

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE:
MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONAL AND
STANDARDS-BASED GRADING PRACTICES

by

Susann Nash

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Approved by:

Dr. Rebecca Shore

Dr. Walter Hart

Dr. Jamie Kudlats

Dr. Jeanneine Jones

ABSTRACT

SUSANN NASH.

Caught in the Middle:

Middle School Principals' Perceptions of Traditional And
Standards-based Grading Practices

(Under the direction of DR. REBECCA SHORE)

The goal of this qualitative study was to understand middle school principals' perceptions of leading a transition from traditional grading to standards-based grading (SBG). Using a multiple case study approach six middle school principals who work in a school district that had successfully implemented SBG in elementary school, but not in middle schools, participated in the study. This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus the study also sought to understand how principals perceived the impacts from COVID-19 on their leadership of SBG. A demographic survey was sent to each participant and semi-structured interviews were conducted with each principal. Using the constant comparison method, four themes emerge: (a) misalignment between PLC practices and individual teachers' grading practices exists, (b) a lack of district level SBG report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration, (c) parents and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescents for high school, and (d) leading SBG was not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also used Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as a framework to understand how principals' self-efficacy impacts that of their teachers and how collective efficacy can be improved by increasing the principals' self-efficacy as an instructional leader. Implications of this study include suggestions for principals to increase their knowledge and self-efficacy through professional development, collaboration, and district level supports. The unique role of middle school culture, including grading practices is discussed.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and principals everywhere.

Mom and Geez- You have always supported and encouraged me in my lifelong journey as a learner and educator. Thank you for teaching me to care about others, have a good work ethic and always have a sense of humor in life.

Oscar- You are my loyal companion, faithfully laying at my feet as I wrote this entire dissertation. Thank you for taking me on all those walks to get fresh air and exercise. You're the best boy!

Principals- To all of you fearless leaders out there, remember your love for learning and take care of yourselves. "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other" -John Kennedy

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BOE	board of education
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
PLC	professional learning community
CFA	common formative assessment
SBG	standards-based grading
SCT	social cognitive theory

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

All who have attended any public or private K-12 school have likely experienced an emotional reaction to getting a grade of “A” or a grade of “F” on an assignment, whether or not they were a successful student. The impact and influence that grades hold have been debated since their origin at the turn of the 20th century (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). According to Guskey (2009), a leading researcher in the standards-based grading (SBG) movement, the challenge for educators to provide meaningful, correct, and equitable grades is paramount. Despite the constant use of grades in all our lives and the power and impact grades have on students’ educational experiences, there is little consistency behind the purpose of grades and how they are created across schools in America (Brookhart, 2011a).

School systems across the United States have reconsidered their assessment and grading systems in response to the creation of the Common Core State Standards (Buckmiller & Peters, 2018). According to Marzano (2000), a standards-based grading (SBG) system focuses on students’ progress and mastery toward specific academic standards taught. Students may be given multiple opportunities to show mastery of a skill or standard over time. In a SBG system, non-academic behaviors such as participation, attendance, effort and practice are not part of a student’s grade. (Marzano, 2000). Increased research around the importance of SBG highlights the need for school leaders to focus on this systemic change to improve both pedagogy and assessment as well as to ensure that grades are meaningful and accurate. Unfortunately, traditional grading practices are not aligned well to current standards and are outdated and arbitrary in relation to the Common Core State Standards (Guskey & Link, 2019).

In the early 2000s Rick DuFour (2011) introduced the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), a practice that focuses on having teachers work in communities of practitioners to know and learn their content standards and provide students with a guaranteed curriculum. This means that meaning all teachers teach students the same and use common formative assessments to evaluate teaching and learning. PLCs are usually organized by grade level and subject of teachers, with specific grade levels and corresponding subject areas meeting weekly under the supervision of a teacher or administrator who serves as facilitator. PLCs have been effective in ensuring all teachers understand content standards and work collaboratively on creating instruction and assessments that measure students' progress on those standards. Additionally, teachers collaboratively reflect on results from student assessments during PLC meetings to make needed instructional changes including reteaching, remediation, and enrichment (Du Four et al., 2010; DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Even though most school systems utilize this PLC model, and even though No Child Left Behind legislation required teaching and assessments to be more standards-based, grading and reporting are still left up to individual teacher judgements (Du Four et al., 2010; Frazier, 2021; Schneider & Hutt, 2014, Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020).

As grading has largely been left to individual teacher judgements, assigning grades to student work has a history of inconsistency. Teacher judgements about grades are problematic because they often include nonacademic factors, such as participation, behavior, grading of homework and grading of extra credit work. Rarely do these judgements include feedback or opportunities for student improvement (Veenstra, 2021). In addition, the ways in which teachers calculate grades, often using percentages and the assignment of zeros, can work against student success and motivation (Guskey, 2013). While elementary teachers have been able to change the

traditional assignment of letter grades to a report card that uses student rubrics, standards-based assessments, and reporting levels of 1-4, secondary schools have proved less willing to adopt this component of standards-based grading (Urich, 2012). Understanding the resistance to using standards-based grading in secondary schools is an important aspect for educational leaders.

In March of 2020, the schools in the United States experienced closures and partial openings and were forced into new digital learning formats due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Santos, 2020). Schools all over the country struggled to maintain a consistent level of instruction and learning due to a sudden shift to an unplanned mix of face-to-face and remote learning. In 2021, schools began to reopen on a more consistent basis after the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine. School closures caused many students to be socially isolated, which has caused an increase in concern over students' social and emotional well-being. In response, many states have been requiring schools to implement social-emotional learning programs as schools reopen. America's school leaders are now faced with reevaluating which standards are most important, incorporating new social-emotional instruction, and reconsidering many of their previous systems as they scramble to address at least a year of student learning loss. Students in poverty and students with disabilities experienced even greater challenges during the pandemic due to factors out of their control, bringing the need to reconsider how educators motivate, evaluate, and instruct all students to a critical point (Feldman & Reeves, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Several legislative reforms such as No Child Left Behind (2000) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) have sought to improve America's education system over the last century (Townsend & Buckmiller, 2020). In the last 20 years, and concurrent to the move to national curricular standards, SBG has been gaining more consideration in today's schools. This

consideration has been largely in response to the high stakes testing and accountability legislation which require schools to set high standards with measurable goals to improve student learning and encourages the use of standards-based assessments (Guskey, 2000).

These legislative actions have resulted in most school systems in the United States starting some level of curriculum reform focusing on the Common Core State Standards along with some consideration of standards-based practices, including assessments, student engagement and grading practices. Current research around SBG indicates that elementary schools have had an easier time integrating a full implementation of SBG and using a four-point grading scale than secondary schools (Townesley & Buckmiller, 2020; Urich, 2012). Secondary schools may have come a long way in improving teachers' understanding and implementation of Common Core State Standards, but the transition from traditional grading practices and reporting a student's progress towards meeting the new standards remains a complex and critical issue (Feldman, 2019b).

As part of the standards-based reform, principals are expected to be instructional leaders. Principals who are instructionally focused share the vision of continuous instructional improvement for teachers and students (Townesley, et al., 2020). Furthermore, school leaders must understand the current research about best practices for grading and grade reporting to lead their teachers in these important standards-based reform efforts. Despite most school systems providing some professional development toward a standards-based approach, there continues to be a disconnect between assessment and grading practices in secondary schools (Veenstra, 2021). Research shows that some barriers to moving to SBG include teacher perceptions of increased workload, loss of autonomy, lack of student accountability and motivation, and parental unknowns and distrust of SBG (Guskey & Link, 2018). With these barriers in mind,

principals can use what is known in the literature about best practices for change and implementation (Feldman, 2019a).

This study aimed to contribute to the current research and literature by understanding middle school principals' perceptions and knowledge of traditional and standards-based grading and grading practices. Utilizing a multiple case study approach allowed for a deep understanding of the middle school principal's perceived role in this grading transition. Additionally, because this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, all school leaders were reevaluating current systems in response to the ever-changing needs of students. This task was especially important given the negative impact of the pandemic. Therefore, this study also considered the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on principals' perceptions of implementing standards-based grading.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of middle school principals in a school district that has partially implemented SBG at the middle school level. Few studies over the last decade have focused on the principal's understanding of SBG reform and how that knowledge impacts their leadership of SBG. Townsley, Buckmiller, and Cooper (2019), predicted a second wave of SBG reform in the school improvement process that school leaders should prepare for. Understanding instructional change, procedural knowledge, and pragmatic or contextual knowledge are leadership skills principals must demonstrate to effectively lead change (Bredeson, 2013). Additionally, research shows that the implementation of SBG is more common and accepted in elementary schools, while secondary schools have experienced more resistance from teachers and parents (Veenstra, 2021). Thus, middle school principals' leadership

skills and understanding of traditional and SBG practices will be paramount in leading grading reform.

Therefore, this study explored the middle school principals' perceptions and understandings of their schools' current grading practices through a multiple case study approach. In addition to describing their understanding of SBG, middle school principals appraised the perceptions of their own leadership in this study. Using this information, the researcher proposed that principals' perceptions could be used in future SBG implementation planning for the district's middle schools.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in the United States in March of 2020 (Santos, 2020), caused major disruptions to student learning and teacher abilities to teach. The pandemic has amplified inequalities many students face from various environmental and life factors. Consequently, school leaders are now faced with revising current student support structures and systems to address these imbalances. The inconsistencies of traditional grading have been studied since their inception at the turn of the 20th century. Now in the 21st century, the world is once again faced with a great challenge put forth by a global pandemic. Thus, an additional area of focus for this study was to understand if principals in a district that promotes standards-based grading perceived the COVID-19 pandemic and its extreme impact on learning as an opportunity to challenge the problems with traditional grading and more effectively implement SBG.

Research Questions

To understand the perceptions of middle school principals surrounding the transition to standards-based grading, and to understand the actions that will be needed to further reform grading practices in the district, the following questions were used.

1. What are middle school principals' perceptions and understandings of current grading practices at their schools?
2. What are middle school principals' perceptions of leading transitions in current grading and reporting practices?
3. What are middle school principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the transition to standards-based grading?

Definition of Terms

- *Grades/Grading* – use of numbers or letters to symbolize, summarize, and communicate the average of scores earned over a course class (Frazier, 2021; Marzano, 2020)
- *Common Core State Standards*- “a clear set of shared goals and expectations for the knowledge and skills students need in English language arts and mathematics at each grade level so they can be prepared to succeed in college, career, and life.”
(<http://www.corestandards.org>)
- *Standards-based grading*: a grade reporting system that reflects students' progress and mastery toward specific academic standards taught; students may be given multiple opportunities to show mastery of a skill or standard; nonacademic behaviors such as participation, attendance, homework, and extra credit are not included in a standards-based grade (Brookhart 2011b; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020)
- *Traditional grading scale*: a grading reporting system that uses averages or points that reflect the amount of work a student completed. These grades are not necessarily tied to mastery of a standard, rather work completion. Nonacademic behaviors such as participation, effort, attendance, homework, and extra credit can be included in traditional grades (Guskey, 2013)

- *Hodgepodge grading*: the use of multiple types of academic and non-academic factors in calculating a grade (Cross & Fray, 1999)
- *Non-academic Factors*: participation, effort, attendance, homework, and extra credit that are sometimes included in traditional grades (Guskey, 2011)
- *Self- efficacy*: an individual's belief and confidence in their abilities, based on experiences, cognitive skills, and attitudes (Bandura, 1997)
- *Covid-19 pandemic*- Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was declared as pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 mainly due to the speed and scale of the transmission of the disease (Santos, 2020)

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework that undergirds this research is the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura 1999). SCT has three forms of agency: personal, proxy, and collective. Essentially Bandura posits that people make decisions about their lives based on experiences and reflections over time rather than having automated responses (Bandura 1999). Specifically, Bandura's model of SCT focuses on one's understanding of their self-efficacy. Thus, self-efficacy can be enhanced and built upon individual social experiences (Bandura, 2000).

By applying the Social Cognitive Theory to school improvement outcomes, school principals may need to consider their own self-efficacy as a leader of implementation efforts as well as that of teachers. Special focus is on the concept of collective efficacy. This is highlighted in successful professional development experiences for teachers, where shared training experiences build the confidence and knowledge of a group of educators. Bandura (1999) described the impact of group efficacy as, "collective agency operating through shared beliefs of

efficacy, pooled understandings, groups aspirations and incentive systems and collective action” (p.22).

Furthermore, the model of self-efficacy and the impact grading has on students as learners should also be considered. Principals consider using their own proxy as they move their teachers through standards-based grading improvements, focusing on the importance of using grades as a student motivator and as a tool to build students’ own self-efficacy as learners. (Vadhai & Lesha, 2015). Perceptibly, the principal’s individual self-efficacy as leader and subsequently that of their teaching staff’s collective efficacy to effectively implement SBg practices are deeply coupled as described by Bandura (2000),

Peoples shared beliefs in their collective efficacy influence the types of futures they seek to achieve through collective action, how well they use their resources, how much effort they put into their group endeavor, their staying power when collective efforts fail to produce quick results or meet forcible opposition, and their vulnerability to the discouragement that can beset people tackling tough social problems (p.76).

Applying Bandura’s SCT of self-efficacy, the researcher aimed to understand how the principals’ perceptions and understandings of SBG can impact their leadership and collective efficacy of their staff.

Subjectivity Statement

As a current middle school administrator, the topic of using meaningful grading practices by middle school teachers is of great personal concern and interest to the researcher. Twenty-two years ago, she began her career as a special education teacher. Once in the classroom, the researcher was shocked by the disproportion of many factors in traditional grading practices,

such as averaging formative student progress, time constraints, graded homework and assigning zeros to young students. Grading seemed to reinforce the negative experiences of many students she served in the special education program. Years later, when the researcher was an assistant principal in a Title I elementary school, she began the steps of implementing standards-based grading. As an assistant principal she was a leader and district trainer in this initiative in elementary schools, working alongside elementary teachers as they began the work of understanding the standards. While this was a “heavy lift” for teachers and was met with challenges and resistance, the journey to standards-based grading was one that elementary teachers embraced fully.

After serving as principal in an elementary school that successfully implemented SBG, the researcher became a middle school principal. The researcher noticed a significant difference in the grading practices and philosophies from elementary to middle school. Traditional grading continued in middle schools, despite the district’s successful elementary SBG implementation. These experiences motivated the researcher to want to further examine middle school principals’ perceptions and experiences surrounding grading improvements in the district she serves.

Delimitations, Assumptions, Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it is specific to one mid-sized school district in the southeast where standards-based grading has been successfully implemented in elementary school. SBG has only been partially implemented in the middle schools, meaning that professional development and professional learning community practices focus on standards-based teaching and assessments, however mathematical averages continue to be utilized on a traditional report card. The information gleaned from this study may not generalize to other school systems that have not yet begun standards reform. Nor will this research focus on

elementary or high schools. However, the data could still provide insight and add to current research for future school districts with middle school implementation.

In this research the assumption is made that all principals are instructional leaders and involved in SBG improvement efforts. The participants were chosen through a sample of convenience based on the district they worked in and researcher's knowledge of the district's history with standards-based implementation. The researcher is a peer of the principals who participated in this qualitative research. Professional relationships with participants helped the researcher to create an open and safe environment for principals to share their experiences and opinions.

Only current middle school principals who worked in this district were considered. These principals have a mix of educational backgrounds and lead a variety of middle schools in the district. Additional descriptions will be provided in Chapter 3.

Summary

This chapter has included relevant information about standards-based grading through the problem statement, purpose of this study, research questions, subjectivity and a definition of terms. Specifically, the historical use of traditional grading and implementation barriers are shared. Furthermore, the researcher discusses the urgent situations school leaders are facing due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need re-evaluate current grading systems to ensure equitable grading practices are described.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the perceptions and experiences of middle school principals who lead middle schools that have partially implemented standards-based improvements but still use traditional grading. The research will highlight the principals' perceptions and understanding of grading practices and any impact due to the COVID-19

pandemic. A list of terms is included for the reader's ease. A subjectivity statement also spells out the researcher's position within the body of work.

A review of the scholarly literature regarding standards-based grading is included in Chapter 2. Additionally, research around principal leadership including known barriers will be included.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The continuous cycle of school improvement and reform to increase student learning has been ongoing in America's public schools since their establishment. With the beginning of American schools in the 1800s, teachers served students of all ages in a one-room schoolhouse. The industrial revolution, coupled with child labor laws, increased the number of students who enrolled in schools and brought about a change in how schools were organized as well as the methods employed to measure and track student growth and progress. Teachers were no longer able to manage individual anecdotal notes and written reports for the growing number of students they were teaching (Schneider & Hutt, 2014), so grading students became a necessary and efficient way for teachers to track students.

Grading is powerful in the educational process, as the implications of grades on individuals affect them beyond the K-12 years of schooling. Students can be motivated and discouraged by grades, as they influence the future of all citizens, impacting high school graduation, college, and career choices. With the immense power grades have on individuals it is almost unfathomable that there are no set criteria for how grading should be done. In fact, in most schools, grades and how they are constructed are decided upon by individual teachers (Guskey, 2000; Kunnath, 2017). With good reason, this has brought grading practices and reporting under scrutiny and critique. While many elementary schools have made some level of transition to a standards-based marking system, most secondary schools remain traditional in grading practices (Veenstra, 2021). These differences further contribute to the confusion of not only how grades are constructed, but of the true meaning of grades (Brookhart et al., 2016;

Marzano & Heflebower; 2011; O'Connor, 2017; Vatterott, 2015;). Accordingly, one researcher termed grading the “wild west of school improvement” (Reeves et al., 2017, p.42).

Despite legislative demands for standards focused instruction and assessment, and despite decades of research that supports the positive effects of shifting from traditional to standards-based grading (SBG) practices, grading remains traditional in most secondary schools today (Buckmiller & Peters, 2018; Townsley, 2018). The improvement of grading systems requires a transformation at many levels. Individual teacher beliefs and autonomy are certainly components to be affected in this change; however systemic change around something as fundamental as grading requires a cultural and collective effort (Link, 2019). True grading reform cannot happen without an organizational change spearheaded by school leaders (Reeves, 2008; Welsh, 2019; Zimmerman, 2006). Just as teachers have strong beliefs and opinions about what should constitute a student's grade, principals also hold their own beliefs about grading and about their ability to reform traditional grading practices. While grading reform has been pushed forth by current standards-based legislations, actual reform for something as individualized as grading falls to the district and school level.

This chapter will review the current educational literature on grading practices, which will include the history and laws surrounding grading practices, the inconsistency of traditional grading, and the benefits and challenges of implementing standards-based grading. Additionally, the researcher will examine the literature pertaining to the role of principal leadership during a reform effort. Finally, a glance into how the current COVID-19 pandemic has affected principals' self-efficacy will also be considered. Table 1 provides a comprehensive list of the literature included in this chapter.

Table 1*Literature Table*

Theme	Source
History & Legal Aspects of Grading	
History & Law	Alexander & Alexander, 2012; Bartlett, 1987, Brookhart, 1994; Chansky, 1974; Chartier, 2003; Drum, 1993, Guskey, 1994; Krischenmaum, 1971; Link, 2019; Schneider & Hutt, 2014
Types of Grading Practices in America's Schools	
Traditional Grading	Bartlett, 1987; Brookhart, 1993; Brookhart, 1994; Chartier, 2003; Cross & Frary, 1999; Guskey, 2000; Guskey, 2004; Guskey, 2009; Guskey & Bailey, 2010; Guskey, 2013; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2001; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2009; Reeves, et al., 2017; Vatterott, 2015
Standards-Based Grading: Benefits & Barriers	Brookhart et. al, 2016; Buckmiller& Peters, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cox, 2011; Colette, et. al, 2020; Fieldman, 2019; Guskey, 2011; Guskey & link, 2019; Haney et. al, 2016; Jung & Guskey, 2007; Knight & cooper, 2019; Kolbe & Jorgenson, 2018; Marzano, 2000; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; Munoz & Guskey, 2015; O'Connor, 2017; O'Connor et. al, 2018; Scriffiny, 2008; Swan et. al, 2014; Townsley, 2018; Townsley, 2020; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020; Ulrich, 2012; Veenstra, 2021
Leading Standards Based Grading	
Principal Leadership- Instructional Leader Change	Atkins, 2016; Barrett & Breyer, 2014; Bredeson, 2013; Brookhart, 2011; Calik, et.al, 2012; Clark & Clark, 2000; Flessa, 2012; Fullan et. al, 2005; Gannon-Shilon & Schechter, 2018; Guskey, 2000; Guskey & Link, 2019; Kohansal, 2015; Lunenburg, 2010; Link, 2019; Pak, et. al, 2019; Reeves, 2008; Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001; Townsley, et al, 2019; Vadahi & Lesha, 2015; Zimmerman 2006, 2011
Collective Efficacy	Bandura, 1997, 1999, 2000; Vadahi & Lesha, 2015
Implications of a Pandemic	
COVID-19: Impact on Schools	Santos, 2020; Townsley et. al, 2019; Townsley 2020; Woodworth, 2020

Historical and Legal Facets of Grading

History of Grading

As a result of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 and compensatory attendance laws, which prohibited children under 16 from working, the number of schools and students increased (Guskey, 1994). High schools in particular grew in numbers and size to accommodate older children who were no longer entering the labor force in their adolescent years. Thus, society's need for a more standardized school system in America emerged (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). An efficient way to track and sort students became a necessity in this fast-growing system that began serving children from all different parts of society.

