore, reflexive notetaking occurred throughout the interview process to help determine if modifications were needed, to assess saturation, and as a means of identifying biases or assumptions. Individual interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The constant comparison process was utilized between interviewees during the interview process, where reflective notes helped capture similarities and differences in emerging

ideas stemming from the participants. Transcripts were organized into digital files and were reviewed in their entirety several times. Memoing occurred throughout the reviewing process as a means of capturing emergent ideas surrounding school leader grading beliefs. The interview data then underwent a rigorous coding process where information was described, classified, and interpreted. Descriptions were created of each emerging idea, and this information was aggregated into categories. A list of codes (inclusive of in vivo codes) was finalized and a description of each one was constructed. Each code was assigned a name, a description, and supporting examples from interview transcripts. The codes were then analyzed to determine salient themes emerging from the data. The data interpretation process involved determining patterns among the themes and making a judgement as to which themes were meaningful. This process was guided by specific questions suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018); “what surprising information did you not expect to find, what information is conceptually unusual, and what are the dominant interpretations/alternative notions” (p.195).

Focus Group

A focus group interview involving three of the participants in the individual interviews was conducted after the individual interview were completed. Focus groups can be beneficial “when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect information limited, and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.164). The focus group interview occurred after the individual interviews so that the researcher could observe how individual responses may be influenced by peer interaction. All school leaders who participated in the individual interviews were invited to participate in the focus group interview. The dissertation committee reviewed focus group

questions to ensure relevance to the research questions. Participants were invited to a Zoom session where the focus group interview took place. The focus group interview occurred a few days after all individual interviews were completed. A semi-structured format was utilized using a separate set of questions that were different from those used during the individual interview but that aligned to individual questions and the research questions. This format allowed the researcher the latitude to formulate additional questions as needed. A transcription application was utilized during this process, and a focus group protocol was created allowing the researcher to summarize responses from individual members as well as his own thoughts in writing (See Appendix D).

Focus Group Questions

1. What are your thoughts on including effort into a grading system? CRQ
2. Compare your beliefs about grading from before you became a school leader to after.
SQ2
3. What are some of the barriers you feel teachers have when it comes to grading procedures? SQ2
4. What types of professional development have you offered to your teachers on grading procedures. SQ1
5. What are the greatest challenges that exist when it comes to grading procedures? SQ2
6. What are your thoughts on grading reform? SQ2
7. Explain your thoughts on where grading reform falls when considering school improvement priorities. SQ2
8. Explain any challenges that you would anticipate if embarking on a grading reform initiative. SQ2

Question one addressed the central research question to understand school leader beliefs on whether non-academic factors should be included in grades. Question two addressed sub-question one to understand how current grading beliefs may have been shaped by experiences as classroom teachers. Question three addressed sub-question two by gaining insight into how grading challenges experienced by school leaders may have influenced the need for grading reform. Questions four and five addressed sub-question two by gaining insight into how school leader efficacy influenced supervision of school-wide grading practices. Questions six and seven addressed the central research question by gaining insight into how grading beliefs may drive the decision on whether or not to pursue grading reform. Question eight addressed sub-question two by gaining and understanding of perceived challenges to grading reform that may influence the decision to pursue such an initiative.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

A similar process was used when analyzing focus group data. The constant comparison process was utilized during the interview process, where reflective notes recorded similarities and differences in emerging ideas identified between individual and focus -group interviews. Data that was obtained through detailed written notes on an interview protocol were read several times. Memoing was conducted during the reading/re-reading process. These memos included researcher thoughts and ideas captured on the interview protocol during the focus group interview. In tandem with the data from the individual interview, descriptions of each emerging ideas were created and arranged in categories. A list of codes was finalized and a description of each one was constructed. Each code was assigned a name, a description, and supporting examples from interview transcripts. The codes were then be analyzed to determine salient themes that emerge from the data. The data interpretation process involved determining patterns

among the themes and making a judgement as to which themes were meaningful.

Vignettes

The final method of data collection involved an analysis of school leader responses to vignettes pertaining to grading. Skilling and Stylianides (2020) define vignettes as scenarios “aligned with relevant research paradigms and methodologies, reflecting realistic and identifiable settings that resonate with participants for the purpose of provoking responses, including but not limited to beliefs, perceptions, emotions, effective responses, reflections, and decision making” (p. 543). Studying educator beliefs through the utilization of vignettes provides an opportunity for individual educator subjective views to surface (Skillings & Stylianides, 2020). In addition, the use of vignettes allows the researcher to evaluate educator perceptions and to identify similarities and difference between them (Skillings & Stylianides, 2020). When paired with other data collection methods such as interviews, vignettes provide additional data that can help confirm the reliability of, and support information collected through traditional methods (Skillings & Stylianides, 2020).

The researcher obtained a signed consent from all participants before engaging in the vignette responses (See Appendix C). Vignettes were sent to participants via email, and participants were asked to provide response in a return email. Responses were kept confidentially in both electronic and hardcopy form.

Vignette Prompts

1. A seventh-grade language arts teacher tells you that one of his students plagiarized a substantial portion of an essay. This essay is to be counted as a major grade for the marking period. The teacher shared that he believes the student should be held accountable for his actions and suggests a major point reduction and after-school

detention as consequences. In talking with the student and the student's parent, you learn that the student, while not identified as needing special education services, has a great deal of difficulty with writing. Explain the course of action you would take in this situation.

2. You receive Pennsylvania State System Assessment (PSSA) results that show tested levels of student performance in math and language arts. As you analyze this data, you come to realize that a considerable number of students who performed well in their language arts classes based on receiving an end of year grade of a 90% or higher performed at a below-basic level on the PSSA language arts assessment. You also notice that there is a group of students who received an end of year grade below a 70% in language arts classes but scored at the proficient level on the PSSA language arts assessment. Explain what you believe may be the factors contributing to this discrepancy.
3. A parent contacts you over concerns about her son's math grade. She explains that her son's math teacher gives students a quiz after every homework assignment and grades the quiz based on accuracy. You confirm that this practice is occurring based on viewing the online gradebook. When you approach the math teacher, he explains that students are more motivated to put forth an effort in completing their homework when they know that they have a graded quiz each time. Explain how you would manage this situation.
4. A first-year teacher is unsure how to proceed with grading for his class, and there is no school-wide grading policy. He comes to you for advice. Explain the advice that you would give him.

Vignette one addressed the central research question and sub-question one, as it sought to inform how school leaders would manage a situation based on their beliefs about grading that

could be based on a similar experiences that they may have faced as either a teacher or administrator. Vignette two addressed sub-question two by eliciting responses that involved supervisor oversight of grading practices within their respective schools. Vignette three addressed the central research question and sub-question two, as it required school leaders to draw upon their own beliefs about grading in a supervisory situation involving grading. Vignette four addresses the central research question and sub-question one by allowing school leaders to draw upon their grading beliefs that may connect to their previous experiences with grading when they were teachers.