While the need for an efficient marking system was becoming evident with the influx of schools at the turn of the 19th century, public schools turned to higher education for a model. According to Schneider and Hutt (2014), university grading began as early as the 18th century. Two of the most historic and traditional grading systems, the 100-point grading scale, which originated at Harvard in 1877, and the letter grade system of A, B, C, D, F which started at Mt. Holyoke College at the start of the 19th century (Durm, 1993) are credited with beginning many grading systems. Public schools quickly found the average system, averaging a series of grades, as the most efficient way to measure and sort the large number of students they were now responsible for. This grading and sorting was also a necessary tool to place individuals somewhere when completing school as contributing citizens of America's growing workforce. The way in which students were graded often ranked them and sorted them into what is known as blue- and white-collar workers (Schneider & Hutt, 2014).

Historically and legally, grades are also used to promote or retain students to the next grade level and are considered for varying placements into specialized programs, including special education and advanced classes (Alexander & Alexander, 2012). As America's

workforce and technology continued to evolve, the need for more college educated individuals made the importance of grades even more influential. The power of how a grade could impact an individual's future as an element of acceptance into college or trade programs brought forth legal challenges against schools for grading policies (Chansky, 1974).

Legal Facets

Many states give local boards of education or school principals the authority and responsibility to determine how grading will be conducted (Alexander & Alexander, 2012). Some states have specific laws defining explicit grading powers. For example, the state of Florida requires a uniform method of averaging and a specific letter grade system (Florida Education Statutes, 2016). The state of Tennessee requires a uniform grading policy for high school students (Tennessee Education Statutes, 2018), while the state of North Carolina assigns the exclusive duty of grading and classifying students to the school principal (North Carolina Elementary and Secondary Statutes, 2017). Traditionally the courts have not interfered with how schools grade students, especially when the schools can prove all students are graded using an explicit grading policy (Chansky, 1974; Link, 2019).

However, the courts have held that grades cannot be reduced due to behavior and discipline in most cases. In the case *Haddad v. BOE* (1968) courts ruled that grades should not be used as punishment. The judge sided with the student whose administrator had directed teachers to give the student failing marks because the student refused to comply with the administrator's instructions during a behavioral incident (Chansky, 1974). *Katzman v. Cumberland Valley School* (1984) further enforced the court's ruling that dispensing a 20-point grade reduction in addition to a five-day suspension for a student's violation of drinking wine was unreasonable and not related to the student's academic performance (Bartlett, 1987).

Despite various court rulings that using student behaviors in grades is illegal, repeated studies have shown that teachers continue to combine academics and behaviors in their grading practices (Brookhart et al., 2016). The absence of an explicit academic grading policy opens school leaders up to litigious cases that question fair and meaningful grades as teachers' individual grading decisions can be subjective (Welsh, 2019).

Types of Grading Practices

Traditional Grading in America

The reliability, validity, and purpose of grades have been debated and researched since schools began (Buckmiller & Peters, 2018; Chansky, 1974; Chartier, 2003; Cross & Frary, 1999; Durm, 1993; Rugg, 1918). Understanding the differences in the philosophies behind grading is an important aspect in the discussion around grading practices. Horace Mann is credited with beginning America's public schools by convincing legislators to mandate tax-supported schools. Mann promoted the model of Prussian schools, which used grades to monitor students and allow them to progress along at their own rate while still informing the educational system of needed changes. However, Lancastrian school models were also popular and followed the frequent testing and ranking of students, efficiently sorting them into categories (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). This philosophical debate in the establishment of schools began the discussion on the purpose of grading; to give students a ranking for a place in a growing society or to promote learning? With both sides of the debate holding value, the widespread use of grading students using a variety of components began and continues today.

Traditional grades are steeped in individual educator beliefs and philosophies that have made traditional grading a common and unique facet of educational practice despite today's standards-based school improvement reform efforts (Reeves et al., 2017). Traditional grading is

a symbol, number, or letter that represents an individual's overall score in a course. Teachers typically have autonomy over their classroom grading systems and the range of factors that individual teachers use to assign points to obtain a grade is vast. The reliability or consistency of traditional grades is one area for concern. Many studies show that while the academic component of grades is the largest part of grading configuration, non-academic factors, such as homework, student behavior, effort, and responsibility are often included. (Brookhart, et al., 2016; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2001; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). In their thorough review of grading studies from the last century compiled in the book *What We Know About Grading* (2019), Guskey and Brookhart point out that grading research has repeatedly emphasized that traditional grades include teacher judgement and what is important to that teacher. Additionally, their research highlights the difficulty school leaders experience in changing these traditional practices that teachers believe epitomize their autonomy over the coursework they teach (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019).

Separate from the inclusion of non-academic factors in most teachers' grading practices, the academic assignments that teachers score are often very specific to an individual teacher's preferences (Brookhart, 1993; Rugg, 1918;). Some teachers weight tests and quizzes higher than daily work assignments, some use a semester long collection of points that result in a final grade, while others use a one-time culminating project or assignment that carries the bulk of the student's score for the course (Feldman, 2019a; Guskey, 2000). Some teachers assign zeros for incomplete work with hard deadlines, while other teachers allow a more flexible approach to students completing work (McMillan, 2001; Randall & Englehard, 2009;). Even when teachers use similar practices in how assignments and points are collected, they typically score things

very differently due to a variance in their expectations of content and knowledge of the standards (Haney et al., 2016).

A study by Randall & Englehard (2009) examined the differences between 234 elementary and middle school teachers' responses to 53 student grading scenarios. Middle school teachers were found to use stricter grading policies than elementary teachers. Specifically, the assigning of a zero for incompleteness of assignments and homework by middle school teachers was prevalent. The use of a zero for a missing assignment is one of many practices secondary teachers strongly support, arguing that students must be held accountable for work. Turning in assignments late or not completing them at all is a behavior issue, however teachers frequently justify giving a zero or failing grade as a strategy to hold students accountable. The authors of the study highlighted that middle school teachers may feel a unique pressure of preparing students for high school that their elementary colleagues do not experience (Randall & Englehard, 2009).

One of Guskey's (2009) qualitative studies included 807 instructional staff members. Participants included 224 K-5 teachers, 158 middle school teachers and 141 high school teachers, for total of 378 were secondary teachers (middle and high combined). Using a Likert rating scale, a survey was given that asked participants to indicate agreement or disagreement regarding grading statements. Seventy-four percent of teachers surveyed stated that the purpose of grades was to communicate students' achievement status. Guskey (2009) found that elementary teachers perceive grading as a way of communication with parents and students and are much more focused on specific learning targets. Secondary teachers view grading as a "vital component of classroom management and control." (p.13) This leads to the point that secondary teachers rely more on non-academic factors than elementary teachers.

Guskey and Link's quantitative study (2018) also sought to understand the differences in teachers' grading practices across grade levels. A teacher's grading survey was completed by 943 K-12 teachers. Results from this study indicated that teachers graded differently depending on their grade level. Teachers at upper grade levels considered quizzes, tests, compositions, and homework more valuable when grading students, while elementary teachers gave more value to formative assessments, student work, and classroom observations (Guskey & Link, 2018).

Cross and Frary's study (1999) deemed the use of multiple types of academic and nonacademic factors in grading to be a hodgepodge method. Additionally, McMillan's (2001) quantitative study that included responses from 1,483 middle and high school teachers supported Cross and Frary's (1999) hodgepodge methods, finding that most secondary teachers rely on a variety of academic and non-academic factors when grading students (Cross & Frary, 1999; McMillan, 2001). The varied use of factors in grading from teacher to teacher makes the value of a grade unclear and does not accurately portray what a student knows or can do based on standards (Brookhart, et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019a; Munoz & Guskey, 2015;).

Academic critics of traditional grading systems argue that many traditional grading practices are harmful to students' emotional well-being and can erode a positive learning culture (Feldman, 2019b; Scriffiny, 2008; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). The use of averaging scores to result in one cumulative grade can punish students for mistakes instead of encouraging learning from mistakes for further learner growth (Reeves, 2008). Grading students on a curve is another traditional practice that does not communicate a student's understanding of the academic content, but rather reflects a comparison or ranking to other students. The use of zeros for incomplete or late work is another questionable grading practice that teachers utilize in traditional grading (Guskey, 2000; Reeves, 2008; Reeves et. al, 2017). The problems with the

use of zeros are vast. Assigning a zero as a grade does not give any descriptor of what the student knows or can do, a score of a zero also sends the message to students that they have no mathematical way to come back from such a low score (Guskey, 2000). Additionally, the practice of grading homework and practice only reinforces the notion that school is a system of compliance rather than true learning engagement (Reeves et al., 2017). Despite their negative and inaccurate impacts on grading, these practices are widely used and defended by educators.

Individual teacher perspectives on what should constitute a student's grade can make the actual assignment of grades arbitrary and sometimes even meaningless. While the concept of grades being considered meaningless may seem outrageous, as they are widely used in almost all decisions schools make about students, many traditional grades have been found to be just individual subjective teacher judgements (Atkins, 2016; Brookhart, 1994; Cox 2011; Feldman, 2019b; Guskey & Link, 2018; Kunnath, 2017; Tierney et al., 2011). Research also shows that grading does not need to occur for learning to take place (Jung & Guskey, 2007; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; Munoz & Guskey, 2015). Yet, research also indicates that the reporting of grades is important in impacting student efforts toward their schoolwork as well as preparing them for endeavors outside of school such as college acceptance and workforce endeavors (Feldman, 2019b; Guskey, 2000; Townsley, 2018).

Standards-Based Grading

Many studies over the last 100 years that have sought to understand and define traditional grading practices in America's schools demonstrate the overwhelming theme in study after study that traditional grading is "hodgepodge" and or multidimensional and mainly based on individual teacher's preferences (Brookhart et al., 2016; McMillan, 2001; Randall & Engelhard, 2009). When a *Nation at Risk* (1983), which focused on America's failing schools, came into play and

pointed out the needs for reform (National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983), policymakers and legislators began the work of reforming schools. This led to No Child Left Behind (2000) which began the standards-based movement and the introduction of the Common Core State Standards (O'Connor et al., 2018; Townsley, 2018). Legislation required schools to ensure teachers were planning, teaching, and assessing student learning based on a set of standards and many states adopted the use of the Common Core State Standards (Colette, et al, 2020).

The principles of the standards-based movement focus on the continual improvement of the quality of teaching and thus student learning (Marzano, 2000). Teaching and learning should be informed by assessments aligned with the standards. The differences between traditional and standards-based practices are listed below in Table 2 (O'Connor, 2008). Academic proponents of SBG state that it can be used to improve the quality of instruction, providing teachers with skill-specific information about students to differentiate instruction and foster a collaborative effort of grading among teachers, increasing the consistency of grading (Frazier, 2021; Guskey & Link, 2018; Welsh, 2019). Additionally, SBG advocates believe it can increase the communication between teachers, parents, and students by providing them standard and skill specific information about a student's progress in a way that traditional hodgepodge grading cannot.

Figure 1:*Traditional Grading System v. Standards-Based Learning System*

Traditional Grading System v. Standards-Based Learning System	
Traditional	Standards-Based Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Based on assessment methods (quizzes, tests, daily work). One grade per subject → Based on % system; often norm-referenced; learning criteria not clear → Use an uncertain combination of factors to determine a grade: attitude, effort, and behavior; Uses penalties & extra credit → Include group scores. → Individual assignments are weighted based on size or importance → Include every score regardless of when it was collected → Grades calculated using mean or average → The teacher makes decisions about grading and announces these decisions to students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Based on standards with a proficiency mark for each standard → Criterion-references and proficiency-based using a limited number of levels of learning; standards being measured are known to all → Measure only standards content to measure proficiency; behaviors reported separately. No penalties or bonuses given → Includes individual evidence only. → A body of evidence shows progress over time towards performance on each standard---"no assignments" bears more weight than another → Emphasize the more recent evidence of learning. → Use a trend line of progress toward a standard with a body of evidence to determine grades---more emphasis on the end of a cycle of learning than beginning → Students and teachers discuss the standards, proficiency scales, and evidence of learning progress together throughout the cycle of learning

Adapted from ©O'Connor 2008. www.solution-tree.com Reproducible

Note: Adapted From: O'Connor, K. (2008). *A repair kit for grading: 15 fixes for broken grades*.

Educational Testing Service. p.7

Benefits of SBG

There are several defining practices of SBG that are beneficial to the grading reform efforts (Townsend, 2018). The paramount goal in using SBG practices is that students are assessed on specific skills using common achievement level descriptors. Nonacademic factors, such as effort, behavior, and homework are assessed separately and not part of the students' academic grade. Common achievement level descriptors provide teachers with clarity on where a student is performing.

Focusing on a student's progress in a specific academic skill within a standard provides teachers, parents, and students a clear representation of what the student has learned and can do and what the student is working toward (O'Connor, 2017; Welsh, 2019). Utilizing these common achievement level descriptors benefits teachers by allowing them to reflect and focus on individualizing their instruction to each student's acquired and needed skills (Marzano, 2000;

Munoz & Guskey, 2015). This also benefits parents and students with specific descriptions about a student's progress on a skill, which can make supporting a student at home and student goal setting very specific and purposeful. Additionally, the use of the common achievement level descriptors also ensures that students are receiving the same grade no matter the teacher's personal preferences.

Another benefit of the SBG grading practice is that the grading process should support student learning (Feldman, 2019a; Link, 2019). Giving students multiple opportunities to show mastery of a skill or standard without penalty or punishment is another hallmark in SBG practices (Guskey, 2000; Townsley, 2018; Welsh, 2019). The use of feedback as an instructional strategy is a main construct in the standards-based learning process. Feedback is a powerful part of the student's learning process and is one of the most effective strategies to increase student learning (Hattie, 1992; Marzano, 2000). The philosophy behind SBG's alignment of best instructional practices, with assessment and grading also requires that teachers provide specific, targeted feedback to students so they can use the feedback to demonstrate further learning. Once students have had a chance to use the feedback and practice, they should then be allowed reassessment of the skill or standard to reflect the student's progress and or mastery (DuFour et al., 2010; Marzano, 2000; Townsley, 2018).

Additionally, grades are not an average of student work from the beginning of the unit to the end. Guskey and Bailey (2010) discuss three types of student work to be considered in grading: product, process, and progress. While the product is a demonstration of what students know and can do at a specific time, progress also allows the teacher to consider the student's growth of learning over the entire skill or standard when determining a final grade. In SBG practices, product and progress can both be used when the teacher is grading (Guskey & Bailey,

2010). The process is how the student arrived at the final product, or skill acquisition. This process could include feedback, practice, homework, small group sessions and would not be used in the grading process (Munoz & Guskey, 2015; O'Connor, 2017; Townsley et al., 2019). In SBG, formative assignments and homework are for practice of the standard rather than determining the final grade. (Marzano, 2000; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; Townsley, 2018; Vatterott, 2015). Rather, the final grade is based on the student's mastery of the learning standard. Understanding these elements of grading and using them as part of a SBG system allows teachers to know their students and their learning styles at a greater level than simply calculating the number of errors on an assignment (Guskey & Bailey, 2010).

Knight & Cooper's (2019) study focusing on high school teachers' perceptions of SBG practices that had been implemented in their classrooms, found that teachers did perceive a positive change in students. Specifically, teachers reported that students demonstrated a growth mindset and began asking teachers for specific feedback on standards, rather than completion for compliance purposes. This finding supports the idea that students also benefit from being part of this SBG process in knowing themselves as learners and being able to set and attain goals (Knight & Cooper, 2019).

Barriers in transition to SBG

There are many reasons why the ongoing debate over the continued use of traditional grades and the transition into full standards-based practices exists. Grading students is a difficult and timely task. However, SBG practices require extra time, given that teachers must have rich knowledge of the standards, achievement level descriptors, and understand the various elements of grading (Guskey & Bailey, 2010). The true process of grading in a standards-focused classroom requires the teacher to be in an ongoing cycle of reflection and feedback with students.

Academics also suggest that teacher professional development and time with their professional learning communities (PLC) are vital components to a successful implementation of SBG (DuFour et al., 2010; Marzano, 2000).

Research conducted by Olsen and Buchanan (2019) followed a group of high school teachers whose school was in a one-year training about rethinking grading practices. While findings showed an improvement in teachers' understanding and acceptance of grade reform, researchers pointed out that the complexities of grading reform will require more than one year of training (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Other studies focusing on standards-based implementation emphasize that making the transition to SBG is not a one-time decision but an ongoing process that requires plenty of time and work on individual educator beliefs and building group capacity (Fullan, 2016; Haney et al., 2016; Knight & Cooper, 2019).

Student motivation is another area of concern for teachers. Studies focused on teacher perceptions of grading show that secondary teachers in particular feel the need to incorporate some non-academic consequences into grading (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Additionally, research from Brookhart (1993) found that teachers believe students earn their grades through hard work, framing grading as compensation. Randall & Englehard (2009) found that teachers across grade levels in elementary through high school all used behavior in their grading practices. This study also suggested that middle school teachers view the developmental age group of students as one that lacks motivation and engagement in school and therefore needed to include work habits in grading to prepare for high school (Randall & Englehard, 2009). Olsen and Buchanan's (2019) study found that some high school teachers expressed that grading should be extrinsic motivation for students and should include responsibility (completing work, turning in assignments on time) in order to prepare them for the real world.

One of the areas most studied regarding grades are teachers' perceptions with respect to grading practices. For any instructional implementation to go well in schools, teachers must have buy-in to the purpose and the process (Fullan et al., 2005). The complexities of grading are not as simple as an instructional program change. Research by Brookhart (1994) found that grading is personal to teachers and represents the autonomy they have been given to teach and lead a classroom. Additionally, teachers' own experiences and beliefs impact how they grade. A study based in Kentucky sought to understand teacher and parent perceptions of the implementation of the standards-based report card. There was a total of 453 responses (338 teachers and 115 parents) reporting a mixed review of the new standards-based report card.

Both teachers and parents found the SBG report card was more informative and contained better quality information, with teachers indicating that while the standards-based report card took more time to complete, they also offered a more in-depth communication about a student. Authors noted that while parents valued the detail about their students' progress, they still wanted a percentage reported (Swan et al., 2014).

Another study examined teacher perceptions using a mixed-method design, analyzing responses of 31 high school teachers whose school was in the implementation process of SBG (Haney et al., 2016). The study results indicated teachers felt that SBG did provide students a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in relation to a standard, however teachers experienced a neutral view that standards-based grading is a more effective grading system than traditional grading methods. Researchers noted that teachers in their first 10 years of teaching tended to respond more favorably to SBG, while experienced teachers appeared less supportive. This could be that younger teachers are more willing to try new things and are more accustomed to standards-based thinking because their college course/teacher prep programs offered more

discussion and teachings in relation to standards-based practices. More experienced teachers may not want to change their practices this late in their careers and were not trained under standards-based teacher preparation programs (Haney et al., 2016).

In her qualitative study about five elementary teachers' experiences transitioning to SBG, Frazier (2021), explained that a lack of training on grading in teacher preparation programs could also be a barrier for teachers transitioning to SBG. Additionally, there is often little time spent in on-going professional development on grading practices for teachers and, district and building level administrators rarely involve themselves with the finite details that teachers use in their individual classrooms (Frazier, 2021). Other studies also point to the notion that even when younger teachers have received some preservice training, they tend to use grading practices that mimic experiences they had from their own schooling or follow those of the teachers around them (Tierney et al., 2011).

Currently, there is rich literature and many books on SBG recommendations for implementation and best practices for schools seeking guidance, however there that are not many empirical studies that focus on the effects of SBG (Brookhart et al., 2016; Welsh, 2019). With little empirical evidence to support the positive effects of SBG, the initiative to transition to SBG is difficult to support for school administrators and teachers (Knight & Cooper, 2019). It should be noted that Marzano (2000) explains that with a transition to standards-based system, grading is the last step of a very big transitional process. As many schools land somewhere on the continuum of implementing standards in teaching and assessments, this may account for why there are fewer studies around full SBG implementation.