Vignette Data Analysis Plan

Vignette responses were read several times throughout the data analysis process. Hardcopies were made allowing key words and phrases to be highlighted and researcher thoughts to be added. The constant comparison process was utilized and reflective notes were written to compare emergent ideas stemming from vignette responses to those of the interviews. Emerging ideas were described and categorized, and list of codes were generated. Each code consisted of a name, description, and example from the corresponding vignette response. The codes were then be analyzed to determine salient themes that emerge from the data.

Data Synthesis

The data synthesis procedure followed the recommendations of Moustakas (1994) pertaining to a transcendental phenomenology. The data gathered from each of these sources was compared to determine if there was consistency among the themes. The themes were integrated into a description of meaning (or the essence) of the experience among the entire group. Common themes that emerged from the three data sources were then further categorized based upon individual or collective school leader beliefs. These themes were also analyzed to

determine the extent to which they addressed the research questions. Specifically, themes were matched with existing beliefs, influences, need for reform, and challenges. These interpretations were also analyzed to determine the extent to which they align to the principles of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which served as the theoretical framework of this study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness procedures in qualitative research has been subjected to positivist scrutiny due to a perceived lack of rigor (Shenton, 2004). In response to these claims, Lincoln and Guba (as cited by Shenton, 2004) developed a framework for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative studies using the credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical consideration as the guiding concepts. This section describes the steps taken assure the trustworthiness of this study using this terminology.

Credibility

Credibility involves determining whether a study truly measures what it seeks to measure (Shenton, 2004). It is considered the most vital component in evaluating the trustworthiness of a study (Shenton, 2014). In this study credibility was achieved through the triangulation of data sources, peer-debriefing, and member checking.

Triangulation

Triangulation involves the use of multiple data collections methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and vignettes. Data obtained from each source was evaluated to see whether it either supported or refuted the data collected from the other two sources.

Peer-Debriefing

Frequent check-ins should occur between the researcher and his or her superior to identify flaws or ethical concerns (Shenton, 2004). This process was accomplished through researcher meetings with the dissertation committee before the study was submitted to the IRB.

Member Checking

Member checking involves participants to read over transcripts to ensure that the words that were recorded match what they were striving to articulate (Shenton, 2004). Each participant was granted the opportunity to review the transcript of their individual interview to verify accuracy of statements.

Transferability

Transferability involves demonstrating that the outcomes of a study can apply to different contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is unfeasible to show that findings of qualitative studies can be applied to other populations or scenarios given samples and settings used in this this approach (Shenton, 2004). However, it is critical that the researcher provide thick and rich descriptions so that readers can compare this information to their own contexts (Shenton, 2004). The researcher was intentional in providing detailed, thick, and rich descriptions of school leader grading beliefs once the data was collected and analyzed.

Dependability

To assure dependability, the process utilized in a study needs to be described with enough detail to allow future researchers to replicate the study (Shenton, 2004). Dependability was satisfied via an audit involving a thorough review of the process and the products of the research by the dissertation committee. The purpose of this audit was to assess the accuracy and

determine whether the findings, interpretations, and conclusions were supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the assurance that the research findings are the product of the participants' thoughts and ideas and not those of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). While researcher bias is inevitable, it is critical that steps are taken to promote the highest levels of objectivity (Shenton, 2004). Confirmability occurred in this study through the triangulation of school leader interviews, the focus group interview, and vignette responses and through the identification of researcher biases using reflexivity, which involved the researcher disclosing his own background and how it directed his interpretation of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations must be made throughout a study, and objective steps need to be taken to ensure ethical issues are addressed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Approval for this study was obtained from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (See Appendix A) to ensure that data collection procedures were conducted ethically. The researcher obtained consent from each interviewee via a consent form signed by both the researcher and participant (See Appendix C). Participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of the study and that they could withdraw from the study at any point in time. The researcher asked permission to use a transcription application from the participants which was also included on the consent form. All documents, including interview protocols, were secured confidentially in a locked file and will be destroyed within three years of the study's completion. While participants were provided the opportunity to reflect upon their grading beliefs and the practices that they currently endorse within their schools, they may have experienced feelings of inadequacy in their current approaches and felt

pressure to reform grading practices as a result of participating in this study. The researcher strived to mitigate such reactions during the member-check process that occurred throughout the interview processes. As participants reviewed their statements for accuracy, the researcher reinforced that the purpose is to capture participant beliefs about grading and not to sway participants into the need to reform grading policies within their respective schools. Finally, pseudonyms were used in place of actual participant names to protect anonymity. A list of participant names and corresponding pseudonyms were kept electronically on a password-protected computer.

Summary

A transcendental phenomenology design was used in this study to capture school leader grading beliefs. The primary means of data collection was through individual interviews followed by a focus group interview and the collection of vignette responses. Data synthesis procedure followed the recommendations of Moustakas (1994) regarding transcendental phenomenology. The constant comparison process was utilized and reflexive notes were written to compare emergent ideas stemming from each data source. The data gathered from each of these sources were then compared to determine if there was consistency among the themes and were then integrated into a description of meaning (or the essence) of the experience among the entire group. Trustworthiness was established by utilizing the framework developed by Lincoln and Guba (as cited by Shenton, 2004) that utilizes credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical consideration as the guiding principles. While ethical considerations were made throughout the research process to ensure that the study adheres to the highest ethical standards.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the beliefs about school-wide grading practices held by school leaders who oversee schools located within the Central Pennsylvania region. This chapter provides a summary of the actual data collection process, participant descriptions, the data, in the form of narrative themes, outlier data; and research question responses.

Participants

Central Pennsylvania school leaders were contacted by phone and by email based on contact information on school websites. Recruitment attempts from neighboring schools were unsuccessful requiring the need to expand the search to other schools within the region. There were also times where interviews needed to be rescheduled. On two occasions, prospective participants agreed to participate but did not respond to further attempts to schedule the individual interview. Recommendations from participants yielded the successful recruitment of four additional qualified candidates. A total of ten qualified school leaders participated in the individual interviews and vignette responses. Finding a common time for school leaders to participate in the focus group interview was difficult, as there were often schedule conflicts. The focus group interview session needed to be rescheduled twice to ensure the participation of three school leaders who also participated in the individual interviews and responded to the vignettes.

Table 2
School Leader Participants

School Leader Participant	Public Education Experience (years)	Subject Taught	School Leadership Experience (years)	Current Leadership Role
Ryan	32	High School and Elementary Health/Physical Education	11	Middle School Principal
John	14	High School Special Education	9	Superintendent
Harold	20	High School Agricultural Science	13	Superintendent
Jim	21	High School Work-based Learning Coordinator	6	High School Principal
Anne	22	High School Language Arts	16	High School Principal
Megan	24	Elementary Teacher	13	Elementary Principal
Don	21	High School Counselor	14	Elementary Principal
Allison	9	High School Biology	1	Middle School Principal
Chandra	13	Elementary Reading, Middle School Language Arts	1	High School Principal
Craig	24	Middle School Biology	14	Assistant Superintendent

Ryan

Ryan is in his thirty-second year in public education and in his fifth year as a middle school principal. Prior to his role as a middle school principal, he served as an assistant principal at the secondary level. He is certified as a health and physical education teacher and spent more

than twenty years as an elementary physical education teacher before transitioning to the high school level for another five years. All of his educational experiences has been with one school district.

John

John is a second-year superintendent with fourteen years of public education experience. Prior to his superintendency, John served as a middle and high school principal. He began his career in education as a high school special education teacher and served in that capacity for six years before entering school leadership in another school. He was a supervisor of a juvenile detention center before entering public education on emergency certification.

Harold

Harold is in his second year as a superintendent. He served multiple schools as a secondary-level assistant principal and principal before becoming a superintendent. He is a certified agricultural science teacher with eight years of classroom experience. He left public education for four years to run his own business before returning to the classroom and moving into administration. Harold earned a doctoral degree in school leadership before becoming a superintendent.

Jim

Jim is in his twenty-first year in public education with twelve years of administrator experience. He is in his ninth year as a principal for a k-12 school for students with behavioral challenges. Prior to this role, Jim was an assistant principal for a urban high school. Jim served as a job coach and transition coordinator before becoming a school leader. He completed a doctoral degree four years ago.

Anne

Anne is in her twelfth year as a school leader. She served as an assistant principal, principal, and curriculum director at three different schools. She spent ten years in the classroom as a high school language arts teacher before becoming a school leader. She stepped away from her career in education for several years to raise her children.

Megan

Megan is in her twenty-fourth year in public education and in her fifteenth year as an elementary principal. All of her school leadership experience has been with the same school. She served as an elementary teacher (grades five and six) prior to becoming an administrator.

Don

Don has fifteen years of administrative experience in two school districts. He has served as a high school assistant principal and curriculum director before settling into his current role as an elementary principal. Prior to his administrative experience, Don served as a school counselor at the high school level. Don completed a doctoral degree in school leadership two years ago.

Allison

Allison has nine years of education experience and is in her first year as a middle school principal. She served one year as a dean of students and eight years as a biology teacher before becoming a principal. She served three different school districts during this time.

Chandra

Chandra is a first-year assistant principal at the secondary level who served as an elementary teacher and reading specialist before entering school leadership. All of her public education experience has been with the same school district. She has fourteen years of experience in public education. She is currently enrolled in a doctoral program.

Craig

Craig is in his twenty-fourth year in public education and is in his second year as an assistant superintendent overseeing multiple elementary schools in a massive, suburban school district. Prior to his current role, Craig has served multiple school districts as assistant principal and principal. Craig's classroom experience was as a middle school science teacher before entering administration. Craig completed his doctoral degree three years ago.

Results

The data collected from the individual interviews, the focus group interview, and the vignettes was subjected to a coding process. All codes were then organized into themes and subthemes. The following sections include a name and description for each theme and subtheme.

Grades Should be Meaningful

A primary theme that emerged clearly at the beginning and throughout the data collection process was the meaningfulness of grades. Participants acknowledged that for grades to have any real value, they must also be meaningful. That is, grades should, to some level, be a depiction of student learning or of student knowledge of a subject or of concepts. Ryan stated, "Grades should be meaningful," and further elaborated that "grades should really align to state assessment performance" suggesting the need for grades to represent knowledge of academic standards. Harold referred to grades as a way to communicate a level of mastery of a skill. He stated, "If students can master and transfer...if that is the outcome, why are we grading all the many steps along the way, because it is not indicative of the final product." Harold's statement mirrored the sentiments of other participants who indicated that not everything that is assigned in a classroom should be graded. Harold further shared that "A grade should mean something." He elaborated saying, "If I get a 98 in an applied math class, and I hand that to an employer, and I cannot

manufacture a piece out of steel, because I don't know how to calculate square feet... then that is a failure on our part as a school system.”

Several participants described how grading behaviors such as completing homework or classroom assignments detracts meaningfulness from grades. Jim, a principal of a school for students with significant mental health needs and behavior disorders, stated, “I got to the point to where I want to grade students based on what they know and allowing them to demonstrate what they know in a way that allows them to shine...” John stated, “Hard work equals success, but hard work does not equal learning. I have had students who did all the homework and classwork but didn't learn anything that I was trying to teach and have had others who didn't do an ounce of homework and classwork and still aced my tests.” When asked directly if homework and classwork should be part of an end- of-quarter grade, John replied, “I'm not in favor of it.”

Eversion to Punitive Grading

An eversion to punitive grading became evident as a subtheme as participants shared their grading beliefs. This idea emerged as participants discussed the importance of meaningfulness and therefore, has been included as a subtheme. Several participants made it a point of emphasis that using grades as a punitive measure is not a practice that they endorse. Megan stated, “Sometimes it's all about sticking it to a kid and making a point, and I'm not sure what the point of that is.” In his response to the vignette involving plagiarism, Jim explained, “I believe grades should reflect learning and not be used as a consequence or punishment...I would not support point reduction as a consequence or punishment.” Harold shared similar sentiments in his vignette response; “What will the point reduction and detention ‘teach’ the child... does the resulting grade reflect the student's learning...do the proposed consequences match the desired outcome of developing a proficient writer?”

Knowledge of Best Practice

Another subtheme emerging from data is that respondents have knowledge of progressive practices grading practices, or practices that are believed to promote equity and accuracy. Harold and Jim both referenced ‘traditional’ grading practices and Harold shared how early in his career, he “embraced the bell curve,” which demonstrates their understanding of the typical practices that have been utilized pervasively across public school systems. These references denote their understanding of alternative grading procedures in comparison to conventional grading methods. Several respondents shared their dislike of entering zeros into a grade book and explained how minimal grading procedures are applied by some teachers within their respective buildings. Both the removal of zeros and minimal grading are widely regarded as non-traditional practices. Jim explained how he gained knowledge of non-traditional practices as part of a school leadership team trying to help a school make adequate yearly progress (AYP) and that these ideas, inclusive of re-assessment, grading of summative assessments only, etc., stayed with him as he moved on to another school.

Respondents who oversee elementary buildings shared the use of the standards-based grading (SBG) at their levels. Megan, who oversees a k-4 building, explained that SBG is utilized for grades k-1 and have been grading this way for more than 5 years. Don led the transition to SBG for his k-5 for grades k-2 within the last year. Anne, a high school principal, is supporting one of her teachers in piloting SBG at the secondary level. Craig, an assistant superintendent who oversees several elementary schools, explained that SBG is used in all of his schools from grades k-5. As a central office administrator, he also shared that middle and high schools in his district are in the process of making changes to their existing grading procedures in the direction of SBG.