Principal's Role in SBG implementation

The role of the principal is multi-faceted, and the expectation of the principal as instructional leader has taken on a huge focus in today's world of standards-based accountability in America's public schools. The literature indicates that the school principal is number two only to the classroom teacher as having the most impact on students' achievement (Marzano et al., 2005; Zimmerman, 2006). In her extensive review of studies encompassing principal leadership of SBG implementation, Link (2019) reports that the school principal is the "most critical actor in the grading reform process" (p. 188). Furthermore, current studies on teacher perceptions during SBG implementation stress that teachers sense a greater level of willingness and implementation success when the principal supports and leads the process (Barrett & Brayer, 2014; Brookhart et al., 2016; Collet et al., 2020; Link, 2019; Link & Guskey, 2019; Pak et al., 2020; Townsley, 2020).

The principal's impact as the instructional leader can affect how well the school responds to change. A quantitative study out of Ankara, Turkey, examined the relationship between the instructional leadership of school principals and the self-efficacy of teachers (Calik et al.2012). Researchers described instructional leadership as a principal's behaviors or actions that have both a direct and indirect impact on teaching and learning. Additionally, researchers used Bandura's (2000) model of teacher self-efficacy and collective efficacy. Teachers' self-efficacy is the belief the teacher has about how well they are able to effectively lead their classrooms, this includes planning, teaching, instruction, and classroom management. Collective teacher efficacy is the shared beliefs of a group of teachers. Collective efficacy is impacted by individual teacher efficacy (Bandura, 2000; Calik et al., 2012; Vadahi & Lesha, 2015). A large sample of 328 teacher participants rated the self-efficacy scale, collective teacher-efficacy scales and an

instructional leadership scale in order to understand any correlations between educators' efficacy and the perceived school leadership they work under. Findings highlighted the principal's instructional leadership had a direct and positive impact on teacher self-efficacy and the school's collective efficacy (Calik et al., 2012).

Additionally, Fullan (2016), whose research focuses on change processes in schools, posits that one important role of the school principal is knowing how to utilize professional capital to make change affective. Fullan explains that professional capital has three elements: human, social, and decisional capital. Human capital is to recruit and nurture quality teachers, social capital builds on the quality of relationships, while making decisions that impact many is decisional capital (Fullan, 2016). As principals are expected to make many of the decisions around policy and reform implementation, they must decide how they will prioritize the various resources of the school: budget, time, coaching, professional development, and staffing, to meet the needs of the initiative.

Principals have the unique power, as managers of their own individual schools, to plan the details of initiatives in their schools. One study of principals in California, followed four principals from two urban school districts during implementation of a reading program. Researchers discussed two ways that principals can respond in the implementation process known as bridging and buffering (Kohansal, 2015). Bridging is described as using activities that support the change and linking it to the school's existing goals. In this way principals find ways to connect the work of the school to the reform effort to engage staff in the process. On the other hand, principals can also buffer reform efforts, which can limit some of the implementation process. Focusing on local or school specific initiatives in lieu of policy reform can be a way of buffering and or strategically limiting engagement in a reform effort in order to protect teachers

from additional reform efforts. How principals utilize bridging and buffering activities plays into how tightly or loosely the expectations of the initiative are implemented. The study results found that principals with the strongest leadership demonstrated instructional knowledge of the reform topic. The instructional knowledge allowed them to lead in the technical and cultural aspects of their schools, which supports teachers (Kohansal, 2015). This contributes to other literature that shows the principal's instructional leadership and knowledge are essential to school reform.

As principals balance the expectations of external stakeholder reform efforts and the inner pressures within their schools, they must first make sense of all the factors involved. Sensemaking is another process that has been studied about principals preparing for change (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2000). Sensemaking involves understanding the principal's own attitudes and beliefs, how they make sense of the situation and what kind of mediating strategies they will use. For principals to lead change and build school culture around change, they must first understand their own willingness to make the change or lead the implementation. Zimmerman (2011) also stresses the importance of principals examining their own attitudes and beliefs. This is important because the principal's self-efficacy, as well as their own understanding and beliefs, can facilitate effective teaching and learning environments (Calik et al, 2012; Fullan; 2016; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2000; Zimmerman, 2011).

While there is rich literature about school change and successful reform strategies for principals, most processes begin with an individual principal's knowledge and perceptions (Marzano et al, 2005; Zimmerman, 2006). Moreover, grading reform is also a highly studied topic that runs deep into educators' philosophical and personal beliefs about schooling. Understanding the principal's perception of grading and how these beliefs correlate to the success of implementation within their school is an important understudied component of the

SBG reform. Additionally, using Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory to understand how teacher self-efficacy and a collective efficacy of teachers are impacted by the principal's instructional leadership may be discovered by exploring principals' perceptions of grading practices.

Grading practices that promote student learning, provide feedback, and guide students through a successful educational experience is one goal of continuous school improvement efforts. Middle schools are in a unique position to transition adolescent students from elementary to high school. Adolescent students become naturally unmotivated toward schoolwork during this time and thus middle school administrators and teachers must remain vigilant in effective practices that will keep students engaged and motivated as they proceed toward high school (Guskey, 2009; Randall & Englehard, 2009). There is a clear gap in the research that seeks to understand middle school principal perceptions about the transition from traditional to SBG grading, which is a key element in successful school change initiatives. Thus, this study seeks to understand middle school principals' perceptions and understandings of grading practices.

Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020 has emphasized the disproportionate achievement among the school children of our society. Many schools had to close in-person learning and switch to online learning platforms. Upon reopening, schools had to begin reconsidering their current practices and systems to support all students with learning loss and time out of school due to this pandemic. James Woodworth, Commissioner of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), delayed their annual NAEP testing in 2020 and 2021 and recommended using local state testing to check on student progress during the pandemic (Woodworth, 2020). Current state testing results show that students with the greatest needs are

once again experiencing some of the worst impacts from the COVID-19 school closures. The methods by which students are assessed, instructed, and graded will need to be among the many factors that schools reconsider in the process of responding to this global impact and its effects on teaching and learning (Townesley & Buckmiller, 2020). Therefore, this study will also consider principals' perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the transition to SBG.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the current literature on grading practices, including historical and legal facets, the inconsistencies in traditional grading practices, the benefits and barriers of standards-based grading practices and the importance of the principal's instructional leadership in grading reform efforts. A missing component in the literature is that of the principal's perceptions and how those can affect the grading transformation in middle schools. By seeking to understand principals' perceptions of grading practices, this study contributes to the research on middle school implementation and transitions to standards-based grading, which is an important aspect of today's school improvement efforts. While this qualitative study is less generalizable than a quantitative study, results and themes discussed add to a growing body of work that attempts to understand the transitions to SBG practices in middle schools based on principal perceptions. Principals and other district leaders in this school system and similar systems can use the highlighted experiences and perceptions to assist leaders in their efforts to reform grading in education.

The unique impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on schools is new, but notable to understand, as at the time of this study, educators are still entrenched in the effects of the pandemic. Understanding the pandemic's impact can benefit educators and students alike as a

changing response to the pandemic is necessary. Following a brief introduction, Chapter 3 delineates the methodology of the study and a statement of the problem and the research questions. The research design, including the selection and sampling of participants is described. In addition, the data collection tools, and data analysis processes are outlined along with descriptions of the process that were used to establish the trustworthiness of the research. The risks, benefits and ethical considerations of this research are also described.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The implementation of standards-based grading in schools has increased in recent years. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of middle school principals about standards-based grading (SBG), as their schools transition to this practice. In addition to adding to the research literature, this contributes to the understanding about leadership practices that support the transition to SBG while illuminating the challenges principals face when leading such an initiative.

This study utilized multiple case studies in order to address the research questions. The researcher sought to gain deep inferences from participants surrounding their lived experiences with SBG. According to Yin (2018), using multiple case studies allowed the researcher to understand the meanings that participants develop from their experiences. The multiple case study approach allowed for repeated or oppositional findings that may yield more in-depth results than a single case study (Yin, 2018). In this study, multiple case studies were used to examine the change processes involved with transition to SBG in selected middle schools. Individual principal's perceptions and understandings were explored, and potential themes were identified and analyzed. The methodology for investigating the research questions is outlined in the sections that follow.

Chapter 3 delineates the methodology of this study and a statement of the problem and the research questions. The research design, including the selection and sampling of participants is described. In addition, the data collection tools, and data analysis processes are outlined along with descriptions of the process that were used to establish the trustworthiness of the research. The risks, benefits and ethical considerations of this research are also described.

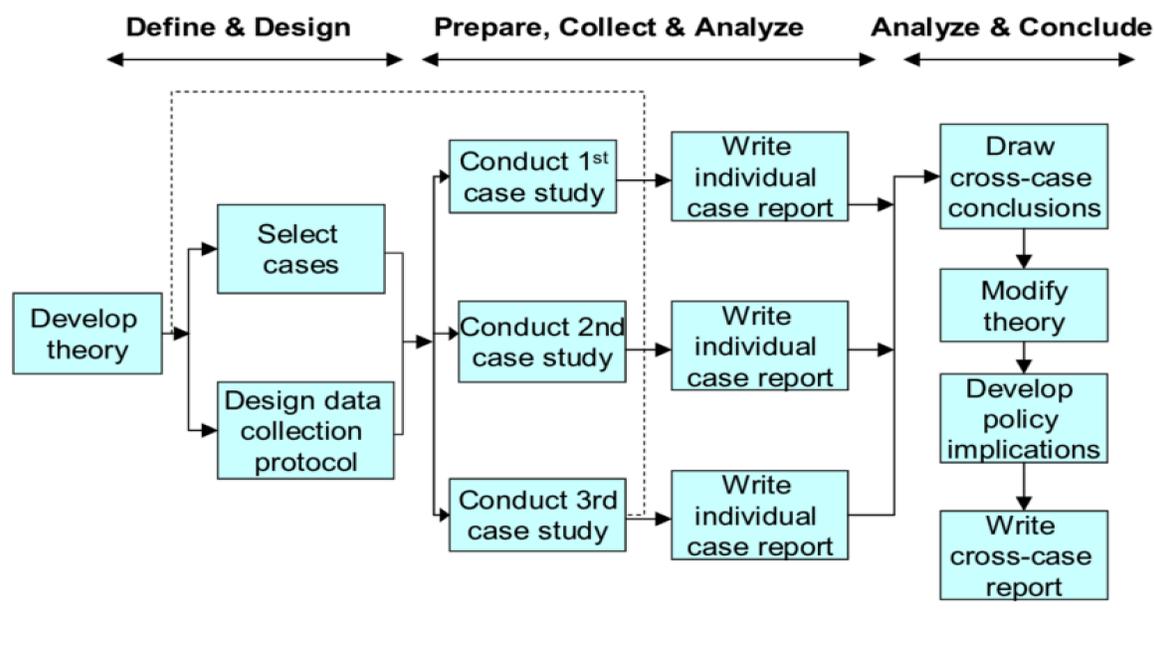
Research Questions

The three research questions that guide this qualitative study surrounding middle school principals' perceptions of the transition from traditional to standards-based grading are listed below.

1. What are middle school principals' perceptions and understandings of current grading practices at their schools?
2. What are middle school principals' perceptions of leading transitions in current grading and reporting practices?
3. What are middle school principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the transition to standards-based grading?

Research Design: Multiple Case Study

This qualitative study used a multiple case study research method. A multiple case study is an appropriate methodology because the researcher sought to uncover and analyze principals' perceptions in order to better understand what may assist in full implementation of SBG in middle schools. According to Yin (2018) multiple case studies allow the researcher to take an intimate look at the experiences and phenomena that occur in a specific time or because of a specific activity. Yin's model of multiple case study (Figure 2) was followed in this study.

Figure 2*Yin's Multiple Case Study Model*

Note. From Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). Sage p. 58

The first step in Yin's Case Study model is to define the parameters of the study in the context of appropriate theory. Applying Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999), which posits that individuals' beliefs, perspectives, and self-efficacy are shaped through experiences, the researcher investigated principals' perceptions of SBG as well as their sense of self-efficacy to implement SBG reforms in middle school. To lead change, principals must feel well-informed and ultimately that the initiative, in this case, grading reform, to be what is best for students (Atkins, 2016). When considering collective efficacy, principals must also believe that their teachers' self-efficacy and group collective efficacy will be successful (Bandura, 2000).

Consequently, the research questions of this study focused on each individual principal's perceptions and knowledge around traditional and standards-based grading reform in middle schools, as well as the impacts of COVID-19.

In designing the study, the researcher's study design and participant criteria are important in "bounding" the case (Yin, 2018) and thus the selection of cases. This bounding process allows the researcher to be specific about the unique occurrences being studied through the selected cases. Six middle school principals were selected as participants from a school district that supports SBG reform but has not fully implemented SBG in middle schools. Specifically, these principals had to be serving as middle school principals in the 2019-2020 school year, when the COVID-19 pandemic began. The replication model was used with each case, using Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999) to help construct the research questions. Principals' perceptions were gathered through a survey and semi-structured interview (Appendix A).

The next step in Yin's (2018) model is to "prepare, collect and analyze" the data from the cases to be studied. Data collection for this study occurred through surveys and semi-structured interviews with each participant. Each of the six principals represents their own individual case and has a case report with independent findings from the data. The final step in Yin's model (*Figure 2*) is to "analyze and conclude," which involved comparing information from the 5 cases. This allowed the researcher to draw conclusions and make inferences (Yin, 2018).

Setting

The school district where this study took place is in the southeastern portion of the United States. The public-school district serves over 30,000 students in grades K-12 and is one of the ten largest districts in the state. The district has eight traditional middle schools and three alternative schools that serve sixth, seventh and eighth grade students. The total student population is

comprised of 9% Asian, 23% African American or Black, 19% Hispanic/Latino, 5% multi-racial and 44% White students. Twelve of the district's 21 elementary schools qualify for federal Title I funds, which is often used as a measure of poverty. Only one middle school receives Title I services.

The district in which this study took place has been transitioning from the use of traditional grading to standards-based grading. Elementary schools in the district all use standards-based grading and reporting. Report cards in elementary schools list content specific standards and students are rated by their teachers based on their progress on specific goals. By contrast, only limited aspects of standards-based grading are implemented in middle schools, at the time of this study. For example, middle school teachers develop assignments based on learning standards, do not assign zeros on students' academic work, and give students a chance to make up missed assignments. However, the report card and grading practices in middle schools are still developed by individual teachers, using a traditional 10-point grading scale that involves averaging number grades or earning a set number of points. This continued use of traditional grading, left up to individual teachers, diverges with the rest of the district's philosophy around grading, adds to the subjective nature of grading and further enhances disproportions that already exist among various student groups (Feldman 2019a; Guskey & Link, 2018). Thus, this study sought to understand middle school principals' perceptions about traditional grading versus SBG and how these perceptions impact their leadership, as their schools transition to the use of SBG. This study sought to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on standards-based grading.

The transition to SBG in these middle schools has been confounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, which began in March 2020, caused some schools to close or move to

a virtual learning format. Some schools even moved back and forth between virtual and in-person learning. As more schools have returned to in-person learning following the introduction of vaccines, educators now find themselves teaching students with even larger learning gaps. In addition to the learning loss, from missed instructional time, inappropriate student behavior is increasing even as students' social emotional skills are at an all-time low. Furthermore, schools are struggling to hire and retain teachers and support staff. These pandemic-driven factors of lost instructional time, a lack of staffing and increasingly challenging student behavior have combined to create very stressful conditions for educators and students alike. Consequently, school principals are reexamining many school practices to assist staff with meeting multiple students' needs. (Townesley et al., 2019). Accordingly, this study's secondary area of focus sought to understand middle school principals' perceptions about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the transition to SBG.

Participants Selection

According to Stake (2006), the researcher should carefully consider the number of cases included in a multiple case study. Including ten or more participants in a multiple case study can provide too much information for a reader and four or less may not provide enough information for comparisons or meaningful analysis. Using the "replication model" six to ten cases would be ideal for making a case and supporting theoretical ideas (Stake, 2006 & Yin, 2018).

Purposive sampling was used for participant selection. Purposive sampling is "a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Participants in this study must have been serving as the principal at one of the traditional middle schools

located in the district selected for this study and they must have begun serving as a middle school principal by the start of the 2019-2020 school year.

Six principals met the criteria for this study. These six middle school principals were recruited by the researcher to participate in the study. A recruitment email was sent to each of these six potential participants with information about the study, its purpose, the criteria to participate, and an explanation about the voluntary nature of their participation. A detailed summary and description of individual participants is included in Chapter 4.

Data Collection

The researcher applied and received IRB approval following university protocol and permission from the Chief Research, Analysis and Accountability Officer of the school district in order to conduct this study. After completing IRB approval and receiving approval from the Chief Research, Analysis and Accountability Officer, a recruitment email and demographic survey was sent to the six middle school principals that the researcher determined, based on criteria, qualified for the study. This recruitment email included a brief description of the purpose of the study, criteria for participation, and an informed consent form. Potential participants were asked to also include contact information and preferred times for interviews with the researcher.

Selected participants completed a demographic survey via *Google* survey prior to the semi-structured interviews. The surveys were used to gather background information about the participants and the schools they serve. After completing the survey, the individual interviews lasted approximately 45-50 minutes. All six of the interviews were conducted during the spring of 2022. These interviews were held virtually using Zoom virtual meeting platform. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the use of virtual meetings has become a convenient way to safeguard and follow the health restrictions. Interviews were recorded using the transcribe

feature on the Zoom platform. Doing so enabled the researcher to revisit the recorded interviews and created transcriptions of the interviews for analysis and coding.

Instrumentation

The researcher used two data collection instruments in this study in order to gain information from participants. First, a *Google* survey email was sent to the participating middle school principals. The survey collected demographic information about the participants and their schools (Appendix A).

The second data collection tool was a semi-structured, one-on-one interview with each participant. The interview protocol was designed around the following topics: (a) principals' understanding and perceptions of their school's current grading practices, (b) principals' perceptions of leading transitions in current grading and reporting practices and (c) principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the transition to SBG (Appendix B).

The interview questions were adapted from two previous studies because using data collection and data analysis methods from comparable studies is recommended to ensure internal validity (Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2018). The researcher utilized two comparable studies focused on SBG to ensure credibility in the participant interview questions. First, Frazier (2021) used semi-structured interviews with elementary teachers who implemented SBG in the same district as the one being used for this study. Next, Atkins (2016) developed a principal perception survey about SBG for a quantitative study involving high school principals in Missouri. Both of these studies' tools were adapted to develop research questions and survey items.

In addition, a pilot study was used. The researcher conducted a pilot study interview with a principal who did not participate in the study. The pilot study participant had transitioned out of the role of principal prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but had previously served in the role of

middle school principal in the district where the study took place. The pilot participant's responses aided the researcher in refining the survey and interview questions. Using a pilot study can assist the researcher in assessing the relevance of the interview questions, practicing and refining interview skills and contributing to the quality, and rigor of the study (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Data Analysis

The use of semi-structured interviews was chosen to gain an authentic understanding of each individual principal's perceptions. Understanding the underlying problems with SBG and the significance attached to those individual leadership experiences is one of the foundations of this qualitative research (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The analysis of the initial survey responses and the individual semi-structured interview transcriptions tell the story of each middle school principal's perceptions and understandings of traditional and standards-based grading as well as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coding processes began following the completion of each participant's interview. First, the researcher compared the transcription provided by Zoom with the audio transcription to check for accuracy of words. An inductive coding approach was used to allow for codes to emerge from the data, rather than a deductive approach, where codes are set prior to the analysis. This inductive approach ensured that the researcher's own biases were not a barrier in the process of dissecting and coding the participants' responses. Furthermore, the inductive approach to coding allows natural themes to develop from the principals' individual perceptions and understandings (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Following the constant comparative method as described by Saldana (2021), the researcher closely read the transcript of each interview to gain meaning. At this point no coding of text had

occurred. Then the researcher re-read the transcriptions and chunked the information into smaller, meaningful portions. Next the researcher assigned a code to each of these smaller portions. A code can be a word or phrase meant to capture a certain essence or meaning. As this process unfolded, the researcher compared each new portion with the previously identified codes. Following the assignments of initial codes, a second round of coding was used to analyze the codes themselves. During the second round of coding, the identifiable codes were examined for similarities and differences and then grouped into categories. These categories were then synthesized into emerging concepts or themes.