Work Ethic is Valued

Another subtheme that emerged from school leader grading beliefs was that work ethic is valued and therefore, should somehow be represented in grading. Respondents admitted to struggling on how work ethic should be incorporated without sacrificing meaningfulness (or an accurate representation of student knowledge or mastery). Ryan stated that there should be a place in a grading system that takes work ethic into account. Both Ryan and Don proposed that some classes, like physical education, need higher amounts of work ethic grades than others. Harold shared that work ethic grades could serve as valuable information for potential employers but that work ethic grades should somehow be reported separately from academic grades. Both Don and Chandra suggested the use of participation rubrics as a means of gauging work ethic in the classroom, but Don still referred to grading work ethic as a “grey area.” Anne explained that hard work and grit should be assessed and rewarded stating, “These skills are sometimes more important than the academic stuff.” Anne further shared the difficulty she has with determining the extent to which work ethic should be included in grading and balancing it with content knowledge. She said, “I struggle with it... I see both sides and it’s hard for me to land anywhere.”

Beliefs Developed on the Job

None of the respondents recall receiving any pre-service training on grading. Several respondents shared that their grading beliefs as teachers were the result of what they felt was ‘right’ based on their own classroom experiences, independent of peer or mentor influences. John explained, “I just felt the need to give students feedback and include parents in the process,” while also citing that he would adjust his grading procedures year-to- year based on what he felt was working and what was not. Anne shared, “Kids would not fail my class as long as I could see they were putting forth an effort” and recalled feeling backlash from peers because

of this stance. Jess, who began her career as an elementary teacher, explained how her grading practices were based her school's gradebook setup, which allowed for points/percentage grades only. Harold, who was an agricultural science teacher, described that various types of skills that he needed to assess and grade, including physical tasks, and mathematical skills, factors that shaped his grading philosophy. He described his resulting grading procedure as traditional, based upon a one-hundred-point scale. Harold also admitted to using assessment "in a punitive fashion" as a way of proving to a student the result of their lack of effort and preparation.

Mentor/Supervisor Influences

Several respondents recalled mentor or school leader influences that shaped their grading beliefs while they were still teachers. Ryan recalled mentor influence in determining his grading procedures as a physical education teacher; "I hitched to my partner's way of grading and never looked back." Harold, Jim, and Allison recalled direction from school leadership on grading practices that would eventually become school-wide policy. Allison explained how she adopted the school-wide grading policy from her previous school when she was hired by another school district and encouraged teachers whom she mentored to utilize the same practices. Don recalled an experience co-teaching a psychology course with the building principal, and shared how grades for everything from tests, projects, papers, and participation to be determined through the creation of rubrics, the resulting points of which would be placed in a weighted gradebook. Dan shared how much he respected his principal as an educator and leaders, resulting in Dan's adoption of these methods.

Ryan remembered his school district's leadership inviting a "grading expert" into a joint in-service involving two other school districts in addition to his own. Ryan explained, "The presenter argued how grading can be subjective... it was eye-opening...people wanted to

change, but nothing really changed.” He added, “There should have been more,” referring to the need for follow-up training while acknowledging that he did not change any of his grading practices as the result of the session.

Balcony View

In this subtheme, participants focused on how becoming a school leader has changed their beliefs about grading. This change in beliefs is due to having a broader, balcony view of school operations and developing a more comprehensive understanding of the school community, including the home lives of students. Anne explained that she was naïve when she entered the education profession assuming that students had the home support to be successful students. It became clear to Anne when she became a principal that not all students live in homes where education is valued or that are conducive to studying or completing homework. She stated, “Now I realize, wow, these kids have way more going on in their lives other than whether they’re going to get their math homework done or not.” Craig explained that he continued to learn and grow throughout his administrative career and made it a point to stay current with educational trends adding, “I have evolved to the belief that all students should earn a 100%... that all students should reach mastery.”

Acknowledgement of Problems

There was consensus among the respondents that there are inherent problems with the way grades are determined in their respective schools. John stated, “The pandemic...should have woken up our system...that our system is failing because we’re measuring work instead of learning, and they’re two different things.” There is also agreement that some of the problems can be linked to unfairness. Anne quipped, “It seems like some teachers go into teaching for the content and not because they like kids, and it shows in the way they grade.” Jim shared ongoing

situations with physical education teachers who were failing students because they were not changing into their gym uniforms even though those students were demonstrating competency of physical education standards. He argued, “Are we grading students based on them changing into a gym uniform, or are we grading them on them showing they have the PE skills?” Jim also shared that grading problems are more prevalent in the absence of a school-wide grading philosophy. When describing the problems he had to deal within his school pertaining to end-of-term grading, Jim explained, “This is what happens when the structures and procedure are not put in up front... it becomes reactionary, and it turns into us having to do clean-up duty.”

Inconsistency in Grading Practices

When addressing problems associated with grading, several respondents talked about how grading practices tend to be different from classroom to classroom creating inconsistency from a school-wide standpoint. Megan attributed this inconsistency to differences in philosophies among the faculty. Don stated, “Some teachers enter grades for participation... I’ve seen it where teachers take away points because students arrived late to class.” Anne attributed inconsistencies to the attempts by teachers to balance academic performance and ‘soft skills’ when determining student performance which is handled differently from teacher to teacher.

Pushing Improvement VS. Supporting Teachers

Respondents described the challenge of trying to make improvements to grading practice while simultaneously trying to support teachers. Jim shared situations where he needed to address teachers about student failures at a school struggling to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) and in turn, facing possible closure or state takeover. He shared that the perception of teachers was that administration was questioning their judgement and competency. He lamented, “How do you be pro-kid without being anti-teacher?” Harold shared a situation where he met

with a teacher to discuss his grading practices during a post-observation conference. He explained how the teacher was awarding points to students during a review activity if students could answer questions correctly and also make a basket on a miniature basketball hoop. “I’m not kidding you, he actually cried when I questioned him about this practice,” he lamented.

Several respondents reported the need to support teachers even in situations where they felt the students were being subjected to unfair grading. This was especially evident in the plagiarism vignette responses. For instance, Anne shared that per the student handbook, cheating results in a zero. She stated, “If a teacher is adamant about following the handbook, I would support them” despite stating unfairness of assigning zeros during the interview. Anne also shared that in this situation, she would follow up with the teacher to help him or her “understand that knowledge of the content is more important,” with the hope that the teacher would agree to allowing the student a second chance with the assignment and possibly average the two submissions. Megan explained that she would side with teachers to the greatest extent possible even when parents make legitimate complaints about a teacher’s grading practices but would follow up with the teacher afterwards with the purpose of trying to improve grading practices going forward. Even though John was outspoken about the problems with grading existing in his schools, he articulated the need to extend “professional courtesy” to his teachers, referring to allowing grading autonomy for his teachers.

Not a Top Priority

While most of the respondents acknowledged the importance of grading and the need for grading reform, overall, there was consensus that it is not a top priority. Craig explained that school leaders are primarily instructional leaders but are constantly balancing the dual role of instructional leader and building manager. He stated that as instructional leaders, they need to

constantly evaluate curriculum, instruction, and assessment but that “grading falls in this wheel.” Don and Megan, who also supervise elementary programs, did not consider grading reform as a top priority, partially because they have adopted SBG in their buildings and believe that this is the most accurate way to evaluate student performance. Considering that SBG is utilized for early elementary students in their respective buildings, neither have immediate plans to expand SBG to the upper elementary grade levels.

Several respondents talked about other initiatives that surpass grading reform on the priority list. Student mental health, behavioral challenges and absenteeism were mentioned as being more important issues to address. When discussing the prospect of grading reform, Anne explained, “It’s in my top 5 but probably lands at the 5th spot,” while sharing that curriculum issues are a greater concern for her school. Don echoed similar sentiments stating that grading reform “does not crack the priority list” even when asked about extending SBG into the upper-elementary grade levels in his school. While stating that reporting methods may be antiquated, Don explained, “It goes back to the idea of what do you want your kids to know and do they know it now after you taught them, and what is the best way to get to that,” and later stated, “we can change whatever we want... but GPA and SAT scores are still king in college.” Megan explained that time and energy should be placed more on instructional practices and that while grades serve as a communication tool for both students and their parents, the truly meaningful information that teachers collect is through benchmarking and progress monitoring that drives instruction even though it is not typically shared with either students or parents.

Acknowledging an Uphill Battle

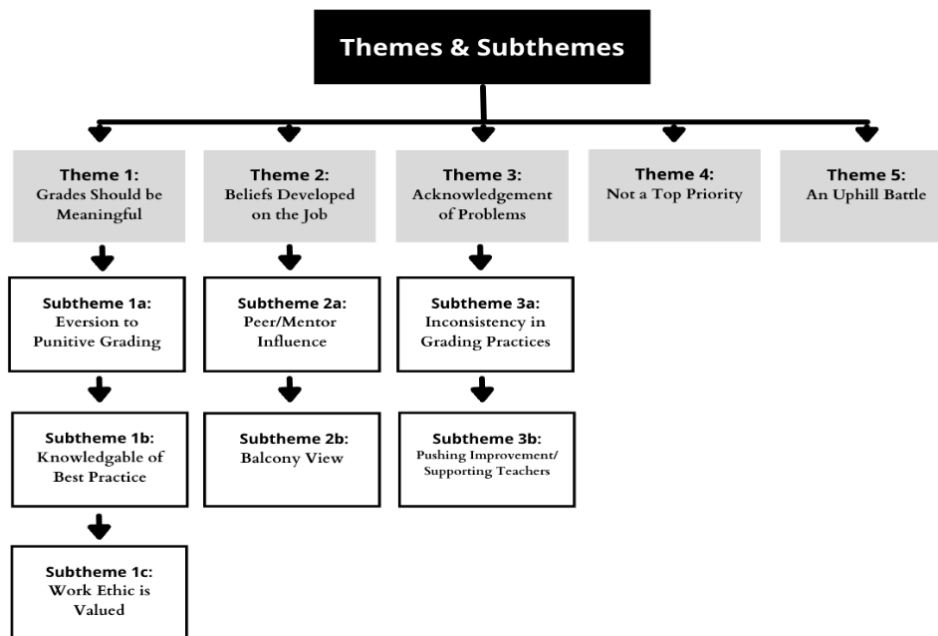
When engaging the topic of grading reform, there was agreement about the difficulty in pursuing such an initiative. Anne described the process as “a grave undertaking” that would

require a “culture shift.” Megan said that she would likely be “run out of town” if she were to lead a grading reform initiative and concluded by saying, “It is not the hill that I am willing to die on.”

Several respondents identified strong beliefs that exist within various stakeholder groups as a significant barrier. Jim stated that “we are products of our past” when describing how both parents and teachers expect grading practices to follow suit with the practices they, themselves experienced as students. He added that the region seems to hold firm to traditional practices in comparison to school district where he was previously employed outside of the Central Pennsylvania region. Jim concluded by saying, “We’re not very progressive in this area.”

Harold and John, both superintendents, voiced concern about pushing new initiatives at a time when there is high turnover. John lamented, “We had to hire eighteen teachers this year, which was more than the last several years combined... the last thing I want to do is drive more people out.” Harold discussed the need to strike a balance between pushing for school improvement without further damaging teacher moral and argued that “a top-down approach” may do more harm than good. He suggested gaining the involvement of teacher leaders to build capacity and to gradually change mindsets. Ryan argued, “Do not make change for change sake... there needs to be a good reason.” Several respondents mentioned the need to communicate why changes are needed and to do so strategically with the various stakeholder groups. Craig cautioned against making changes “too fast, too quick” when engaging “the conservative mentality of stakeholders.”

Figure 1
Themes & Subthemes



Outlier Data and Findings

All of themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis process align to the research questions of this study. However, there were outlier findings that became evident during data analysis. That is, there were beliefs shared by one or two respondents that ran contrary to the beliefs shared by almost all of the others.

Outlier Finding #1

Almost all of the respondents shared how including homework, classwork, and effort as part of a grade actually detract from the meaningfulness of a grade. However, two respondents, Allison and Chandra, explained that including these factors into grading is appropriate and even necessary. Allison explained her belief that at about 30% of a final grade should consist of these factors and described these factors as “key.” Chandra stated that “participation and meeting timelines should be tied into the grade” and advocates for the use of a 50-point participation

rubric to determine this grade. Both Chandra and Allison have worked in public education for less than ten years, and both are in their first years as school leaders. Their experience level is significantly different from the other school leaders in this study, all of whom have more than twenty years of public education experience and ten or more years of school leader experience.

Outlier Finding #2

Most of the respondents identified inconsistency as problem when considering school-wide grading practices. Inconsistency refers to the differences in grading from classroom to classroom within a school. Ryan was the only respondent who identified inconsistency as a positive factor stating, “Inconsistency can be a positive thing... kids need to get used to answering to more than one boss when on a job.”

Research Question Responses

The data analysis process revealed several themes and subthemes. All of the themes and subthemes emerging from the data analysis align to the central research question and the sub-questions identified in this study. The following section provides summaries on how the themes address the central questions and sub-questions.

Central Research Question

What are the beliefs commonly held by school leaders regarding grading? The participants’ perspective is that grading should be meaningful. A further explanation of ‘meaningful’ reveals the belief that grades should be an accurate representation of student understanding of a concepts or tasks. Harold’s elaboration encapsulates the beliefs shared by most of the respondents when he said, “A grade should mean something...if I get a 98 in an applied math class, and I hand that to an employer, and I cannot manufacture a piece out of steel, because I don’t know how to calculate square feet... then that is a failure on our part as a

school system.” Respondents shared that they value work ethic and believe that it should somehow be factored into a student’s grade. Finally, respondents shared that grades should not be used to punish students, as Jim explained, “I believe grades should reflect learning and not be used as a consequence or punishment...”