The researcher stored transcripts and coding processes (actual codes and small portion groups) utilizing UNC-Charlotte Google for Education spreadsheets and documents. Specifics of analyzed categories and themes are shared for each case in Chapter 4. Additionally, broader themes and consideration across the multiple cases are also discussed in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are vital measures to ensure trustworthiness within a qualitative study (Shenton, 2004). These constructs were considered in the design, methodology, and reporting of this study. In order to establish credibility, the researcher relied upon her extensive experiences as a middle school administrator and her personal knowledge about SBG. As a middle school administrator in the district where the study took place, the researcher ensured that participants, who were also her professional peers, understood that information shared in a one-on-one interview would remain confidential and pseudonyms would be used to maintain privacy. The researcher maintains that her familiarity with the participants created a level of comfort in which they were forthright in their responses.

Transferability considers if the research could be applied to similar situations and how generalizable it is (Shenton, 2004). While qualitative research designs are not usually generalizable to an entire population, there is still much to be gleaned from the detailed description and analysis of the individual participant data. In this study, sufficient and thorough contextual information are provided in the descriptions of the participants, and the school district. Also, lush descriptions of the principals' perceptions are provided. This information will enable similarly situated school districts that are considering SBG implementation to gain insights from this study. Therefore, findings of this study could be generalized to similar districts, thereby enhancing the transferability of the study (Yin, 2018).

Dependability is important in qualitative research because it ensures that the study could be replicated in the future. To enhance dependability, the researcher has provided a thorough description of each participant, the data collection, and the inductive coding processes to be used for data analysis. In addition, the researcher aligns Bandura's (1999) Social Cognitive Theory with the development of the research questions and purpose behind the study. Providing detailed and clear descriptions of the entire study's design allows readers to assess the reliability of the research practices and their effectiveness (Shenton, 2004).

Finally, because the researcher is a novice researcher, guidance was sought through meetings with the dissertation chair and committee members to ensure that that the selected methodologies and analysis of data were a result of the direct responses of the individual participants. This process ensured the researcher did not defer to preestablished notions in the analysis. Member checks, which allow participants to read their interview transcripts and provide feedback to the researcher, were also completed as a step in both ensuring credibility and

confirmability in this study. The subjectivity statement included in Chapter 1, also presents the researcher's experiences as an educator with grading and any potential partialities that may exist.

Risks, Benefits and Ethical Considerations

There were minimal risks to participants in this multiple case study research. The university IRB process was utilized to ensure compliance with ethical standards. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of participants. Additionally, approval was obtained from the Chief Research, Analysis and Accountability Officer of the district in which the study was conducted to ensure participants knew that their district approved of the study and to further guarantee ethical practices, particularly the confidentiality of personal information. Participation was voluntary and non-evaluative, and each participant signed an informed consent in order to participate (see Appendix A). All coded data has been de-identified and maintained through UNC-Charlotte's Google for Education secure spreadsheets and documents. They will be destroyed following the study.

Summary

A detailed explanation of the qualitative methodology of this study is included in Chapter 3. The use of a multiple case study examining the perceptions, understandings, and self-efficacy of six middle school principals is appropriate to understand the nuances and unique perspectives that only school level principals can have (Yin, 2018). Data collection employed an in-person recruitment, followed by a recruitment email, demographic survey, and semi-structured interviews. All participant interviews were conducted on the Zoom platform, which also provided transcriptions. The researcher used inductive coding under the constant comparative method to analyze the survey and interview data. Themes collected from the analysis of

individual cases allowed the researcher to make comparisons across all cases. Findings, thematic analysis, and discussion of cases are included in Chapters 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

As explained in Chapter 3, the researcher's goal was to describe and understand the perceptions of six middle school principals regarding their leadership of grading using a multiple case study. The researcher focused on three research questions:

1. What are middle school principals' perceptions and understandings of current grading practices at their schools?
2. What are middle school principals' perceptions of leading transitions in current grading and reporting practices?
3. What are middle school principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the transition to standards-based grading?

In this chapter the researcher presents the demographic survey findings for each principal and their current school, an explanation of the codes and categories established in the analysis of participant interview transcripts, and the six individual case studies. The researcher used pseudonyms for each of the six participants, their schools, and the school district to ensure anonymity and preserve confidentiality. The demographic survey data is used to describe each participant and the middle school they led.

After interviewing each of the six participants using the semi-structured interview questions, the researcher transcribed each interview and initially read them for precision and clarity. During the second reading of each transcript, the researcher began extracting meaningful phrases and sentences, also referred to as data chunks, from the transcripts. Once the list of data chunks had been extracted onto a Google spreadsheet, a corresponding code was created. This iterative, analytical process was repeated for each case study, using the codes created from the

pilot study and adding new ones that emerged from other case studies. Once all transcripts were coded, the researcher synthesized the codes into groups and labeled the groups with a larger category name. The researcher then analyzed categories of codes and data chunks to build descriptive themes which capture the essence of the case studies' common findings.

Each of the six individual case studies includes a description of the participant's professional background, the school's demographic data, a narrative of their experiences and perceptions of current grading practices in their schools, and a summary of each case study's findings. The data set from each of the six case studies were then used for comparison, following the multiple case study procedure (Yin, 2018). This comparison gave rise to themes that correspond to each of the research questions. These themes are described following each case study narrative.

Demographic Survey Results

A recruitment email was sent to six middle school principals to encourage them to participate in this study in the early spring of 2022. All six principals agreed to participate. The first principal was used as the pilot study participant. A demographic survey was then sent to all six principals after receiving their signed consent form. The demographic survey, which consisted of eight questions, was sent through Google. Table 2 provides participants' personal demographic information and years of principal experience.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Survey Questions 1,2,3

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Years in Principalship
Lucy	Female	White	9
George	Male	White	8
David	Male	White	6
Samantha	Female	White	5
Wanda	Female	White	15
Raymond	Male	White	22

The demographic survey also asked principals to provide their school's demographic data for analysis in this study. Table 3 includes a breakdown of each school's student population including the ethnicity of students and the percentage of students receiving free-and-reduced lunch prices, a measure which is commonly utilized to describe the number of students living in poverty in a school. Additionally, the survey asked how many of the school's teachers had five or more years of teaching experience.

Table 3

School Demographic Survey questions: 4,5,6

Participant	Middle School	% FRL	% of teachers 5+ years	% of students by Ethnicity				
				Asian	Black	Hispanic	Multi	White
Lucy	Maple	80	40	0	35	36	6	23
George	Pine	13	75	15	20	10	5	50
David	Oak	18	50	15	20	10	5	50
Samantha	Frasier	52	89	2	28	21	5	44
Wanda	Redbud	30	50	5	28	16	6	45
Raymond	Elm	28	85	0	15	0	5	80

The last two questions of the demographic survey focused on each middle school's student report card type, traditional or standards-based. The final question of the demographic survey asked individual principals to identify the amount of professional development in standards-based grading they received through Southern Trees Schools. Tables 4 & 5 provide participants' responses to both of those questions.

Table 4*Demographic Survey Question 7*

Report Card Type	% of schools
Does your school utilize a standards-based or traditional report card?	
Standards-based	0%
Traditional	100%

Table 5*Demographic Survey Question 8*

Professional Development	% of principals
Have you received any of the following standards-based trainings while in Southern Trees District (check all that apply)	
standards-based grading training sessions	40%
annual standards-based grading review at PLC or grade level meetings	100%
discussion or article/book study around standards-based grading at an assistant principal or principal meeting	20%
I have not participated in any of these trainings	0%
Other	20%

Analysis Process**Codes & Categories**

After interviews were transcribed, an analysis of each transcript was completed. This analysis began with the coding of each transcript. Thirty total codes were created. The codes were then sorted and synthesized into 10 broader categories. Table 6 shows the 30 codes grouped under the 10 broader categories. The table also displays the number, percentage, and frequency of codes throughout the six case study participants. These codes were reviewed to develop descriptive themes from the interviews.

Table 6*Category & Codes*

Categories			
Codes	# of participants	% of participants	Frequency of codes
Teacher & Parent Influences			
Parent Understanding Communications	6	100	12
Teacher Belief Preferences	5	83.35	12
Traditional Systems			
Student Accountability/ Compliance	6	100	14
High School Preparation	6	100	10
District Expectations			
District Leadership	5	83.35	10
50 Rule	6	100	12
Leading grading reform*	6	100	22
Communication			
Professional Development	6	100	9
Commitment/Clarity for SBG	3	50	8
K-12 Alignment			
Middle School Transition	5	83.35	17
Elementary Practices	6	100	10
PLC Practices			
Common Grading Practices	3	50	5
Traditional Practices	5	83.34	5
Growth Mindset	3	50	5
Improvements of Traditional Practices	3	50	7
Strengths of SBG	4	66.68	10
Purpose			
Factors of Grading	4	66.68	8
Purpose of Grades	6	100	12
Instructional Practices/Assessments*	6	100	20
Individual Teacher's Grading Practices			
Monitoring Grades	6	100	6
Teacher Exemplars	3	50	3
Strengths of Traditional Practices	3	50	3
COVID-19 Impacts			
Student Behavior/Maturity	6	100	8
Social Emotional Needs	4	66.68	5
Instructional Practices/Assessments*	6	100	20
Equity	2	33.34	2
Other Factors			
Leading grading reform*	6	100	24
Principal's Role	3	50	5
Barriers to leading SBG	5	83.35	10
Transition to SBG	4	66.68	2
Principal's Knowledge & Experience	3	50	9
Improvements of SBG	1	16.69	1

Note: indicates a code and corresponding data chunk was used in more than one category

Descriptive Themes

Once the 10 broader categories and the 30 corresponding codes had been organized into meaningful data sets, the researcher began writing thematic sentences for each category. Making connections across the categories, the researcher developed four overarching descriptive themes that capture the essence of the principals' common perspectives in the case studies' findings.

Figure 3 displays the analytical process used to progress from codes to descriptive themes.

Figure 3

A Depiction of the Data Analysis Progression



Case Study 1: Lucy Maple Middle School

The interview with Lucy was conducted on Zoom virtual platform in spring of 2022. The semi-structured interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. According to the demographic survey data that Lucy supplied, she is a White female with nine years of experience in the principalship. Lucy currently serves as principal of Maple Middle School in Southern Trees Schools.

The student population for Maple Middle consists of 35% Black, 36% Hispanic, 6% Multi-racial, and 23% White students. Approximately 80% of students qualify for free-and-reduced lunch services. Additionally, 40% of teachers have 5 or more years of experience, leaving 60%, with less than 5 years of teaching experience. Maple Middle School uses a traditional report card according to the demographic survey Lucy completed.

During her previous service as an elementary principal and assistant principal, Lucy attended multiple training sessions about SBG provided by Southern Trees Schools. Additionally, Lucy led professional development sessions for elementary school teachers to discuss and train on the implementation of SBG. However, when asked about training on SBG for middle schools, Lucy does not recall any being offered.

Lucy described her school as one of traditional grading. She explained that much of the grading in her school focuses on what she considers to be skills-based practice, such as students receiving scores for completing software-based drills to reinforce student learning. Lucy stated that teachers do allow students to complete assignments following missed deadlines. She added that teachers follow a district policy in which students receive no grade lower than a 50 on any assignment, even one they did not complete (commonly referred to as the 50 Rule).

Lucy stated that she is unsure about the rigor or quality of assignments that teachers are giving to students at Maple Middle. Lucy has observed the school's Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and knows they are focused on instruction and using common formative assessments (CFAs). Lucy explained that having a young staff means the PLCs are focused on aligning teachers on the same curriculum plans and they have not spent much time discussing how grades are calculated. Lucy's descriptions of PLCs at Maple Middle builds on the emerging

theme that *misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists*. Further, Lucy explained the purpose of grades:

Grades help the student understand what they know and don't know so that the teacher can help them. If that is the true reason behind a grade and not just a number, then what are we doing with it? Where does the end point belong? Some see it is the grade on the paper, but for others, they see that as a starting point to help fix the mistakes and errors they may have moving forward.

Lucy thinks there should be a separation between grading students' behaviors and the grading of academics. She said, "The emphasis in middle school still needs to be to help the children because they are still children. We have to ask what we are communicating to the students about grades." Lucy believes that middle school teachers rely on students' grades to help them motivate and control students. She stated, "In some situations teachers use it (the grade) to manage the classroom."

Lucy explained that she thinks it is easier for parents to understand traditional grades because traditional grades are what they experienced when they were in school. She also believes that middle school teachers, like parents, are more comfortable with traditional grading. She stated, "I think that goes back to what they know, right?" Additionally, Lucy added that parents want to continue traditional grading because many of them are very focused on ratings and rankings of students' grade point averages as their children get closer to high school and college and because they find it easier to help their children with elementary assignments:

I think parents are less concerned with specific standards and knowing how to help their children once they get to secondary and are more concerned with that grading number. Probably because in elementary parents can still support students with

content at home doing the basics with them, whereas the content in middle school and high school are often out of the parents' wheelhouse.

The theme that *parents and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high school* is evident in Lucy's descriptions about teachers and parents.

Lucy shared that even though the elementary schools in Southern Trees Schools were using a full SBG report card, there was still some teacher subjectivity among elementary teachers when grading academic standards. She added, "There is a lot of leeway, and it can get messy with standards. Parents still wanted to know; how did you determine where my child was toward the standard?" Lucy explained that the most important component in grading must be the evidence or data that contributed to the grading, regardless of the grading system used:

I think documentation is kind of beat into my head, so the more you have the more you have to stand on, right? The more pieces you have, whether it be a portfolio piece, an actual example or a test correction on what the student can add next time the better. This goes back to what is the ultimate goal just to put a number on a page or is the ultimate goal to help the child progress academically through that grading process, having multiple ways to do that, the more the better.

Lucy shared that she was surprised at the lack of SBG implementation when she moved from an elementary school principalship to a middle school principalship. She commented, "I assumed there had been more structures put in place, because we had so many at the elementary level." When asked if Lucy feels pressure from the district-level staff to implement SBG at the middle school level, she said she does not. She does feel there is probably more pressure and frustration from teachers who are very upset about the 50 Rule and want to remain with traditional grading. Lucy's description of teacher frustration adds to the theme, *a lack of district-*

level SBG report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration.

When asked what she thinks district-level staff should do to support grading reform, Lucy explained the need for a cohesive plan that is mapped out over a few years. She explained, “We had been doing it for a few years in elementary school, and it is not perfected.” Additionally, Lucy stated, “They would need to really explain “the WHY and HOW,” otherwise it will be just like it has been with this 50 Rule, frustrating teachers.” Lucy also noted that it would be important not to isolate grading from other important components of needed middle school reform. She opined, “A systems approach around updating middle school practices would be better and can include these pieces around instruction and assessment, I see that as more of a priority right now.”

As the interview progressed to questions about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on grading improvements, the theme *leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic* became evident in Lucy’s responses. Lucy believed that the pandemic has had a huge impact on her students who were already at risk. Lucy noted, “For so many kids there’s such a gap of where they’re supposed to be and where they really are academically, socially, and emotionally.” Additionally, Lucy explained that teachers can improve on what and how they are grading after this pandemic, but that it should be focused on more than just grades:

We have to somehow repackage this so that teachers and parents also see this need to help students regain the social-emotional components they lost during COVID-19 school closures and not make it just about traditional versus SBG. A collective rethinking of where we are and how we need to move the kids forward and get out of the old mindsets.

When asked about the principal leading SBG after the pandemic Lucy shared, “We could do it, but again, it needs to be more focused on instruction. Also, when I think of priorities it sometimes feels like everything is on fire and so you have to prioritize the fire.”

Overall, Lucy shared a strong understanding of SBG from her experiences as an elementary principal. Additionally, she noted the importance of teachers’ understanding of the two types grading philosophies, traditional and SBG, and how grading impacts students. Lucy would like to see a system-wide rethinking of middle school practices that can support the many at-risk students her teachers serve. However, she understands the value parents and teachers put on traditional grades in middle schools. While Lucy previously led SBG reform, she is not convinced that it is a current priority given more pressing educational needs following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case Study 2: George Pine Middle School

The semi-structured interview with George was conducted in the spring of 2022 over the Zoom virtual platform. The interview lasted approximately 35 minutes. As described in the demographic survey that George completed, he is a White male with eight years of experience as a principal. He is currently serving as principal of Pine Middle School. The student population of Pine Middle school is composed of 15% Asian, 20% Black, 10% Hispanic, 5% Multiracial and 50% White students. Pine Middle is considered one of the most affluent middle schools in the district, with only 13% of the students being served through the free-and-reduced program. Pine Middle also has an experienced staff, with 75% of teachers having taught five years or more. According to the demographic survey, Pine Middle utilizes traditional report cards.

George shared that he has spent most of his career in a middle school as both teacher and administrator. However, George also has three years of experience as an elementary school

principal. He was in the elementary school principalship when the Southern Trees Schools began SBG, and he recalled the significant amount of time it took for teachers to learn about and create grading rubrics. While serving as an elementary principal, George attended some of the required SBG training sessions that were designed for elementary teachers. George stated that he has not attended any other SBG training since becoming a middle school principal and no training has been done with middle school teachers during his tenure as a middle school principal.

When asked about his school's current grading practices, George said that Pine Middle teachers use traditional grading practices. George shared that grading consistency among teachers has been established through the school's many PLCs. He explained there is a PLC for each grade level and subject area, and they meet weekly with an administrator. George stated that the PLCs ensure that teachers in the same grade level and subject area use the same number of grades as well as a mix of assignments within their grading practices. However, George explained that those PLC expectations are just guidelines and that each teacher has their own individual grading plan. These loosely structured guidelines align well with George's stated belief that teachers should have ownership of their classes and that traditional grading is a strength of the school district and Pine Middle. When asked if he monitored grading practices, George stated that he does not monitor grading practices "other than checking to make sure they are putting grades in the system consistently and having administrators attend PLCs so we know what is being discussed." George's description of PLCs, individual grading practices, and monitoring of grades, build on the theme *misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists*.

In sharing his understanding of the purpose of grades, George explained that grades should reflect what the student knows or what percentage of the content the student has

mastered. Additionally, George noted that grades should provide feedback to parents, students, and teachers about a student's mastery of content. He explained, "Grades should provide feedback and reflect what a student knows or what percentage of the content the student has mastered to provide feedback to parents, students, and teachers on the student's mastery toward content."

When asked about the strengths and needs of current grading practices, George stated that he is not in favor of transitioning middle schools to SBG. However, he does believe there is room for improvement with the current traditional grading practices. He provided an example related to the issue of teachers grading homework and practice. Specifically, George said that math teachers take too many grades. However, he added, "In middle school if teachers do not grade an assignment, many students will not complete the work. And if they don't complete the work, especially the practice, then teachers can't know where a student is struggling."

Additionally, George believes that some student behavior should be considered when determining a student's grade:

I don't think you should take 10 points off because they didn't put their name on the paper. But I do believe there is a level of behavior that naturally goes into an assignment in terms of how much effort you put forth. Perhaps a rubric that shows how much you followed all the examples or a test that shows you how to study.

George further explained that he does not think students should have "carte blanche" to turn in assignments whenever they want. He stated, "I think that reinforces negative behaviors that doesn't model what institutions stand for." However, George does believe that teachers should build in multiple opportunities for students to show mastery of standards, make up work, and complete test/assignment corrections.

As the interview continued with questions about teacher and parent beliefs, the theme of *parents and teachers expecting traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high school* became apparent. George shared that most middle school teachers would prefer traditional grading:

It holds kids accountable because otherwise we know we have gifted kids who grasp things easily, always going to be a Level 4 (if using SBG) and if they can do one little task to be a 4, they will. I think there is so much more that goes into developing critical thinkers, so the accountability piece of grading is important in middle school.

George thinks that while many teachers appreciate SBG philosophies, they are more comfortable with traditional grading. He also shared that the belief that parents prefer traditional grading because they are familiar with letter grades and they “know what an A, B, C, etc. represents.” He provided an example of parents being confused over the SBG report card in elementary school. He said, “If the student is a 2, progressing in the middle of the year and then score high on the benchmark test, that information is confusing to parents.” George added, “If traditional grading is done right, it allows context as to how well my kid is doing in school and this is what parents want to know.” George also shared that grades are very important to the students and the families at his school. He stated, “The majority of the students at this school are college bound, their parents expect As from them. We have many students earning high school credits here in preparation for high school and college.” Additionally, George noted that he has not felt any pressure to transition his staff to SBG from the traditional system. Rather he feels parents and teachers are supportive of traditional grading and they expect that Pine Middle will continue traditional grading.

When asked about the district's leadership's role in SBG, George shared his perception of the district's vision of SBG as more of an elementary practice. George recalled working with elementary teachers when SBG was introduced and stated there were so many hours put into trying to create and understand grading rubrics and calibrate teachers' understanding of the standards. Yet, he questioned if SBG in the elementary schools had been evaluated since implementation. He stated, "I wonder what the data would show us about the effectiveness of how SBG is affecting elementary students." George's ideas contribute to the theme, *a lack of district-level report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration.*

Additionally, George shared his frustration with the district's 50 Rule for middle school grades. He explained that the 50 Rule was put in place as a SBG practice to ensure that students could not receive lower than a 50 on any assignment. George suggested that this policy has reinforced negative work habits in middle school students. For example, Pine Middle has a high number of students in honor's level classes. George said that those students, who are typically seen as "compliant and good students," take inappropriate advantage of the 50 Rule. He said that they do not complete work because the students know they will not get an "F" in the class. "So, it has created a little game playing with, I'm not going to complete this assignment." George believes this practice has inflated student grades:

For instance, we had 636 students make all "As" this quarter, which is a little less than half our student population, which is great, but I also know that if we gave zeros that number would not be there and I am not sure we truly should have 636 "A" students.

In the end, George believes that if there is no accountability for the students to complete work, then many students will pick and choose which assignments they complete. He stated, “The district wants to ensure that students can recover from a zero, but the way they are going about it with a rule, is not really helping students see the importance of doing the work.”

Reflecting on the recent COVID-19 pandemic, George does not think the pandemic has impacted the need for grading reform. Still, he does think improvements need to be made in instruction since students and teachers are back in person together consistently. When asked about his role in leading staff after the pandemic, George said that his role as a principal is to move teachers away from some of the remote instructional practices they had to use during the pandemic, to some best practices that focus students on interaction and critical thinking:

I think the work for me, and the leadership team is, we’ve got to keep reminding our teachers in PLCs of actually getting away from some of the technology and ensure we are building critical thinkers. So, during COVID-19 when we had to be remote, hybrid and then back and forth between in person and remote for a while, we were forced to do everything through technology in order to survive and some of that ended up being a lot easier on teachers. Now that we are back to full in person learning, the focus should be on going back to some of those in-person experiences that build critical thinking.

George’s insights into the current needs of staff and students build on the theme that *leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic*.

In summary, George believes that traditional grading is an effective practice at Pine Middle School. While George has had some experience with SBG in elementary school, he does not think it would be a sensible decision for middle schools. George expressed the need for

middle school students to be held accountable through grades, and that this accountability is expected by parents and teachers. While George sees a need to focus his teachers on improved instructional practices post COVID-19 pandemic, he does not feel that SBG is necessary.

Case Study 3: David Oaks Middle School

David met with the researcher on the Zoom virtual platform in the spring of 2022 during a 45-minute semi-structured interview session. Based on his responses to the demographic survey, David is a White male with seven years of experience as a principal. David previously has served as a high school assistant principal, a middle school assistant principal, and an elementary school principal. He currently serves as principal of Oaks Middle School.

Oaks Middle School's student population consists of 5% Asian, 23% Black, 6% Hispanic, 13% Multiracial, and 58% White students. Additionally, Oaks Middle school is one of the more affluent middle schools in the Southern Trees Schools, with 18% of the students being served by the free-and-reduced lunch program. Oaks Middle has an experienced teaching staff with 50% of the teachers at Oaks Middle having taught five or more years. Oaks Middle School uses a traditional report card according to the demographic survey completed by David.

David did not participate in elementary school SBG trainings before becoming an elementary principal. He shared that he had participated in a few article/book discussions around SGB at district-level administrative meetings, but he had no formal professional development. David shared that most of his SBG experience and knowledge comes from his time as an elementary principal in Southern Trees Schools following districtwide implementation of SBG in elementary. When asked about his experience with SBG Principal David stated:

I lived it as an elementary principal. I have more of an understanding of SBG in K-5, not that the premise isn't good, but in middle school there are a lot more dynamics that are not taken into account when it comes to accountability side of things.

When asked to describe the current grading practices at Oaks Middle, David stated that his school uses traditional report card and grading practices. He said, "We have pockets where teachers are really focusing on the types of assignments they are assigning, but it is really more still traditional scale." David thinks that students seeing a direct "numerical equivalent of right and wrong" on their work is a strength of traditional grading. While David thinks numerical grades are a strength, he also thinks teachers can better select the types of assignments they use to determine a student's grade. He does think teachers should use less practice assignments for grades, but also allow the grade to show the student has made growth and mastery of topics. He feels that the teachers do a good job through PLCs of knowing what to teach and assess. According to David, Oaks Middle teachers use a variety of ways to calculate grades, including a mix of points and averages. Additionally, most allow test corrections so students can improve test grades. David's description of the PLCs and teacher's grading practices at Oak Middle contribute to the emerging theme that *misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists*.

David also discussed his perceptions about the purpose of grades. He noted that there is a discrepancy between the ideal purpose of grades and parents' understanding of grades. David stated, "Grades should show the student's progress toward mastery of the skills. On the practical end of things, people don't know what that means. Parents and students see grades as; is my kid doing what they are supposed to be doing at school?"

David also thinks that middle school teachers prefer traditional grading. He stated, “I don’t think anyone in middle school disagrees with the premise of SBG, but in middle school it does not account for all the needed components.” He referred to the unpopular implementation of the Southern Trees Schools’ district-level 50 Rule that requires middle school teachers to give no less than a 50 on any assignment including those not turned in to reduce the effects of zeroes. David explained the use of the 50 Rule in middle school has made students even more apathetic and that students could then have only a few assignments done and still make a “D.” David explained that this practice then allows the student to qualify for athletics and other extra-curricular activities.

When asked to clarify if he thinks student behavior should be part of grading, David explained:

I don’t think behavior should be included in grades, however not doing work is a behavior. So, I think there needs to be, if your child chooses to do nothing, then the grade is going to be impacted by that, it is the natural consequence.

David thinks that “SBG is really hard for non-school people to understand, so then you get into what does a 3 mean, that is confusing for parents and students.” Instead of transitioning to SBG, David would like to focus more on having a school-led approach to letting parents know what the middle school grades mean and how they prepare students for the transition from middle to high school. David’s description of the purpose and perception of grades builds on the emerging theme that *parents and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high school.*

David said he has not done any work with his current middle school staff towards SBG grading reform. He shared that while he has felt pressure from the district to follow the 50 Rule, even though it has unintended consequences, David posited:

a lowest minimum grading rule should be part of a full SBG reform. The intention of a rule like that is to help kids who are truly failing, using it as a blanket rule to state we are SBG, is teaching a lot of other kids who aren't failing how to play a game with their work.

He explained that in the previous year Oaks Middle was one of the only middle schools in the district that still gave a zero for missing work. He said that giving zeroes for missed work led to more students completing their work. Additionally, his middle school had some of the highest test scores in the state that year. The following year his staff followed the 50 Rule and Oaks Middle still had high growth on student achievement results. However, academic achievement was not as high as in the year in which zeroes were assigned for missed work. David believes this is because students were not held accountable throughout the year for completing assignments.

The theme that of *a lack of district-level report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle schools has created confusion and frustration* emerged in David's interview responses. When asked to describe district-level supports of SBG implementation in middle schools, David shared that the district has not provided any training or support on SBG and the district's required 50 Rule. He added that the 50 Rule has not been helpful. He further explained that many middle school students are taking high school credit courses. Thus, he believes the grading policies should be the same across middle and high school. David indicated that he thinks it is unethical for middle schools to award students who do not complete

assignments a grade of 50 while high schools give zeroes for missing the same assignments. David does not think that it benefits middle school students to have a different set of grading rules than those used in high schools. He thinks that practice frustrates middle school teachers.

David also thinks the district should provide clear direction on grading. He envisions this direction including the school board and district leaders explaining SBG implementation throughout the district to parents and teachers. Alternatively, David argued to leave SBG as an elementary grading tool and align middle school and high school grading practices. David captured the frustration, “Where we are at now is confusing, but I’m not sure we will see it change because standards-based sounds good, nobody wants to stand up and say we aren’t doing it.”

As the interview continued, David shared that during the COVID-19 pandemic there was a negative impact on student grading because teachers ended up just giving grades that resulted from “desperation in the remote days.” David stated that he does not see a reason to change the way they are currently grading. Rather, he believes teachers can improve on the types of assessments and he believes that offering students the opportunity to modify and create authentic types of assessments would possibly impact grading. However, he does not think this modification needs to be done by implementing SBG report card. This reinforced the theme that *leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic.*

David’s overall perceptions of grading in middle school are supportive of continuing traditional grading practices. While David would like to see improvement on the communication about grades throughout the district, he does not see SBG as valuable for middle school students. David expressed frustration with the misalignment of grading practices across elementary, middle, and high schools and he does see this as an area for improvement. David believes his

priority as principal is to ensure teachers are using the best instruction and assessment choices, rather than reforming grading practices.

Case Study 4: Samantha Frasier Middle School

A one-hour, semi-structured interview with Samantha was held in the spring of 2022 on Zoom. Samantha had completed the demographic survey which indicates that she is a White female principal with five years of experience. Samantha had previously served both as a teacher and high school assistant principal.

Samantha has been serving as principal of Frasier Middle School for five years. The Frasier Middle student population is comprised of 2% Asian, 28% Black, 21% Hispanic, 5% Multiracial, and 44% White students, with 52% of the student body being served by the free-and-reduced lunch program. Frasier Middle has an especially veteran teaching staff with 89% of the teachers having five or more years of teaching experience. Samantha indicated that Frasier Middle uses a traditional report card.

In the demographic survey, Samantha shared that she had not previously had any training on SBG through the Southern Trees Schools. However, she stated during the interview that she had been a part of a few discussions and article reviews about SBG held during principals' meetings. Additionally, she was able to attend a national conference on formative assessment with other district leaders. In describing her experience at the assessment conference, she shared that she really bought into the idea of mastery assessment and grading that was presented:

There was a lot of good discussion and energy at our district table about this philosophy of mastery assessment...but then we were also like, how realistic is this for secondary teachers, who teach over a hundred students a year?

When asked about the current grading practices at her school, Samantha shared that she has met with her PLCs to ensure they are following the district's SBG policies that include, not grading homework and following the 50 Rule. When asked how she monitored grades, Samantha answered that she and her administrative team might check PowerSchool, which is the management system that stores the grades, and that they check in with PLCs. But the main audit is done by the data manager right before report cards are finalized to ensure there were no grades less than 50. Samantha also explained that she uses PLCs in her school as the place to discuss assessment and instruction with teams of teachers and that they review a list of failing students each quarter. She also stated that PLCs have been asked to look at how and what they grade together.

Samantha explained that the administrators at her school were very familiar with how most teachers graded because both the administrators and teachers had longevity at the school. "Our campus is one that is very communicative, so we've all gotten to know our teachers, really, really well." Samantha also shared that some of the grading practices are teacher specific:

I know I've got folks who do test corrections. And then there's some because of all the stuff they've done from the beginning of the unit are like - no retests or fixes.

So, I do think that's a little bit different per teacher and also by the different PLCs.

Samantha's description of PLCs as the school's method for assessment and instructional discourse among teachers and administrators, while simultaneously having each teacher making independent grading decisions, builds on the theme *misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists*.

Samantha further described the differences in teachers' grading practices. She explained that some like to grade everything, and some do not grade as much. Samantha also shared that

student grades can be inflated depending on how many assignments teachers give and then average for a final grade. Samantha explained that it is frustrating to see the misalignment between classroom grades and the number of students those who do and don't pass the end-of-grade state tests. To illustrate, Samantha gave an example of a highly effective math teacher whose students do very well on end-of-grade tests. She attributed this success to the teacher focusing on learning and practice rather than on giving grades. She explained:

He doesn't really do a lot of grading; he uses very few grades. But his kids do extremely well (on the end-of-grade test) because he does a lot of in class work, just learning and learning and learning and you do see a positive correlation to the end-of-grade testing.

As the interview progressed, Samantha elaborated on the need for district leaders to decide if SBG was going to be implemented throughout the district. Samantha explained that it seemed as if the district was trying to have "a foot in both worlds," as they supported both traditional and SBG philosophies. For example, Samantha recalled being in a district meeting when she heard about the 50 Rule. She explained, "They basically told us, hey look the 50 is the new zero. So, we've had conversations about that at PLCs, but aside from that we have not done any SBG training." She added that she does not think the district can effectively implement SBG only in elementary and middle schools and then introduce traditional grades in high schools:

If we're going to do it in middle school, we've got to do a systemic change all the way through, otherwise we are doing a huge disservice to our middle school kids before they get to high school. If we are expecting to get students ready for college and career readiness it's a much bigger picture and we can't just put grades on students in ninth grade, that does not bode well with me.

Samantha's explanation contributes to the theme of *a lack of district-level report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration.*

Samantha explained that most of the work with SBG in Southern Trees school district was done in elementary schools and her perception is that SBG has been a success at that level. She added that a formal analysis of the implementation of SBG in the elementary schools would inform what SBG might look like in the middle schools. Specifically, she noted, "If we see data showing this is best practice for students, then we could develop what does this look like for the transitional years of middle school."

Samantha expressed frustration with some of the past district-level decisions around SBG, including taking high school out of the SBG secondary grading policy and then creating the 50 Rule exclusively for middle schools. She shared that middle school teachers really do not like the rule. While she favors allowing students the opportunity to recover from zeros, she agrees with teachers' concerns that the 50 Rule has created apathy among students about completing assignments. When asked if she felt pressure from the district to implement SBG, she said she did not. Rather, she shared that she thinks there is more pressure from veteran and experienced teachers to maintain their autonomy over grading.

When asked about the impacts of COVID-19 on students and grading practices, Samantha shared:

So, what's hard for me is making it all about grading. What's bubbling up is a decrease in emotional maturity with an increase in the types of behaviors, causing increase in discipline and it's creating this perfect storm. So, I think we need to take this opportunity to also think about that social-emotional piece for school back in there.

Samantha further added that reevaluating instruction after the pandemic to further incorporate students' social-emotional needs could also have positive effects on assessment and grading. Samantha spoke about how adolescent students need to be encouraged and emotionally supported while also being held accountable for their academic performance and for more abstract ideals like social interactions, participation, and responsibility. She also suggested that grading could be used to build confidence and pride in students rather than just using it as a penalty. Samantha feels that some middle school students may have more significant social-emotional delays because of social isolation during the pandemic and rethinking some grading practices could be used as a way to support some of these adolescents in the maturing process that happens in middle school years.

When asked if she thought she could lead grading reform following the pandemic, she indicated she could, but not as an isolated priority. Samantha indicated that she did not see grading as a stand-alone initiative. "To me this is about assessment, not just what is on the report card, right? It's got to be the whole shebang." Samantha spoke to the importance of understanding the adolescent child, is unique to the transitional years of middle school. She explained:

The changes in their bodies, and minds, and hearts, is a real thing, they go through so much in those years. So, I come back to the change can't be about one practice but about all the things that go into assessing and supporting middle school students, and what are we getting them ready for?

Samantha's answers to questions about grading improvements following the pandemic build on the theme of *leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic*.

In summary, Samantha is open to learning more about how SBG could be successful in middle schools because she believes that the focus needs to be on instruction, mastery, and student growth. However, she does not feel leading SBG is her responsibility without a district plan for a K-12 implementation. Samantha also feels that any kind of grading reform would need to consider all the changes students naturally go through as adolescents, and it would also need to consider students' social and emotional needs following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case Study 5: Wanda Redbud Middle School

Wanda was interviewed on the Zoom virtual platform in the spring of 2022 for approximately 45 minutes using a semi-structured format. According to the demographic survey completed by Wanda she is a White female principal with 14 years of experience as a middle school principal. Wanda previously served as a high school teacher and a middle school assistant principal. Wanda has been the principal of three middle schools, and she currently serves as the principal of Redbud Middle School.

The student population for Redbud Middle School is made up of 5% Asian, 28% Black, 16% Hispanic, 6% Multiracial, and 45% White students. Approximately 28% of the student body is served by the free-and-reduced lunch program. Redbud Middle has a relatively experienced teaching staff, with 60% of the teachers having five or more years' experience teaching. Wanda indicated that report cards use a traditional grading system at Redbud Middle.

When asked about her experiences with SBG, Wanda immediately stated that she is huge supporter of SBG. She claimed to be somewhat self-transformed in the SBG philosophy. She explained that she read the book *Rethinking Homework* (Vatterott, 2015) while serving as a high school math teacher. Reading that book caused Wanda to examine her own grading practices and getting students more engaged in math. Wanda explained that she had an "aha" moment when

she started thinking about traditional math grading, which involved grading practice and homework for accuracy and completion and giving zeros for incomplete work. She had been seeking a way to move her high school students from completing assignments for compliance and have them participate in authentic mathematical struggle. She saw students begin to change their level of participation in math class when she no longer graded practice, homework, and terminated the use of zeros. Wanda also explained that she realized the students' grades were not the sole purpose of her math class. Rather, she wanted student learning to be the primary focus. She stated it is hard to help teachers understand that philosophy.

Wanda stated that she has not received any formal professional development on SBG through the Southern Trees Schools. Wanda explained that her most meaningful understanding of SBG occurred in the process of examining the ideas presented in the article "The Case Against the Zero" (Reeves, 2004) with a math teacher when she was serving as a principal. The article raises the issue of the zero not aligning to a 4-point grading scale and how it is also not mathematically fair to use zeroes in ten-point grading scales. The article promoted the use of a 4-point as more impartial grading scale. Wanda described their learning evolution:

We really mulled over that, and I pushed him from traditional math, and he literally transformed his instruction based on you know us kind of digging into that. When you consider good math instruction it just doesn't align with when you start trying to put in place all the mathematical practices, it's just hard to put a traditional number on all that kind of instruction and so we started valuing different pieces of what kids, how kids are demonstrating it, was just as important for kids to be able to talk out their thinking as it was to produce the correct answer. It's hard to quantify that with you know, what a traditional number would force us to do.

When asked to describe current grading practices at her school, Wanda stated that teachers were using curriculum standards from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and giving feedback to students about their progress on the standards. Wanda also shared that her teachers have been working to help students set goals and monitor their own progress. She feels that encouraging a growth mindset with students and teachers is another step toward SBG. She explained, “I feel like goal setting the grades (with the students) has been really positive for us. And it kind of helped us frontload the growth mindset for kids and gave them a reason to want to keep trying after that initial failure.” Additionally, the use of PLC teams to review students’ grades and monitor students who are failing is an important part of the grading practices at Redbud Middle. Wanda described using the PLC to “push” teachers to think about the students. She explained, “I’ve never been a micromanager, but I like to always keep the conversation going, what are you doing for that 30% who didn’t get it? and then I keep asking.”

Wanda described teachers making common decisions about curriculum standards and student assignments through the discussions held during PLC meetings. Wanda has done training with her staff to emphasize that practice work should not be graded and that assignments used to determine final grades should only capture the students’ progression of mastery of the standard. However individual teachers are given the autonomy to select assignments that work best for each of their classes.

When asked to describe the purpose of grades, Wanda opined that grades should serve as a communication tool for students, parents, and teachers to identify the extent to which a student has mastered grade level concepts. Wanda’s rich descriptions of the PLCs’ focus on standardized instruction and student work while individual teachers determine grading factors continue to

shape the theme that *misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists*.

As the interview progressed with questions about leading SBG professional development, Wanda explained that she has established a culture of learning through PLCs with her staff. She described an organic, ongoing conversation she has with teachers at content-specific PLCs and at larger staff meetings. Wanda explained, "You have to challenge them and come at it from different angles, even giving them different mathematical scenarios to make your point." Wanda articulated that ultimately the transition comes from not forcing mandates on teachers but encouraging them and asking them to think differently. Wanda also asks teachers who have had a positive experience with SBG to "share their testimonies and transformations." Wanda described other ways she has continued to move the staff forward with SBG through optional book studies and discussions during PLC meetings. When asked if she felt pressured to implement SBG Wanda stated she had not. She added, "I guess since I already felt so strongly about it and I am always pushing SBG, I have not felt pressured."

The theme of *a lack of district report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration* became evident when Wanda described middle school teachers' reactions to the 50 Rule. She explained the district grading guidelines have created teacher frustration with policies such as the 50 Rule. Wanda also shared that she thought it would benefit students if middle schools and high schools to become more closely aligned in their grading processes for the benefit of the students. Wanda believes the frustration around the 50 Rule could create an opportunity for more dialogue with district leaders about the purpose behind the grading practices. However, she believes for this dialogue to happen, the

district will have to create a long-term professional development plan around SBG for secondary teachers.

The theme *parents and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high school* became evident as Wanda continued to discuss expectations and barriers in changes in grading practices. Wanda believes that parents prefer traditional grading, but she explains:

That is really all they know; an A is good and F is bad. I honestly think they would like more information, but there is no bumper sticker that can capture standards-based grading, like my kid made the honor roll, right?

Despite expressing concerns about traditional grading, Wanda acknowledged that her experiences as a parent aided her understanding of parents' support for traditional grading. She shared that she was concerned about the letter grades her own children received as they progressed through middle school and high school. She explained, "The systems we have for students to be accepted into college, athletics, and other opportunities have made the value of the letter grade and GPA to be the most important factor for students and parents."

Nonetheless, Wanda expressed frustration with the traditional practices many middle school teachers still hold on to:

I still think we have a lot of folks (teachers) that want to penalize kids with grades. Their reasoning for penalizing is to teach kids they won't be able to do this in the workplace, and I think they have to be practical; you know things come up and life happens, I don't penalize staff every time they are late, sometimes it is just life.

Despite her concerns about some teachers using a penalty mindset, Wanda noted that many teachers have been open to a mastery approach in grading. She shared that most teachers

understand and value the philosophies of SBG, however they are not confident in managing SBG with so many students. Also, Wanda noted that some teachers resist SBG because it takes longer to grade students under that model than it does to count points or average scores under a traditional model.

When asked about leading SBG reform on the heels of COVID-19 Wanda shared that she is not sure if that should be a priority right now:

I do think SBG is the way to go with our kids, however I am worried with the teacher shortage and the stress we have on our current teachers. Asking them to change their grading practices right now might not need to be the focus. It feels a little like we are in survival mode, so I'm not sure it's a top priority.

Wanda's comments build on the theme that *leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic*. Wanda further explained that the access and equity issues that have plagued certain groups of students were only made worse by the pandemic. Therefore, she said that teachers could benefit more from professional development focused on social-emotional needs that have risen from the pandemic rather than transition to SBG.

In conclusion, Wanda supports the implementation of SBG in middle schools. She understands the philosophical shift that must take place for teachers to truly implement grading improvements. Wanda continues to work with her staff through PLCs to constantly reflect on instruction, assessment, and grading practices. However, Wanda recognizes the need for district alignment between elementary, middle, and high schools regarding grading practices. Finally, while Wanda values the impact SBG reform would have on middle school, she does not see that as a priority with all the other needs that have risen since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case Study 6: Raymond Elm Middle School

A 40-minute interview was conducted with Raymond in spring of 2022 using the Zoom platform. In the demographic survey, Raymond indicated that he has been a middle school principal for 22 years, and he spent all his years as an educator in a middle school setting. At the time of this interview, Raymond was serving as principal of his second middle school, Elm Middle School, where he has been principal for the last 8 years.

Elm Middle is in the Southern Trees School system in a southeastern state in the US. The student population consists of 15% Black, 80% White, and 5% Other (which includes Multiracial and Hispanic) students. Additionally, 28% of the student population at Elm Middle is served through the free-and-reduced lunch program. Elm Middle School has an experienced staff, with 80% of the teachers having taught five or more years. Raymond indicated that Elm Middle uses a traditional report card.

Raymond's knowledge of SBG began when he attended a mastery learning conference years ago with Rick Wormeli, a researcher and author in differentiated instruction and SBG. While Raymond grew up with traditional grading and used traditional practices as a teacher, he attended Wormeli's conference "Fair Isn't Always Equal" and began to move toward standard-based thinking. Raymond also shared that graduate school program he completed was trying out standards-based grading. He explained, "I got my first 2 and thought hey I failed, but the professors were like, no you're growing up the scale to the end of the class, and so I actually didn't understand it either as a student." When asked if he had any training on SBG Raymond stated he had not:

There was just a meeting one time, and it was like we are using these standards-based policies for grading in middle school and I think I recall some discussion around PowerSchool requiring number grades and that was it, but no PD.

When asked to describe his schools' current grading practices and whether they were mostly traditional or standards-based, he asked the researcher, "Is there a third option?" He elaborated by saying that he believes Elm Middle has a hybrid grading system. Raymond asks his teachers to grade by standards but to use the traditional hundred-point scale to assign grades. Raymond claimed he is a proponent of standards-based grading and articulated that he has attempted to "convert the standards-based philosophy in the hundred-point scale." However, Raymond clarified that Elm Middle is still mostly traditional in teachers' grading practices with some standards-based "tendencies and practices infiltrating in," resulting in his description of a hybrid grading system.

In describing the strengths of the current grading practices at Elm Middle, Raymond was pleased to share that his teachers had embraced one of the philosophies of SBG, offering students a chance to complete test corrections and other tasks that allow students to show mastery. He stated, "They are looking at the growth in terms of reading and other things, celebrating the growth with students is very important." Additionally, teachers are not using grades as a penalty or punishment. He added:

Test corrections is a great example of a baby step we've taken... it sends the message to the student, okay you didn't master it but let me go back and correct my mistakes. Research says you're going to remember this mistake and not make it again if your correct yourself."

Raymond explained that kind of small step seems to have resonated with most teachers, even those who are very rigid with traditional grading.

Raymond believes that grades should “show what you know and reflect on what you know, not just if you are a compliant kid. It needs to be based on how you are grasping and understanding standards that are being taught.” Additionally, Raymond expressed that the grading process should involve clear communication and feedback to the students. “I think we’re a little too focused on the grade, instead of mastery of the standards and I believe that is where we need to get to.” At Elm Middle School Raymond does require the PLCs to ensure that teachers are using similar grading rubrics across that grade and content area and that teachers are discussing student data as a team. However, Raymond noted the conversations can quickly move to “how many points a student can earn on an assignment, instead of what is the best way to help the students apply this standard.” This builds on the theme *misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher’s grading practices exists*.

Raymond shared that approximately one-half of his teachers have been willing to try new things with grading and the other half are resistant. Raymond believes the teachers who are resistant do not understand SBG and have a hard time with it because of their own experiences with grading. He believes that parents also have a better understanding of traditional grades because again that is how they grew up and what they know. Raymond knows it can be confusing to parents but thinks if a more effective job was done with the teacher training and parent communication piece, more parents would understand, especially since students are graded on a standards-based report card in elementary in the district and parents have become familiar with SBG.

Raymond also explained that he thinks middle school is a transitional spot for grading, which speaks to the theme *parents and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high school*. Raymond noted:

Parents in our district understand standards-based because they have had it in elementary, but they are thinking they need “real grades” in middle school to get them ready for high school. I can see the dilemma for middle school teachers, they feel oh we have to get them ready for high school, but I’m thinking it’s more important to ensure they know the standards before high school.

Additionally, Raymond acknowledged that change is a process and a long-term plan with “baby steps” is needed for effective implementation. Raymond feels the Southern Trees Schools’ leaders want to be a standards-based grading school system. He explained that the district implemented SBG in elementary schools with professional development and pilot school programs. However there hasn’t been any training toward SBG in middle schools. Raymond explained they simply distributed some “SBG policies” for middle school. His comments build on the theme, *a lack of district-level report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration*. When asked what the district leadership should do Raymond explained:

more intentionality with training, more focused on what research tells us about grading, the purposes, and what is effective. In most ways we are very behind. As it stands now, it seems there is no plan and no real vision. They need to start with a pilot and take the time to do it right... we need to go the next mile.

Raymond conveyed that middle school needs its own model that would include some behavior components of not completing work, which Raymond states is a big barrier for middle school teachers in embracing SBG.

Raymond described his success with implementing SBG by using a growth mindset. He said, “I try to use Teach It, Preach It, Model It, the best I can. I’ve never been a micromanager.” In Raymond’s experience, teachers do better when they are given the freedom to try a new initiative rather than being mandated to do so. Therefore, Raymond has not been surprised by teachers’ negative reaction to the district-mandated 50 Rule that requires all zeros to be turned into 50s. Raymond explained the idea behind a lowest minimum grade is to help students recover from zeros. However, Raymond shared that the mandate of the 50 Rule has not gone well with teachers who felt this practice was imposed upon them with no training or explanation.

When asked how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected grading, Raymond explained, “We have larger gaps with kids now, there’s even a great need to go back to the student, understand the concept or standard, where they are proficient.” Additionally, Raymond stated that teachers need training on how to fill in learning gaps resulting from lost instructional time. He noted that teachers are being asked to teach grade-level academic standards while simultaneously helping students to accelerate in previous grade-level standards missed during pandemic induced school closures. He believes this will require different training from what teachers were focused on during the pandemic. Specifically, professional development was focused on how to teach school virtually. According to Raymond, schools need to turn their focus to best practices for in-person learning now that the pandemic is behind us.

When asked about how the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted the principal’s ability to lead grading reform, Raymond shared, “I will keep leading grading reform

in the small ways I can message it, really trying to do it through a growth mindset.” However, Raymond expressed concern that principals would need support from the district and the board of education to fully implement a SBG report card in middle school. With that in mind, Raymond rationalized that the climate in education has shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic, making a shift to SBG more daunting. He said, “I’m not sure now is the time, with the climate of parents going to school boards for everything they don’t like. Administrators and teachers have lost so much credibility, so I’m not sure I can see it as a success right now.” Raymond’s comments contribute to the theme, *leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic*. Raymond also shared that a full transition to SBG would be particularly challenging considering so many other priorities. For example, he noted that schools are trying to address students’ learning loss related to the pandemic, social-emotional learning, teacher burnout, and a national teacher shortage.

In review, Raymond is in support of the SBG report card and grading system for middle schools. He has a wealth of knowledge on both the successes and barriers that must be part of a well-planned implementation of SBG. Raymond suggested the idea of a comprehensive middle school model for SBG that is unique to the needs of adolescents, as well as a district plan that includes staff training and support. While Raymond is a supporter of SBG reform, he is not convinced it can be a top priority in a post-COVID-19 pandemic school.

Research Question 1

What are middle school principals’ perceptions and understandings of current grading practices?

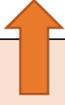
The first area of analysis for this study was to examine principals’ perceptions of current grading practices in their schools. Understanding principals’ knowledge of grading practices in their schools would be foundational to answer other researcher questions. The response from

participants consistently gave rise to the first theme: *misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists*.

This theme was evident in all six case study narratives. Each principal described using their school's PLCs to foster alignment between curriculum standards, classroom instruction, and assessment. Most principals spoke positively about how PLCs provided an effective structure in which teachers collaborated about instruction and assessment. Specifically, all the principals suggested that grades should clearly articulate a student's mastery of a particular curriculum standard to the students, parents, and teachers.

Despite participants' descriptions about how PLCs are used to standardized instruction, assessment, and grading between teachers, all principals identified individual teacher grading practices as the norm. Teachers within every middle school have significant autonomy when it comes to grading practices. For example, George shared that the teachers needed ownership of their classes through their own grading systems. Raymond described "pockets" of teachers using SBG practices in grading but made it clear that doing so was at their discretion. Thorough principal descriptions of the various grading practices utilized by teachers show that principals are aware of a variety of individualized grading practices. However, despite the collaborative work with PLCs to standardize practices, principals do not monitor or mandate the same grading practices across teachers, grade levels, or even a PLC group of teachers. Figure 4 displays the various data components that led to the emergence of this theme.

Figure 4*Theme 1*

Emergent Theme	<i>misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists</i>		
Categories	 PLC Collaboration	 Purpose of Grades	 Individual Teacher's Grading
Codes & Data Chunks	Common Grading Practices Traditional Practices Growth Mindset Improvements in Traditional Practices Strengths of SBG	Factors of Grading Purpose of Grades Instructional Practice & Assessments	Monitoring Grades Teacher Exemplars Strengths of Traditional Practices

Note. A visual representation of the codes, categories, and emergent descriptive theme: *misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists.*

A related finding that was noted across all six principal case studies was the absence of district-level training on SBG practices for principals. Lucy, George, and David all had previous experience with SBG because of training they received when working in elementary schools. Wanda and Raymond, who both said that they are proponents of SBG in middle school were somewhat self-taught in SBG practices. Samantha had only attended a national conference on mastery learning. However, all six participants reported receiving no training at the district level while serving as middle school principals. It became evident through principals' responses that some SBG practices are being implemented through district policies while more comprehensive SBG training is noticeably absent.

Research Question 2

What are middle school principals' perceptions of leading transition in current grading and reporting practices?

The second area of analysis for this study was to examine principals' perceptions of leading transition in current grading practices in their schools. This is an important topic because the district of study has fully implemented SBG in the elementary schools and has required the use of SBG policies in middle schools. Given that any successful implementation to current grading practices would depend largely on principal leadership, it is important to understand their perceptions of their ability to lead such a transition. The responses from participants consistently gave rise to a second theme: *a lack of district-level report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration.*

The emphasis on the 50 Rule, a district-level grading mandate for middle schools that does not allow a grade below 50 on any student assignment, was discussed at length by each principal. It was described as a barrier and frustration for teachers. Participants also noted that teachers resent that the 50 Rule only applies to middle schools. According to participants, middle school teachers believe that the 50 Rule has unintentionally contributed to apathy among some students about completing assignments.

All six participants also described concerns about the lack of a district plan for the progression of a SBG grading report card that transitions with students from elementary, middle, and high schools. George, David, and Samantha considered SBG more of an elementary practice in the district. Samantha, David, Wanda, and Raymond all spoke to the great need for alignment between middle and high school grading practices. David described giving a minimum grade of 50 to middle school students who take high school classes while simultaneously giving zeros to

high school students taking the same classes as an unethical practice. Lucy, David, and Raymond each spoke to the need for district-level support and clarity before they could effectively lead grading reform. Samantha also shared her perception that the district was trying to have “a foot in both worlds,” supporting both traditional and SBG philosophies. Raymond shared the viewpoint that if district leaders and the school board did not support teachers and administrators, they would not have much credibility in grading reform. All participants voiced the need for a systemwide approach to aligning grading practices. Figure 5 displays the various data components that led to the emergence of this theme.

Figure 5

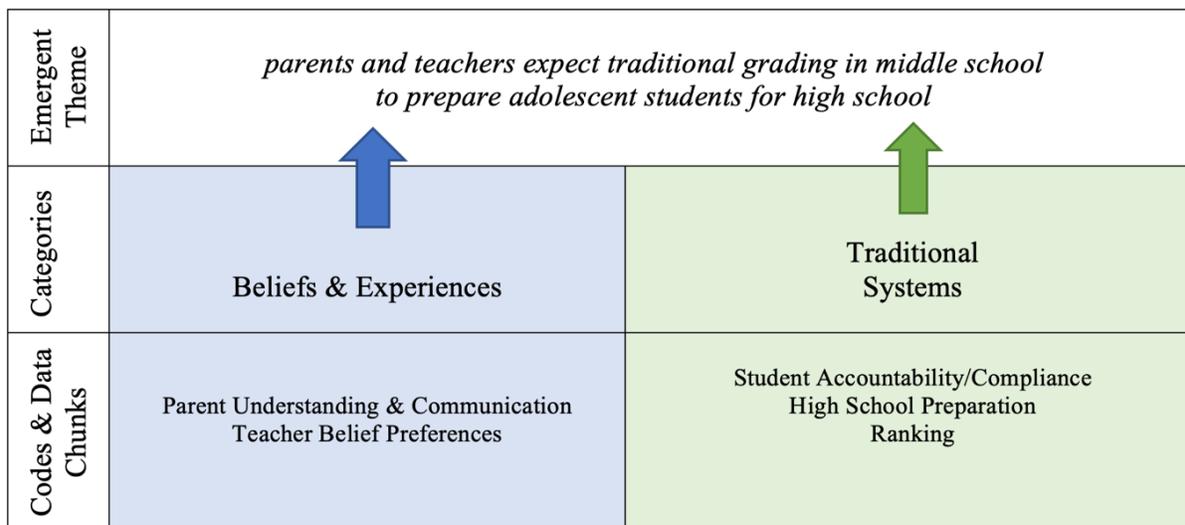
Theme 2

Emergent Theme	<i>a lack of district-level SBG report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration</i>		
Categories	 District Expectations	 Communication	 K-12 Alignment
Codes & Data Chunks	District Leadership 50 Rule Leading Grading Reform	Professional Development Commitment/Clarity for SBG	Middle School Transition Elementary Practices

Note. A visual representation of the codes, categories, and emergent descriptive theme: *a lack of district level report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration.*

The second research question also gave rise to a third theme. The theme *parents and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high*

school was evident in five of the participants' narratives. Understanding how parents and teachers view grading is an important aspect in principals' perceptions of leading grading transitions. Additionally, all six participants also spoke about middle school teachers' preference for traditional grading. For example, Lucy shared that while she does not condone using behavior as part of a student's grade, she saw middle school teachers using it as a classroom management and motivation tool. Both George and David spoke about the importance of using traditional grades to hold students accountable for completing coursework. Five of the participants also detailed how parents understand traditional grades better than SBG. Wanda, George, and Lucy both discussed parents valuing traditional grades as a gauge when students enter high school and college. They also referred to the importance of traditional grades for the various rankings of students that occur in high schools. The need for communication and clarity to parents about SBG from the district level was also noted across case studies. Raymond suggested a model of SBG, specifically middle school, that includes accountability for work habits, might be a good starting place to adding middle school teachers concerned with student accountability. Figure 6 displays the various data components that led to the emergence of this theme.

Figure 6*Theme 3*

Note. A visual representation of the codes, categories, and emergent descriptive theme: *parents and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high school.*

Research Question 3

What are middle school principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the transition to SBG?

The final theme, *leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic*, can be related to both research questions 2 and 3. Each participant spoke about their perceptions of the impacts of COVID-19. Commonalities across participants' responses included the need to reintroduce best teaching practices, prevent teacher burnout, and develop systems around student social-emotional needs. Lucy, Wanda, and Raymond all stated they felt they could lead SBG reform in middle school. However, they felt the impact of COVID-19 had put other priorities in front of grading reform. Both Lucy and Samantha expressed the need for a broader, systemic

middle school reform that would encompass student social-emotional needs, academic loss, and grading rather than implementing SBG as a stand-alone initiative. But George and David did not think SBG reform is appropriate or needed for middle school. All participants described their role as the leader of their school post COVID-19 pandemic as one of facilitating improved instructional practices. Ultimately, all six participants stated that SBG improvements were not a current priority. Figure 7 displays the various data components that led to the emergence of this theme.

Figure 7

Theme 4

Emergent Theme	<i>leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	
Categories	 Impacts of COVID-19	 Other Factors
Codes & Data Chunks	Student Behavior Maturity Social Emotional Needs Learning Loss Teacher Shortage/Hiring Instructional Practice Assessments Equity Concerns	Leading grading Reform Principal's Role Barriers to Leading SBG Transition to SBG Principal's Knowledge and Experience Improvements of SBG

Note. A visual representation of the codes, categories, and emergent descriptive theme: *leading SBG is not a priority post COVID-19 pandemic.*

Summary

In Chapter 4, the researcher has specified descriptive data from each of the six participants from the demographic survey that was completed prior to the interviews.

Additionally, descriptive data about each school's student demographics are also included. A detailed description of the analysis and synthesis process of the interview data was also included in this chapter. A rich description of each participant's perceptions was provided through a narrative of each interview. Four descriptive themes emerged from the analysis and comparison of the principals' perspectives through the individual case studies a) misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists b) a lack of district level SBG report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration c) parents and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high school and d) leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 5 includes further discussion and interpretation of the six case studies and the descriptive themes as well as the implications and limitations of this study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

School principals are in the exclusive position to have the greatest impact on their school culture, teacher growth and efficacy, and student achievement (DuFour et al., 2010; Marzano, 2000). Over the last two decades, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (DuFour et al., 2010) have been widely adopted across schools in America as a tool for school administrators and teachers to work toward the standards-based legislation that was mandated through the establishment of No Child Left Behind (2000). Beyond the mandates of lawmakers, the PLC model has been used by school leaders to build school culture around the idea of continuous improvement (Marzano, 2006; DuFour et al., 2010). At the same time, academic research surrounding grading practices continues to divide educators between traditional and standards-based practices. The decades long educational reform on standards-based curriculum and instruction through collaborative PLCs has not necessarily impacted how teachers assign grades. While more elementary schools have successfully adopted SBG report card practices, many secondary schools have not.

The literature on grading reform has shown that many secondary teachers continue to use traditional grading practices. These traditional grading practices combine academic and nonacademic factors under individual teacher discretion, making traditional grading systems confusing and arbitrary. Principals have continued to grant teachers autonomy in developing grades, despite studies that emphasize the inconsistencies in traditional practices. School principals have the responsibility of overseeing the grading practices utilized by teachers in their schools and are legally responsible for ensuring consistent grading practices are employed (Alexander & Alexander, 2012).

Research emphasizes that principal leadership is one of the most impactful factors in grading reform (Guskey, 2011; Link, 2019; Marzano, 2000). The purpose of this qualitative study sought to understand middle school principals' perceptions of leading SBG. A multiple case study design was utilized capturing the perceptions of six middle school principals. All six principals worked in the Southern Trees Schools in the southeast portion of the United States. The school district in this study had successfully implemented SBG in elementary schools. The district issued SBG practices and policies which included the 50 Rule for middle schools, while high schools continue with traditional grading practices.

The researcher, who was a peer of the participants, used a recruitment email and phone calls to gain participation in the study from eligible principals. Once participants gave consent to participate, the researcher sent a survey through Google to collect background information on each participant and demographic information about their school. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2022 using the Zoom platform. The interview protocol was designed around the following topics: (a) principals' understanding and perceptions of their school's current grading practices, (b) principals' perceptions of leading transitions in current grading and reporting practices and (c) principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the transition to SBG (Appendix B).

After completing the interviews through Zoom, a transcript of the recording was made available to the researcher, generated by the Zoom transcription feature. The researcher then listened to the Zoom audio recording of the transcript while reading the Zoom written version for accuracy. This step ensured all words were correct on the Zoom generated transcript. Once transcripts were checked for accuracy, the researcher listened and read through the transcriptions for meaning and began coding data chunks from interview responses. Using the constant

comparative method, the researcher sorted and compared sets of data to each other as chunks were labeled with codes and codes were then grouped into common categories. These categories were synthesized into the four themes that emerged across the six case studies.

Using the multiple case study design and the constant compare method to analyze the data, the researcher was able to answer the three research questions.

1. What are middle school principals' perceptions and understandings of current grading practices at their schools?
2. What are middle school principals' perceptions of leading transitions in current grading and reporting practices?
3. What are middle school principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the transition to standards-based grading?

The four themes that emerged from the data analysis were: (a) misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists, (b) a lack of district-level report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration, (c) parents and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high school, and (d) leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researcher sought to understand the perceptions and experiences of middle school principals in their leadership of SBG. Understanding how the leadership of the school principal impacts school improvement is important in creating meaningful change in schools. This study occurred during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The effects of the pandemic on principals' leadership on this topic is also discussed. In this final chapter the researcher will share an

interpretation of findings and discuss implications and limitations. Recommendations for future studies will conclude this chapter.

Interpretation of Findings

Misalignment Between PLC Practices and Individual Teacher's Grading Practices

All principals described the structure of PLCs in their schools as the way in which teachers come together to discuss instruction and assessment. In these middle school PLCs, teachers who taught on the same grade level and taught the same subject met weekly to focus on teaching their content standards by planning instruction and looking at common formative assessments (CFAs). This finding is consistent with the DuFour's (2010) recommended structure of PLCs as the avenue to bring a group of teachers together to collaboratively increase their understanding of the standards and improve instruction. While principals in the study identified PLCs as being focused on standards, instruction, and common assessments, all their schools continue to use traditional grading on report cards. Additionally, all the principals acknowledged that teachers use traditional grading practices which include nonacademic factors. This aligns with McMillian's (2001) study that found many secondary teachers use a variety of academic and nonacademic factors when grading students.

One of the first steps in implementing SBG is to ensure teachers have a shared understanding of the purpose of grades (Brookhart, 2011a). The six principals in this study shared a common understanding of the purpose of grades by describing grades as communication of a student's progress toward a specific standard or skill set to students, parents, and teachers. Despite a shared understanding of the purpose of grades, and the common use of standards-focused PLCs in all the middle schools, principal participants acknowledged that teachers continue to develop traditional grading systems independently from PLCs. Ironically, allowing

teachers to create independent grading systems based using hodgepodge grading (Cross & Fray, 1999) components conflicts with the standards-based instructional focus of PLCs. These findings indicate there is a misalignment between the standards-based practices of PLCs and the traditional grading practices teachers use.

Principals as instructional leaders set the expectations for acceptable instructional and assessment practices in their school (Marzano, 2000). In doing so, they define not only the managerial and logistical norms but also the cultural norms in the school. Research has shown that principals have a direct impact on teachers which leads to an indirect impact on student achievement (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Therefore, the principal's vision, influence, and expectations of PLCs remains an important vehicle in impacting student achievement. One reason that a misalignment between PLC and teacher grading practices exists could be due to individual principal's beliefs about grading. Research has shown that the principal's personal beliefs impact what they lead and promote in their schools (Link, 2019; Reeves, 2008; Zimmerman, 2011). This study found differences in the principals' beliefs about grading practices.

Two principals in this study felt that utilizing the traditional grading philosophy including the use of nonacademic factors in grades. David from Oaks Middle stated, "I don't think behavior should be included in grades, however not doing work is a behavior...and so there is a natural consequence." In this statement David is condoning traditional grading practices that allow teachers to award zeros or remove points from a student's academic score for late work. In a standards-based culture, administrators and teachers hold students accountable for incomplete or missed work in other ways, such as working lunches and missed social activities, while ensuring students complete assignments. George from Pine Middle stated, "I don't think teachers

should take 10 points off because they didn't put their name on their paper." However, George stated that students should not have "carte blanche" to turn in assignments at any time. He said, "I think that reinforces negative behaviors that doesn't model what the institutions stand for." These findings from David and George align with traditional grading philosophies. Neither George nor David wanted to implement SBG, at their schools. By contrast, Samantha at Frasier Middle seemed undecided on leading SBG. However, she favored the idea of promoting mastery learning and making middle school culture more inclusive of adolescent students' social and emotional needs.

Three other principals in the study were striving to transition teachers' traditional grading philosophies to standards-based. Lucy thought there should be a separation in behaviors and grading of academics. She said, "The emphasis of middle school still needs to be to help the children, because they are still children. We have to ask what we are communicating to the students about grades." Wanda described an ongoing push toward SBG practices with her teachers at Redbud Middle. She said, "I've never been a micromanager, but I like to always keep the conversation going, what are you doing for the 30% who didn't get it? And then I keep asking." Additionally, Raymond from Elm Middle stated that he had attempted to "convert the standards-based philosophy in the hundred-point scale," which he described as a hybrid grading system. He also said, "I believe we are a little too focused on the grade, instead of mastery of the standards and I believe that is where we need to get to." All three of these principals believed that SBG should be in middle schools, despite still having teachers using traditional practices.

Principals have the distinctive power to leverage the work of their PLCs for improvement in student achievement (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Wanda, Raymond, and Lucy described how their understanding and beliefs about traditional grading changed when they learned new

knowledge and had positive experiences leading teachers in SBG, while Samantha, David, and George had minimal training and less positive experiences with SBG. Hence, principal knowledge and beliefs about grading are impacted by the amount of training and experience they have had. This aligns with Kohansal's (2015) study that found principals who had deep instructional understanding of the initiative being implemented were more successful in creating change. This includes being able to describe the purpose of change to stakeholders and collaborate with key teaching staff to create a detailed implementation plan for their school. Thus, an important factor in determining the cause of the misalignment between PLC and grading practices within these middle schools is the principal's knowledge and experience in SBG.

Disparities in the six principals' perspectives about the use of traditional grading and SBG could also be linked to the demographics of the schools they led. Principals George and David, who did not think SBG was needed in middle school and were satisfied with traditional grading, led the most affluent middle schools. Wanda and Raymond led schools with a similar number of at-risk students (around 30% receiving free-and-reduced lunch services), while Samantha's school had about 50% of the students identified as at-risk through free-and-reduced lunch services. Lucy led the most at risk of the middle schools, with the highest percentage of racially diverse students and 80% of the student population receiving free-and-reduced lunch services. It could be that the principals who worked with more diverse and at-risk student populations grasp the need for more standards-based approach to measure student growth. Principals with less student diversity and student achievement gaps may not see an immediate need for improving grading practices. Additionally, principals who work with the more affluent populations may feel more pressure to maintain traditional practices from parents at their

schools. Nevertheless, research shows that the United States population is continuing to grow in diversity (Leone et al, 2009). Thus, the principal's ability to lead staff through responsive instruction and build inclusive school cultures will become an important factor in school success as the population continues to change.

Confusion and Frustration From Lack of SBG K-12 Report Card Progressions

All six principals expressed frustration with the district's role in communicating grading practices and expectations. Samantha's description that the district was trying to have "a foot in both worlds," as they supported both traditional and SBG philosophies was a common finding across the middle school principals in this study. All six principals described the mandated 50 Rule as a barrier to SBG practices for middle school teachers. Several principals felt this had increased student apathy toward completing work, while other principals were frustrated this policy had been created for all secondary schools and then changed to be exclusively for middle schools, leaving high schools to utilize traditional practices. Moreover, Samantha, George and David all perceived the highly organized and detailed elementary implementation to mean that SBG was more of a developmental elementary practice. This idea was reinforced by the lack of district communication and professional development given to middle school principals and teachers.

David felt strongly that middle schools and high schools should have similar grading policies so that students who take high school credit courses in middle school are evaluated the same. Adding to the confusion, the district middle school grading policies are written using standards-based language. Additionally, Wanda suggested the district's student management system, PowerSchool, which is the software that maintains all student records and grades, was the "tail wagging the dog," explaining that the program is not very adaptable to SBG report

cards. Wanda described this as another barrier in the district's roll out of SBG at the secondary level. All these factors have created confusion and frustration around SBG implementation for middle school principals to manage.

Southern Trees Schools has shown the desire to be a SBG school district with the successful elementary implementation that included training for administrators, teachers, and the use of pilot schools. The district created SBG policies and mandated the 50 Rule for middle schools but provided no professional development as they had for elementary staff. Therefore, the specific vision of SBG at middle schools has been left up to individual principals. This is problematic because all the principals stated they had not received any training from the district on how to implement SBG in middle schools. Without training, principals can't make informed decisions and are left to act merely on their own experiences and beliefs around grading, which for some remains traditional. The principals that described the most success with SBG implementation in their schools had either used it as a teacher themselves, like Wanda, or as a student like Raymond in his master's program or led SBG in elementary school like Lucy.

Zimmerman's (2011) extensive studies of principal leadership emphasize the importance of principals being informed leaders. Seeking professional development on important educational improvement issues, such as grading, is essential in principals being able to effectively lead change. Once principals have had time to learn and understand the need for change, they need time to make sense of how the change will impact all the stakeholders within their schools. This is described as sensemaking (Gannon-Shilon & Schechter, 2000), a very important process in a principal's ability to plan for change. Additionally, professional development that focuses on research-based grading practices was identified as a crucial beginning step for principals to lead a successful transition in grading (Carter, 2016; Link 2019).

Therefore, the absence of professional development provided to middle school principals and teachers in contrast to the support provided to elementary staff indicates a lack of support and clarity from district-level leaders in this study. Current literature indicates that school districts that create clear plans and expectations have a greater impact on student achievement (Marzano, 2000; DuFour & Marzano, 2011). It should be considered that one reason for the differences in elementary school and middle school implementation might be due to the transition of key district-level leaders. Some of the key district-level leaders who implemented SBG in elementary schools left the district by the time of this study. Nevertheless, all six principals in this study identified the need for improved district-wide communication on grading practices between elementary, middle, and high school.

Moreover, DuFour & Marzano (2011) suggested that school districts should support principals with an equal amount of pressure and support in their expectations of school improvement. This can be done by allowing principals to work collaboratively with each other to brainstorm how to handle the barriers and emphasize the benefits of an initiative. When this collaborative process occurs, it builds principals' self-efficacy which in turn improves a principal's effectiveness in leading teachers in PLCs through these important transitions (Louis et al., 2010). Findings in this study have shown that principals relying on their individual knowledge and experience have continued the use of traditional practices. Even the principals who have attempted to lead SBG practices in their middle schools have been limited by these district-level dynamics. Providing middle school principals with research-based training on SBG practices and aligning those with the district's elementary SBG practices is a necessary step that is currently missing in a successful middle school transition.

Parents and Teachers Support For Traditional Grading

Principals must be aware of all stakeholders' perceptions around grading practices. Aside from overseeing the mandated 50 Rule, the principal participants described minimal pressure from the district to implement SBG. Rather, all six principals described a greater level of pressure or expectation from teachers and parents to maintain traditional grading practices. Research suggests that parent understanding and acceptance of SBG has been a consistent barrier for school leaders (Swan et al., 2016; Townley, 2018).

Parent preference of traditional grading was described by all six principals. Several principals stated that student letter grades and percentages are an important aspect of school for most parents. George stated, "The majority of the students at this school are college bound, their parents expect As from them." Lucy explained that parents like traditional grades because they understand and know them from their own school experiences. She added that when students get to middle school their parents are less focused on instructional standards and more concerned with grades because they begin to think about high school and college, where grades are used for class placement and acceptance into programs. Wanda shared that as a parent herself, she understands why parents favor traditional grading. She said, "The systems we have for students to be accepted into college, athletics, and other opportunities have made the value of the letter grade and GPA to be the most important factor for students and parents." These findings are consistent with other research about parents' perspectives around SBG report cards. Swan et al., (2014) found that while parents understood the new SBG report card and thought it provided more detailed information about their child's learning, they still wanted a percentage grade attached to the report card. Long-standing use of report card percentage grades allows students to be ranked and sorted for post high school endeavors (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Considering this

finding, principals must create a plan for increasing parents' understanding of various grading practices and their purpose.

Teachers' buy-in is likely the most studied area surrounding grading reform, as teachers are ultimately the ones who control grading (Brookhart, 1993; Guskey, 2009; Feldman, 2019a). All the principals in the study indicated teachers used a variety of grading practices. Wanda and Raymond described having teachers who were moving toward a more standards-based approach, using feedback with test corrections and multiple opportunities to show mastery of a standard. Both principals mentioned transitioning teachers to growth mindset (Dweck, 2015) language with students. A growth mindset philosophy involves student goal setting and changing one's mindset from fixed to always progressing. Raymond explained that teachers who use growth mindset tell students, "we're not there yet, you're almost there," when giving feedback, rather than using grades in a punitive way. Both principals also spoke of trying to model this growth mindset in their work with teachers in the PLC setting. Samantha described one of her most effective math teachers as using few grades, and instead focusing on more learning and practice with students, which she said aligned with positive end of year test scores for students, putting the focus on effective teaching and learning and not on grading.

Another common finding in this study is all principals acknowledged that some teachers include nonacademic factors in their grading practices. All six principals described some need for student accountability for adolescent students who tend to become unmotivated in school. Lucy stated that some middle school teachers use grades to help with classroom management. Raymond and Wanda both stated that teachers who were deeply connected to traditional grades use zeros as a punitive measure for incomplete assignments. George and David both agreed with the practice of removing points and giving zeros for students as an accountability measure.

Although some principals in this study prefer traditional grading practices and others prefer SBG practices, all the principals believe teachers should control grading. This could be because principals cannot realistically manage all the factors that go into individual teachers' grading practices. However, it is also likely that the principals' own beliefs about grading combined with the amount of training and their individual leadership styles are the reasons they do not mandate specific grading practices. Research around school change repeatedly highlights the inclusion of teachers and parents in the change process (Fullan, 2005; Kunnath, 2017; Swan et al, 2016, Zimmerman, 2006). Principals in this study described frustrating experiences from managing the mandated 50 Rule. These experiences of mandating the 50 Rule, likely caused principals to recognize the complexity and resistance that exists around changing grading practices. In his research around leading change, Fullan (1993) explains "you can't mandate what matters," (p.33) concluding that to make lasting improvements, leaders must go through the process of helping stakeholders understand the need for change and transformations.

Leading SBG Is Not a Priority Following The COVID-19 Pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had tremendous effects on the world since it began in spring of 2020. Schools have been impacted by several factors such as school closures, loss of staffing, increased gaps in student achievement, and greater student needs in social emotional health. Principals in the study perceived the impact of COVID-19 differently. Lucy, who runs the most at-risk middle school in the study, stated that the gaps in learning and areas of need for her students have grown larger. She explained that the staff need to focus on the new academic gaps created from school closures, but that the students have also experienced a loss in social skills and emotional stability from some of the isolation required during COVID-19. Samantha shared this sentiment stating that she was focusing her staffs' efforts on the needs of the whole child.

She explained that some grade levels were having to teach students social norms for cooperative learning interactions and other skills that were previously taught in elementary school. Wanda and Raymond also spoke to learning loss for students and a need to plan for catching students up in missed instructional standards. David and George described less of an impact on student learning loss at their schools and were more aware of trying to improve teachers' instruction to include more critical thinking. Again, this variance in principals' perceptions of the impacts of COVID-19 could be associated with the school's demographics. Noticeably, the principals who serve the more diverse and at-risk student populations saw more concerns with academics, social and emotional wellness, and increased equity gaps for students. Whereas the principals who serve more affluent and less at-risk student populations were mainly concerned with academic needs.

All six principals discussed the impacts of COVID-19 on teacher instruction. George discussed wanting to lead his teachers away from relying on technology as the primary teaching tool and go back to interpersonal and interactive learning such as group work and team discussions to improve students' critical thinking. This was echoed by other principals who also described a need to revisit best teaching practices, indicating that teachers had become too reliant on the software programs and technology tools they had to use during the pandemic. This could be because of the ease in using these online programs, which was a necessity when teachers were teaching both students in person and virtually.

Finally, when asked about the impact on their roles as principals from COVID-19 many were overwhelmed with the tasks ahead. Some described the growing teacher shortage; some were focused on the increased instructional gaps and others described the emotional task of leading a school in post pandemic times. Specifically, the principals expressed that leading SBG

was not a priority at this time in education. Even Raymond and Wanda, ever the champions for SBG, weren't sure that this was the right time. Wanda explained that teachers had so many responsibilities at this moment in time, trying to get in-person learning back to where it was before the pandemic. Raymond also expressed concern that SBG may not be supported at middle schools right now, as the public has shifted in their support of schools since the pandemic started. Samantha and Lucy both thought grading improvements should be addressed through a system-wide restructuring of middle school practices that are more inclusive of students' social-emotional needs.

When asked, only two of the six principals thought that leading SBG should be a priority in the next five years. Two other principals viewed it as important but not a stand-alone initiative and did not think it was a priority, both claiming there are too many other immediate needs, such as students social and emotional health, getting students caught up academically, and finding teachers. Two of the principals were not in favor of leading or implementing SBG at all. These findings indicate that middle school principals do not believe leading SBG should be a priority considering other more pressing issues brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is still much to learn about the effects on students and school systems as they continue to recover and adjust from the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered with caution as they may not be generalizable to other school districts. This multiple case study only included the perceptions of six middle school principals. These six principals all worked in the same school district which was chosen for its implementation status with SBG. Specifically, the district implemented SBG in elementary schools with a stall into the middle and high school implementation. Participants

in this study were required to be serving as the principal at one of the traditional middle schools located in the district selected for this study and they must have begun serving as a middle school principal by the start of the 2019-2020 school year. These factors could limit the transferability of this study to other principals and school systems.

The data collection methods used may also provide limitations to the study's findings. The qualitative practice of gleaning data from interviews depends upon the participants' willingness to share and those perceptions and experiences are limited to the individual. Additionally, the researcher in this study had a peer relationship with the participants. Individuals may have been influenced by the relationship and this could have impacted their willingness to be completely honest or present biased responses. However, a trusting professional relationship existed, and anonymity was applied, which is a delimitation of this point.

Finally, as this study sought to understand the impacts of the current global pandemic from the COVID-19 virus, it is also a limitation to the study. The impacts on education and educators as they work to bring schools back to full in-person learning is persistent. This could have an impact on the participants' perspectives as they were managing a mirage of new priorities and challenges during the time the interviews were conducted. As school leaders continue to face challenges brought forth by the pandemic, their priorities, experiences, and opinions on educational topics are constantly being impacted. Therefore, it would not be possible to recreate the educational climate and conditions in which this study took place.

Implications

This study sought to understand middle school principals' perceptions of leading SBG. This study found that middle school principals' beliefs, knowledge, and experience about grading impacted their desire to lead SBG. This is significant because middle school principals influence their school's culture. Middle schools are unique in their developmental role in adolescent students' lives. While adolescent students spend a short three years in middle school, these years are known to be very impactful on students as their bodies and brains change from childhood to adolescence. Knowing that the typical adolescent's brain struggles with judgement, lack of motivation and socialization makes cultivating an inclusive middle school culture very important in the milestones of students' lives (Clark & Clark, 2000). Thus, middle school principals and staff should be focused on creating a culture of acceptance and growth, which should include grading practices that support and encourage student progress.

Aiding middle school students and their parents in understanding the purpose of middle school should include defining how academic grades as well as nonacademic skills will be taught, learned, and evaluated. Certainly, students will need schools to provide structures that address behaviors that are common in adolescents. However, adolescent students also need to feel a sense of belonging and should be involved in their middle schools in a multitude of activities (Clark & Clark, 2000). Middle schools that find ways to create an inclusive culture with active learning can find new and innovative ways to teach and celebrate adolescent students in the important work habits, responsibility, and social emotional skills that will prepare them for a successful high school journey.

Grading has also had emotional impacts on students. While grades can provide motivation, they can also generate feelings of failure. Some researchers have found that some

traditional grading practices can diminish school culture and discourage students from learning from their mistakes (Feldman, 2019b; Reeves, 2008; Scriffiny, 2008; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Therefore, middle school principals should consider grading as an important factor in cultivating school culture. For principals to effectively consider the impact of grading on culture, they must reflect on their own beliefs and knowledge.

To truly lead change principals must create cultures of ongoing improvement (Marzano, 2000). For principals to engage in the reflective process, they must first be presented with new research-based information. Principals from this study need more professional development and interaction with the literature on both traditional and standards-based practices. Since all the principals in this study felt grading should remain an element that teachers determine, principals must become more knowledgeable on the effects grading practices have on adolescent students. This will be an important step to assist principals in understanding the need for grading improvements, thus giving them a moral incentive for grading transformation. According to Fullan (2005), principals need a moral incentive, a compelling reason, to lead staff through meaningful and sustainable change. Therefore, principals spending time learning and understanding the research around how grading practices impact the culture their schools create is necessary.

As principals progress in the steps toward change that comes with any school improvement process, they need to have confidence and envision themselves leading vital changes with success, thus improving their self-efficacy as instructional leaders. In this study all the middle school principals voiced the desire for district leadership to provide clear alignment in grading between the levels of elementary, middle, and high school. Repeated literature on school change and principal leadership calls for principals to understand not just the curricular

problems, but also how to lead people through change (Fullan, 2005; Reeves, 2008; Zimmerman, 2011). Many principals create systems to manage their schools, such as creating efficient routines and practices for compliance. However, the literature on change in schools highlights the importance of always leading with a lens of improvement, moving past mere managerial systems (DuFour et al., 2010; Guskey & Link, 2019,). District leaders can begin building capacity for SBG while also supporting principals and growing their self-efficacy through various kinds of training, reflection activities, and collaboration with other principals (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Building a principal's self-efficacy is supported in Bandura's (1999) Social Cognitive Theory. Previous research found that when the principal's instructional leadership is perceived as high, teacher's individual self- efficacy, and thus collective efficacy increase around the initiative or improvement effort (Calik et al., 2012; Zimmerman, 2006; 2011). Thus, building principals' self-efficacy as instructional leaders around grading improvement will have a direct effect on teachers. In their research about the theoretical implications of increasing teachers' self-efficacy, Vadhai & Lesha (2015, p.83) summarize the importance of improving self-efficacy,

In the quickly changing world around us, it is imperative we not only develop and teach skills but that our focus is on self-efficacy for all people within the school organization, leaders, staff, and students. Self-efficacy can be the catalyst to an explosion of empowerment and be the tool to create more than mere students, teachers, or leaders but greatness.

Thus, the importance of building a principal's self-efficacy should not be underestimated. Using the SCT, Bandura (2000) posited that individual human agency can transfer to collective agency. Applying this theoretical concept, principals can lead their teachers through collaborative,

continuous improvement of their school culture, which should include grading practices that measure academic and nonacademic factors separately, while also creating an inclusive environment designed for adolescent learners.

Impacts from the pandemic could be a catalyst for middle school principals to reevaluate their school's culture. Several principals in the study shared a desire to lead best instructional practices after the pandemic, while other principals wanted to find ways to connect adolescent students' social and emotional well-being within the middle school mission. Two of the principals in this study posited that grading improvements might be better received if grading was part of a larger systemic change in middle schools. Combining the practice of growth mindset with instructional improvements for student success could be an effective entryway for principals and teachers to evaluate grading along with other long standing school practices.

In addition to the effects of COVID-19 that are forcing schools to support students' social and emotional health, the population in the United States is growing more culturally diverse (Leone et al., 2009). Four principals also noted that the COVID-19 impacts on schools, amplified the disproportionalities that some of the students were already experiencing prior to the pandemic. Additionally, this study found connections in the preference of traditional grading and schools that served students of higher socioeconomic status. More research is needed to understand the relationship between grading practices, student demographics, and equity concerns. Nevertheless, principals are faced with finding new ways to meet so many student needs in a changing and diverse population. At the heart of continuous school improvement lies a pathway to incorporate a school culture that is more inclusive of all students (Leone et al., 2009).

The implications of this study are interconnected. As the discussion around best grading practices continues, principals remain tasked with the challenge of creating continuous cycles of

improvement in a growing and changing American culture. In order for principals to increase their knowledge of research-based grading practices, reflect on their moral imperative for change, and increase their self-efficacy in leading improvement efforts they must participate in on-going professorial development and collaborative work with other principals and school leaders. Additionally, the implications of this study suggest that grading should be considered as an element in improving middle school culture for a diversely changing student population.

Recommendations

Discernibly this study points to the need for continuous professional development for principals in both grading practices and managing school change and improvement. Revisiting the goals and structures of PLCs could be an important first step in this process. In order for grading improvements to occur, principals must find a way to connect the standards-based focus of PLCs with individual teacher grading practices. As suggested in this study's implications, this work may be best received in a cultural revisioning with all staff. Principals should also consider collaborating with teacher leaders to create grading guidelines that allow teachers to maintain decisions about academic grading but provide school wide structures for addressing nonacademic aspects. This could include providing work sessions for students with incomplete assignments and celebrations for students who exhibit growth in responsibilities and other work habits. Additionally middle school principals and teacher leaders could collaborate to create a specific grading system that transitions students through the milestones that occur in the short but important middle school transitional years between elementary and high school.

School districts who are considering SBG should develop a plan for the entire K-12 system with the input of all stakeholders. A clearly communicated district plan will benefit all principals, teachers, parents, and students. Developing grading progressions for report cards from

elementary school to middle school to high school would provide clarity. Including principals and teachers in research-based professional development on grading practices with district leaders would be a meaningful way to develop the details and discuss possible barriers and resolutions.

Additionally, partnering with universities could be beneficial for school districts looking to implement SBG practices. Frazier (2021) found that pre-service teachers could benefit from more training on SBG at the university level. Universities should be included in the discussion of understanding grading issues as K-12 school systems produce adult learners for universities. Working closely with universities to determine how these transitions will look would be an important aspect for parent and student preparations into advanced high school and college level courses.

Longitudinal studies that focus on the results of on-going professional development in SBG for both school leaders and teachers would be beneficial. These types of studies could focus results on self-efficacy of principals and teachers, the impact on academic outcomes for students, and the impact of SBG on school culture. Another area of study to follow is district-level leadership and its effectiveness in grading improvements and the specific relationship between district leaders and principals during grading implementations. Findings from these kinds of studies could provide useful information for other schools considering grading practices as part of a cultural transformation in today's middle schools.

Finally, as America's society continues to grow into a more diverse, culturally rich environment, a lens on equity in grading could help build more understanding for the need of a standards-based approach. The effects from the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to bring forth new obstacles and with them new ways of responding. Townsley (2020) predicted there would

need to be a restructuring of grades because of the pandemic. Studies that focus on how schools utilize the challenges of the pandemic to create new meaningful inclusive school cultures will be beneficial in many educational areas.

Conclusion

The influences of traditional grading have been studied by educational researchers for close to a century (Chancer, 1974; Chartier, 2003; Durm, 1993; Rugg, 1918). Despite the debate of traditional grading practices, they continue to be used in many secondary schools across the nation. Legislation starting with No Child Left Behind (2000) has called school leaders to ensure standards-based teaching and assessment to be the focus of school improvements. In response many schools have adopted the use of PLCs which allow teachers to work in collaborative groups to improve teaching and learning through common standards-based assessment and planning (DuFour et al., 2010). More recent research has highlighted that elementary schools tend to transition to SBG report card systems more easily than secondary schools (Vadahi et al., 2015).

This qualitative study sought to contribute to the research on SBG implementation in middle schools by examining the principals' perceptions. Principal leadership is the most effective tool in the success of a school's improvement initiatives (Link, 2019; Marzano, 2000). Using a multiple case study approach, six middle school principals working in a school system that successfully implemented SBG in elementary school, but not in middle school, were interviewed.

The four themes found in this study were derived from the six principals' descriptions of grading practices within their schools. The themes found in this study are a) misalignment between PLC practices and individual teacher's grading practices exists, b) a lack of district level

SBG report card grading progressions from elementary school to middle school has created confusion and frustration, c) parent and teachers expect traditional grading in middle school to prepare adolescent students for high school, and d) leading SBG is not a priority following the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of each theme discuss how principals in this study rely on their own knowledge and beliefs around grading to motivate them to improve grading practices or maintain traditional practices.

The implications discussed, emphasize the importance of principals growing their understanding of research-based practices on both traditional and standards-based grading. The principal's ability to reflect on the need for improvements in an educational practice as complex as grading, requires them to come to their own moral imperative (Fullan, 2005; Zimmerman, 2011). This must exist before principals decide they will move their staff forward in grading improvements. Two principals in the study did not see the need for SBG in their middle schools. While the other four expressed some level of SBG improvements were needed in their middle schools.

Additionally, implications of district-level planning around SBG implementation and the building of capacity for such change by improving principal's self-efficacy is discussed. The importance of a principal's self-efficacy as an instructional leader has a direct influence on teacher's collective efficacy and that ultimately impacts how successful a school's improvement efforts are (Calik et al., 2012). Principals as middle managers between state and district level leaders and the daily managing of their teachers and students is a huge responsibility. Surely the supports provided to them are imperative in successful school improvement.

The impacts from the COVID-19 global pandemic are still surfacing at the time of this study and play an important role in the setting of this study. The pandemic's impacts will bring

an ongoing area of need for schools to respond to. These challenges could provide school principals with an opportunity for innovation and creativity in considering student grades. It is suggested in this study that perhaps grading is one component of reworking school culture, especially in middle school, which occurs in the unique time of adolescent student life.

Reevaluating how schools use traditional practices, including the grading of students, is necessary work in an ever-changing society. Principals carry the torch for school improvement within each of their schools, their beliefs and knowledge of research-based practices are important influences on their instructional leadership. Principals' influence in aligning PLCs and individual teacher grading practices, participating in research-based professional development and collaboration with other principals will aid them in improving their self-efficacy as school leaders. These are all important factors as schools continue to respond to a growing diverse population and the impacts from the COVID-19. Utilizing forward thinking approaches such as growth mindset (Dweck, 2015) could aid middle school principals in leading teachers through careful reevaluation of grading practices, grading purposes, and the impacts on students. In conclusion, this study contributes to the ongoing growing body of research on SBG implementation and grading reform. As principal leadership is one of the most critical aspects to the success of school improvement, this study provides consideration around transitioning middle school staff to SBG and how principals can become more effective leaders for continuous school improvement rather than perceiving themselves as caught in the middle.

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APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Email Demographic Survey:

1. What is your current professional role?			
2. To which gender do you most identify?			
3. Which of the following best describes your race? American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White			
4. In what year did you become a principal?			
5. What is the student population of the school you serve as principal?			
6. Approximately, what percentage of your teachers have taught for five or more years.			
7. Does your school utilize a standards-based or traditional report card?			
8. Approximately what percentage of your students qualify for free-or-reduced meal prices?			
9. Were you working as a school-based administrator in “Southern Trees Schools” during the 2017-2018 school year?			
10. Did you complete standards-based grading training offered by the “Southern Trees Schools” during the 2017-2018 school year?			

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Questions adapted Attitudinal Survey from:

Atkins, J. (2016), High School Principal Perceptions of Grading and Grade Reporting Practices, #10016876 Doctoral Dissertation, Southwest Baptist University, Boliva, MO. Proquest

Frazier, M. (2021). A Multiple Case Study on the lived experiences of five upper elementary school teachers who transitioned from traditional grading practices to standards-based grading practices. #. Doctoral Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte North Carolina. ProQuest

Interview Questions / Research Question Specifications:

Interview Question:	Understanding of current (traditional and SBG) practices (Q 1)	Leading change/transitions in grading (Q 2)	Impacts of COVID-19 (Q3)
1. Describe the practices that are currently used by teachers in your school to determine students' grades. Would you describe your school as one that primarily uses traditional grading practices or standards-based grading practices? Other middle schools in the district?	X		
Follow up prompts if NOT addressed by previous question How do teachers determine final course grades for students? Which of the following grading practices do teachers use? ___ using mathematical averages or percentages to determine final class/course grades ___ assigning zeroes for missing or incomplete work ___ having 50 as the lowest potential grade a student can earn on an assignment ___ grading homework ___ grading effort ___ allowing students to complete assignments they failed to complete by the deadline	X		

___ allowing students to retake a test to determine mastery			
2. What are the strengths of the grading practices that are currently used in your school? Other middle schools in the district?	X		
3. What improvements need to be made to the current grading practices in your school? Other middle schools in the district?	X		
4. In what ways do you monitor teachers' grading practices?	X		
5. What do you believe are the purposes of grades in middle school?		X	
6. Tell me about your knowledge and experiences with traditional and standards-based grading, and what are your perceptions of each?		X	
7. What do you believe are your teachers' views about traditional grading and standards-based grading?		X	
8. What types of feedback should parents and students receive as part of a student's grade (i.e., a number, a letter, narrative feedback, other)?		X	
Follow up Prompt (if NOT addressed by the previous question) Should grade reporting describe the extent to which a student mastered specific standards as opposed to just providing a number or letter grade?		X	
9. What factors should teachers consider when determining a student's final grade in a class?		X	
Follow up Prompt (if NOT addressed by the previous question) What role should non-academic factors like student behavior and student effort play in determining students' grades?		X	

10. Is it important for teachers who teach the same subjects and grades to use the same grading system and is this happening at your school? Why or why not?		X	
11. Should teachers be evaluated based in part on how well they evaluate student learning?		X	
12. Describe your school's transition to standards-based grading. What has been your role in that process? What actions have you taken to support the transition to standards-based grading?		X	
Follow up Prompt (if NOT addressed by the previous question: What type of training about SBG has been provided? Who led the training? Was it effective in supporting the transition to SBG? Does your school have ongoing conversations and training about the importance of grading and ways to improve grading practices?		X	
13. What factors have contributed to your successes in leading the transition to standards-based grading?		X	
14. What factors have inhibited the transition to standards-based grading (i.e. biggest challenges)?		X	
15. What pressures exist to transition to SBG? Remain with traditional grading?		X	
16. What do you believe should be the role of district leaders in the transition to standards-based grading?		X	
FOLLOW UP PROMPT:		X	

Should the implementation of standards-based grading be included as part of the district's strategic plan?			
17. Is grading reform something you wish to lead in your school in the next 3-5 years? (Why or why not?)		X	
18. Considering the current impacts of COVID-19 on student learning, do you see a greater need for improved grading practices? In what ways?			X
19. Considering the current impacts of COVID-19 on teachers, do you see grading reform as a priority for teacher professional growth? (Why or Why not)			X
20. Considering the current impacts of COVID-19 on yourself as a school leader, do you feel you could successfully implement improved grading practices? (Why or Why not?)			X

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE OF MASTER DATABASE

6	I think they need to lead, lead the charge in this mindset and. I mean they need to get school leaders together and say this is what research says. (DL)	CC/DL
6	The frustrating thing is, I don't see them and making decisions. A collaborative decision making mindset is good, get all the voices, but let's just say this is the direction we're going, and this is our plan, whether we have a three year plan to 5 year plan or whatever.	CC/DL
2	Yes, so I said earlier by teams, but it is more based on the grade-level, you want to make sure that in the 3 ELA classes they are the same, but also across core subjects, so it is vertical and horizontally the same across teachers (CGP)	CGP
4	I think there needs to be a separation of grading behaviors and grading the academic right, and I think we still have work to do on that. (CGP)	CGP
5	And some kids need for reinforcement feedback, so I think that it may look a little different in terms of individual grades on specific standards, but when it comes to the mastery those parts have got to be the same otherwise when you do the work of fields. you're just not talking about you know, the same thing it's apples and oranges. (CGP)	CGP
	I don't want to harp on the 50 thing- but I do I think there is a medium ground we (District Leadership) can come – even a 30- so there is a sting if you don't do your work, but you can still come back from it (DL)... it is not mathematically equivalent and that is not accurate to give half credit.	DL
2	They should have absolute commitment to professional development and communication to parents and not just put it on a sole person at the school (DL)	DL
3	Because if we can prepare you for today, high school will come, but I do think something as big as how we're assessing kids. I do think we need to think about that piece of it, so I guess from the county level, I would say, Is this going to be a district type of thing? Will middle school be transitional years like with everything else is transitional. (DL) Is high school going to stick with whatever.	DL
3	I think that's got to be a clear K 12 vision yeah what that's gonna look like. (DL)	DL
4	Obviously if the district did it, I think it needs to come from a district. Like collective middle school kind of thing.	DL
	For secondary, I do, honestly, because I feel like if we could get high schools and middle school more closely aligned, I think it would	

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT



Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title of the Project: Middle School Principals' Perceptions of Traditional and Standards -Based Grading Practices

Principal Investigator: Susann Nash, UNCC Doctoral Student

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Rebecca Shore, UNCC Professor

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Important Information You Need to Know

- The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of middle school principals in a school district that has partially implemented standards-based grading at the middle school level
- Participants who are eligible for this study was a middle school principal during the 2019-2020 school year.
- You will be asked to participate in an individual, one-on-one virtual (Zoom) interview.
- If you choose to participate it will require a maximum of three (3) hours of your time.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include the discomfort of revealing your feelings about required transitions from the grading to standards-based grading.
- Benefits may include the knowledge that you are adding to the overall literature on grading practices and grade reform.
- You may choose not to participate at any time during the study.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to participate in this research study.

Why are we doing this study?

The purpose of this researcher's study is to examine the perceptions of middle school principals in a school district that has partially implemented standards-based grading at the middle school level. Middle school principal's leadership skills and understanding of traditional and SBG practices will be paramount in leading grading reform. Using this information, the researcher will determine how principals' perceptions can be used in future SBG implementation planning for the district's middle schools. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in the United States in March of 2020, has caused major disruptions to student learning and teacher abilities to teach. The pandemic has amplified inequalities many students face from various environmental and life factors. Consequently, school leaders are now faced with revising current student support structures and systems to address these imbalances. Thus, an additional area of focus for this study is to understand if principals in a district that promotes





standards-based grading perceive the COVID-19 pandemic and its extreme impact on learning, as an opportunity to challenge the problems with traditional grading and more effectively implement SBG.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a middle school principal in the school district that has partially implemented standards-based grading and reporting in secondary. Participants who are eligible for this study had started or had been in the role of middle school principal during the 2019-2020 school year.

What will happen if I take part in this study?

If you chose to participate in this study and complete this Consent Form, you will be asked to answer questions about grading with regard to your knowledge of traditional and standards-based practices, your school's current grading practices, your school's transition into standards-based grading, and the possible impacts of COVID-19 on your school's implementation.

An email will be sent to you with your agreed upon interview time (set at your convince), in which you will also complete a short demographic Google survey before the person to person interview.

This one-on-one interview will take place virtually on Zoom at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will be recorded on Zoom using the transcribe feature.

Finally, participants will be sent their interview answers to review for accuracy using a secure google link. Any feedback or changes you wish to provide to your answers will help the researcher capture the intended meaning of each response, as this study seeks to understand individual principal's perceptions on standards-based grading practices.

What benefits might I experience?

You may not benefit directly from being in this study. However, others might benefit because your experiences as shared in this study are adding to the overall literature of grading and grade reform.

What risks might I experience?

You may experience information risk by way of a breach of confidentiality. To minimize this risk, I will use pseudonyms for subject names, school name and district name.

How will my information be protected?

All data collection and digital files will be on password protected files and devices. The Zoom video recording will be deleted immediately following the interview. The Zoom audio file will be deleted after the transcription process is completed. Coding will be used in interview data, which will eliminate the use





of actual subject names on interview files (eg, SS#1, SS#2 to mean Study Subject #1, Study Subject#2). Sharing of digital files that include data or study subject information will be done over university sponsored/owned email and sharing programs. Study data will only be shared between PI and faculty advisor. All digital files will be deleted within six (6) months of study completion.

How will my information be used after the study is over?

After this study is complete, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies without asking for your consent again or as may be needed as part of publishing our results. The data we share will NOT include information that could identify you.

Will I receive an incentive for taking part in this study?

This study is voluntary, there are no incentives given to participants.

What other choices do I have if I don't take part in this study?

This study is voluntary, you do not have to participate.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

It is up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?

For questions about this research, you may contact Sue Nash at snash1@uncc.edu, 704-517-2122 and Dr. Rebecca Shore at rshore6@uncc.edu or 704-687-8867.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

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 receive a