Sub-Question One

How do the past experiences of school leaders contribute to their beliefs on grading? Respondents shared how their grading beliefs were shaped by their experiences as teachers. Some of the participants shared no recollection of mentor influences on grading practices, while others recalled them vividly. To a lesser extent, participants shared the influences of their school leaders on their grading beliefs. Overall, their experiences as school leaders have caused them to think differently about grading practices. Megan said that becoming a principal has allowed her to “see the bigger picture” which is an accurate representation of how grading beliefs were shaped by leadership roles as described by others. Respondents shared knowledge of non-traditional grading practices, such as minimal grading and SBG that they gained during their school leadership tenure, such as Jim, who developed an understanding of non-traditional practices while working as part of a school leadership team to help a school make AYP.

Sub-Question Two

What challenges do school leaders face when overseeing grading procedures within their respective districts/buildings? Respondents shared that there are inherent problems that exist within school-wide grading practices; namely inaccuracy, inconsistency, and unfairness. Respondents described the challenges of dealing with these problems while trying to remain supportive of teachers. Jim’s statement, “How do you be pro-kid without being anti-teacher?” captures the overall sentiments of the school leaders participating in this study. Finally,

respondents explained that there is a need for changes in school-wide grading practices but that there are other more important priorities. Anne said, “It’s in my top five but probably lands at the fifth spot,” when describing where school-wide grade changes fall on her priority list but shared that the process would be a “grave undertaking.” Anne’s comments were consistent with those of several participants regarding where grading reform falls as a priority and the challenges that would ensue if a grading reform initiative were pursued.

Summary

Several themes emerged from the data collection process, all of which provide insight to the research questions raised in this study. Meaningfulness of grades emerged as a major theme throughout the study as participants described their beliefs about school-wide grading practices (the central research question). Three subthemes provided further insight into school leader grading beliefs; aversion to punitive grading, the value of work ethic, and knowledge of best practice. In response to how grading beliefs were shaped by participants’ past experiences (sub-question one), the emerging themes pertain to beliefs developed while ‘on the job,’ which include the following subthemes; beliefs influenced by mentor and school leadership, beliefs shaped by participants’ roles as school leaders, and knowledge of non-traditional practices. In response to sub-question two pertaining to challenges school leaders face when overseeing school-wide grading practices, the emerging theme was the acknowledgement of problems with grading practices, with inconsistency and the need to support teachers as subthemes. Despite acknowledging that grading problems exist, grading reform is not believed to be a top priority according to participants, but most of the participants shared common anticipated challenges if they were to pursue grading reform initiative. Finally, there were some outlying data, or data provided by one or two participants that contradicted the data provided by the larger group; the

belief that grading inconsistency is beneficial, and the expectation for homework, classwork, and participation to be included as part of a final grade.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the beliefs about school-wide grading practices held by school leaders in public schools located within the Central Pennsylvania region. In this chapter, researcher interpretations and ideas are included to refine the findings of this study and interpret them for the reader. This chapter consists of five discussion subsections: interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

In this study, the school leaders shared their beliefs regarding school-wide grading practices. School leaders also provided insight into how their grading beliefs were shaped through experiences as well as the challenges they face when overseeing school-wide grading practices. An interpretation of findings inclusive of empirical and theoretical support is necessary to illuminate the current reality pertaining to the current practices of school-wide grading and how they are maintained, supported, or challenged by school leaders.

Interpretation of Findings

Some interpretations are shared as a result of identifying the salient themes of this study. First, it is clear that school leaders possess grading beliefs that align to best practices. Also, to a large degree, grading practices during participants' teacher years were developed more by default through experiences and interactions but have been challenged and reshaped as a result of their school leadership experiences. There is reluctance on the part of principals to push for school-wide changes because a) they do not see the need for change as a top priority and b) there

is reluctance due to the existing and anticipated challenges. Lastly, the creation of a school-wide grading policy may be beneficial in promoting fairness and accuracy to school-wide grading and reduce and in reducing the number of problems school leaders face while overseeing school-wide grading practices.

Summary of Thematic Findings

In this study, interpretations of the findings can be made surrounding the themes that emerged through the data collection process. Since the interpretations are made in relation to the findings, it is critical that the themes remain clearly articulated. Three themes emerged pertaining to the grading beliefs; meaningfulness, aversion to punitive grading, and valuing work ethic. In addressing how school leader grading beliefs have been shaped, it is evident that on-the-job experiences are the most recognized contributor, hence is another theme that is supported by three subthemes; mentor/supervisor influences, beliefs shaped by participants' roles as school leaders, and knowledge of best practices. Relating to challenges school leaders face when overseeing school-wide grading practices, the emerging theme was the acknowledgement of problems with existing grading practices, with inconsistency and the need to support teachers as subthemes.

Beliefs Align with Best Practice. It is evident that the school leaders participating in this study had beliefs about grading that align to what is considered best practice. Overwhelmingly, participants shared that grades should be meaningful, or an accurate representation of student understanding, and that non-academic factors such as class participation and homework completion detract from meaningfulness. These beliefs align to research findings that show the inclusion of nonacademic factors such as homework and class participation, make grades a misrepresentation of a student's achievement level (Guskey & Link, 2017; Townsley, et. al,

2018; Guskey, 2018). However, it is clear that the school leaders in this study are at odds with how to represent work ethic in the grading process without impacting meaningfulness. None of the participants shared a method for reporting work ethic separately from academic performance. Reporting non-academic factors separately from summative assessment performance, grading becomes a more accurate snapshot of student performance on key standards without becoming skewed by non-academic factors (Guskey, 2018). Townsley et. al. (2018) provides practical steps on how to achieve this separation.

The school leaders in this study also shared the beliefs that grades should not be used as a punitive measure. Though not clearly articulated, participants indicated how “sticking it to a student” can negatively impact teacher-student relationships (Keller, 2016; Klapp, 2017) and the overall school climate (Williams et al., 2019). Despite these beliefs, it is evident that grading remains up to teacher discretion, which may be perpetuating problems associated with grading accuracy, fairness, consistency, which in turn could undermine teacher-student relations and school climate.

Beliefs Developed by Default. It is evident that grading beliefs have developed by default for the school leaders in this study early in their career while they were teachers. None of the participants recall receiving pre-service training on grading practices, recollections of in-service training or administrative direction was minimal resulting in the school leaders in this study to determine on their own or to rely on peer/mentor influence on how to grade students. This phenomenon aligns to research findings that show how a lack of preservice training has made grading a largely concealed, personal experience for many teachers (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). However, two participants in this study (John and Harold) vividly recall ongoing in-service training on grading practices paired with administrative support which resulted in a

significant change in thinking for these individuals that stayed with them as they transitioned into school leader roles. It is evident that the grading beliefs of the school leaders in this study have been shaped by their own professional experiences (Carraway & Young, 2015), professional networks (Jennings, 2010), existing organizational culture (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017), and professional identities (Mizrahi-Shtelman, 2019).

The Impact of Self-Efficacy. With the exception of those who received in-depth training on grading practices, most of the participant's knowledge of effective grading practices is incomplete and disjointed; a situation that may result in uncertainty and lack of confidence when dealing with issues relating to grading and when contemplating grading reform. School leader self-efficacy represents a set of beliefs that allow one to execute policies and procedures that advance school effectiveness and guide the leader's actions and behaviors that impact expectations for students and teachers (Versland & Erickson, 2017). However, it is evident that school-leader efficacy is lacking pertaining to school-wide grading practices. Self-efficacy is paramount as it governs school leaders' beliefs in their ability to positively influence learning outcomes within their schools (Lyons & Murphy, 1994) and impacts the extent to which school leaders can address complex organizational problems and persevere in leading in complex, emotionally charged situations (Swain, 2016). In the current context, a lack of self-efficacy may be dictating passivity on the part of school leaders in their handling of issues related to school-wide grading practices.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The interpretations of the data collected in this study provide some clarity on implications for both policy and practice. From a policy standpoint, it is evident that schools can benefit from the development of a school-wide grading policy but may need support in the process. From a

practice standpoint, school leader preparations programs should place some emphasis on grading practices that promote accuracy, fairness, student learning. The sections below provide further explanations for these implications.

Implications for Policy

The development or revision of a school-wide grading policy that promotes accuracy, fairness, and consistency may limit the challenges the school leaders face in overseeing grading in their respective schools. Doing so may eliminate inconsistencies within the same building when there is not a grading policy in place (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). School policy development that provides clear directions on accepting late assignments for full credit, applying minimal grading, excluding zeros from the gradebook, and removing non-academic factors from grading criteria may help promote a more equitable school environment (Feldman, 2018).

Research shows the numerous benefits of SBG experienced by students (Schimmer, 2016; Vatterott, 2015) and teachers (Kelly, 2020; Linhart, 2019). There is also growing evidence of SBG's effectiveness at the secondary level ((Sanchez et al., 2017). In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has shed light on the harmfulness associated with traditional grading practices (Zalaznick, 2022). The adoption of SBG throughout the entire k-12 educational continuum could help school overcome challenges with grading exacerbated by the pandemic and have a transformational impact on student learning, teacher morale, and school culture.

However, it is important to consider the fact that traditional grading practices have been entrenched in the educational systems for over a century (Feldman, 2018). Transitioning from what is known to what is unknown, leads to uncertainty and discomfort, which often serves as a catalyst for resistance from various stakeholder groups (Guskey, 2021). Therefore, it would be critical for school leaders take strategic steps to communicate the need for change prior to the

implementation of a grading policy in achieve the highest level of stakeholder buy-in possible (Guskey, 2021). One suggestion is for local intermediate units to offer professional development and consultation to school leadership specifically tailored to the grading reform change process.

Implications for Practice

Pre-service teacher programs devote minimal time to grading practices leaving preservice teachers to rely on their own perceptions (Battistone, 2019; Bergman, 2018; Bonner & Chen, 2021). This lack of training has left grading to be a mainly hidden, personal experience for many teachers (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). It is for these reasons that a call for teacher-training programs is being made to equip future teachers with the knowledge of accurate and equitable grading practices that in turn, could help in creating a positive learning environment in their classrooms. The same can be said for school leadership preparation programs. Principal certification programs, for example, should include direction on effective grading practices that promote a positive school culture.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

The results of this study corroborate previous research conducted on school leader grading beliefs. The results also align to the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two. The following sections provide an explanation of this alignment.

Empirical Implications

In a study conducted by Carraway and Young (2015) the way school leaders oversaw policies was shaped by their own professional experiences. The current study supports this finding, as participants shared how their beliefs and the subsequent oversight of school-wide grading practices were largely the result of their experiences with grading while still teachers. In the current study, several school leaders shared the need to support teachers when handing

grading disputes which could be a product of a school's culture pertaining to teacher growth and development. From this standpoint, the findings of this study align to those of Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2017) that the handling of policies by school leaders can be attributed to existing school culture. Atkins (2016) conducted a study that investigated the perceptions of high school principals regarding traditional grading, effective grading, and leadership behaviors promoting grading reform. The results of survey data from this study show that 95% of participants responded in favor of research-based practices over traditional ones. Comparable results were obtained in the current study, as almost all of participants shared some understanding of research-based grading practices as well as a preference of such practices over traditional ones. Furthermore, the author found that more experienced principals were more in favor of research-based practices than were less experienced principals. This finding mirrors that of the current study; the two outlier participants who advocated the use of traditional grading methods were first-year principals compared to the other eight who had, on average, more than ten years of administrative experience.

Theoretical Implications

Social cognitive theory considers how individuals develop and maintain behaviors as well as the impact of social environment and previous experience on behaviors (Behavioral Change Models, 2018). Self-efficacy is a critical construct of SCT, which is defined as one's confidence in his or her ability to perform a behavior and can be influenced by both personal and environmental characteristics (Behavioral Change Models, 2018). From a school leadership lens, self-efficacy represents a set of practice and beliefs that allow one to execute policies and procedures that advance school effectiveness and guide the leader's actions and behaviors that impact expectations for students and teachers (Versland & Erickson, 2017). In the current study,

school leader self-efficacy as it pertains to the school-wide grading practices, was explored. It is clear that despite some knowledge of best practice, there is hesitancy and, in some cases, an unwillingness to pursue grading reform even on a small scale. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that there is a lack the self-efficacy on the part of school leaders, especially with threat of school community backlash looming, to develop and execute a school-wide grading policy.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses of the study that cannot be controlled. Most of the interviews in this study were conducted remotely. As a result, non-verbal and paraverbal responses from the participants may have gone undetected by the researcher. In addition, the researcher in this study is a school leader who is overseeing a building-wide grading reform initiative. With the participants being employed by schools with the region, it is possible that they may have some knowledge of this initiative despite none of them expressly sharing such knowledge to the researcher. Finally, snowball sampling was used as a recruitment method, which involves generating a pool of participants through recommendations made by individuals who possess the same qualities of research interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recommendations from participants in this study yielded the successful recruitment of four additional qualified candidates. It is therefore possible that relationships exist among participants that could have resulted in shared interview information.

Delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher makes to limit or define the boundaries of the study. As an exploratory study that could influence future research directionality, participants were not limited to a particular level of leadership. Instead, the study was opened to all levels of school leadership from assistant principal to superintendent. This decision was made to allow the researcher to evaluate whether grading beliefs could be attributed

to administrative role. Similarly, the school leaders in this study were not confined to certain grade levels but was opened to any school leaders who oversee schools anywhere on the k-12 continuum with the purpose of determining whether differences in grading beliefs existed due to grade levels. Lastly, participants were included regardless of years of experience. This approach created an opportunity for the researcher to interpret the extent to which grading beliefs may be influenced by years of school leadership experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations for future research based on the limitations, delimitations, and findings of this study. There were ten participants in this study, all of whom oversee schools/districts in the Central Pennsylvania region. This study could be broadened to a larger population of school leaders in other areas of the state or even beyond state borders. Recruiting participants in this way may provide insight into how school leader grading beliefs may differ based on various geographic locations. Since SBG has become more commonplace at the elementary level and is slowly gaining traction at the secondary level, relegating participation to secondary principals may be a worthy pursuit. Exclusively studying the beliefs of this population may provide deeper insights pertaining to school leader self-efficacy in terms of how school-wide grading policies are developed and executed at the secondary level. As more school leaders choose to pursue grading reform initiatives, studies on their experiences with the change process could provide further clarity on how to approach grading reform most effectively. Finally, as more schools are moving to SBG, it may be an opportune time to conduct quantitative studies to compare the effects of traditional grading and SBG on areas such as student achievement, student behavior, teacher morale, and drop-out rates.

Conclusion

Grading practices in the k-12 educational system have stood the test of time. Despite prevalent knowledge that many of these practices are indeed flawed, they continue to be utilized across the United States. It has become abundantly clear that traditional grading practices lack clarity, accuracy, and fairness; a reality that has become all the more apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of these practices are both negative and far-reaching for students, and unbeknownst to many, these practices are making the work of teachers and administrators more challenging. It is time for schools to embrace grading reform at all levels. More and more elementary schools are adopting SBG. Some secondary schools are making the SBG transition as well, albeit to a much smaller scale. Other schools have adopted more progressive grading practices that promote accuracy and fairness without the commitment of SBG. However, the progress has been slow in coming, as many schools remain entrenched in traditional grading to the detriment of the students they serve.

The decision to pursue grading reform rests in the hands of school leadership; a decision that is hinged on their grading beliefs. The purpose of this study was to understand the commonly held beliefs of school leaders in the Central Pennsylvania region, the results of which show that school leaders do have some knowledge of grading best practices as well as a recognition that several problems exist with traditional grading. Despite these beliefs, grading reform is not believed to be a top priority, which may be due to a lack of understanding of the full spectrum of implications relating to traditional grading or of best practices. There is also an unwillingness to take on such an initiative even if it were to become a priority, as school leaders see the daunting task of uprooting the entrenched grading belief of teachers and parents. The hope is that this study can help advance the cause for grading reform by recognizing where

school leaders currently stand in terms of their grading beliefs with the purpose of creating a pathway forward for change.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

Date: 1-21-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY22-23-345

Title: School Leader Beliefs Regarding School-Wide Grading Practices: A Phenomonological Study

Creation Date: 9-26-2022

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Matt Czaplicki

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	Exempt

Key Study Contacts

Member	Matt Czaplicki	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	
Member	Matt Czaplicki	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	
Member	Katelynn Wheeler	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	

Appendix B

Recruitment Email

Dear _____:

As a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a degree in educational leadership. The purpose of my research is to gain an understanding of school leader beliefs regarding school-wide grading practices, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must currently be employed in a role as a school leader in the Central Pennsylvania region as either an assistant principal, principal, curriculum director, assistant superintendent, or superintendent. Participants must also hold a valid principal certification in the state of Pennsylvania. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an individual interview (45 minutes), a focus group interview (45 minutes), and respond to vignettes (30 minutes). Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me for more information and to schedule the individual interview.

A consent document will be sent to you. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document, scan, and email it to me prior to the individual interview.

Participants will receive a \$20 Visa gift card.

Sincerely,

Matt Czaplicki
Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Appendix B1

Phone Recruitment Script

Hello _____,

As a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a degree in educational leadership. The purpose of my research is to gain an understanding of school leader beliefs regarding school-wide grading practices, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must currently be employed in a role as a school leader in the Central Pennsylvania region as either an assistant principal, principal, curriculum director, assistant superintendent, or superintendent. Participants must also hold a valid principal certification in the state of Pennsylvania. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an individual interview which will take about 45 minutes, a focus group interview which will take about 45 minutes, and respond to vignettes which will take about 30 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate? (Yes) Great, can we set up a time for an interview? (No) I understand. Thank you for your time. [Conclude the conversation.]

A consent document will be sent to you. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document, scan, and email it to me prior to the individual interview. Participants will receive a \$20 gift Visa gift card.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

Appendix C

Consent

Title of Project: School Leader Beliefs Regarding School-Wide Grading Practices: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Matt Czaplicki, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be currently be employed in a role as a school leader in the Central Pennsylvania region as either an assistant principal, principal, curriculum director, assistant superintendent, or superintendent, and you must also hold a valid principal certification in the state of Pennsylvania. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study will be to understand the beliefs regarding school-wide grading practices held by school leaders employed by Central Pennsylvania schools.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an individual interview that will take no more than 45 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded. A transcription application will be used to transcribe the interview into written text.
2. Participate in a focus group interview that will take no more than 45 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded. A transcription application will be used to transcribe the interview into written text.
3. Respond to four vignettes that will be sent to you via email. Responses to the four vignettes will be emailed to the researcher. Responding to vignettes will not take longer than 30 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include an understanding on how school leader beliefs regarding grading are influenced by the beliefs of teachers and fellow administrators, current school culture, and personal and professional experiences with grading, which could aid in the successful implementation of grading reform initiatives.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Participant responses to vignettes will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Vignette responses will be stored on a password-locked computer.
- Interview transcripts will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years after participants reviewed them and confirmed their accuracy. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to the transcripts.

How will you be compensated for being a part of this study?

After vignette responses have been received by the researcher via email, participants will receive a \$20 Visa gift card. Any participant who chooses to withdraw from the study after beginning but before completing all study procedures will receive a \$10 Visa gift card.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Matt Czaplicki. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have any questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record the person named below as part of their participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix D

Individual Interview Protocol

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position.
2. Describe your process for grading in your classes when you were still in the classroom.
3. Describe the extent to which the grading practice you used as a teacher were the result of peer or mentor influences.
4. What are your thoughts on considering effort when determining an end-of-quarter grade?

5. Describe how your beliefs about grading have changed since becoming a school leader.

6. What expectations do you have for teachers when it comes to grading?

7. Describe any pre-service or in-service training you received on grading procedures.

8. What challenges have you had to deal with as an administrator that pertain to grading?

9. What changes, if any, would you like to see in grading procedures used in your school?

10. Explain where grading reform falls on a list of priorities for your school.

11. What challenges do you foresee if you were to pursue grade reform?

Additional Notes:

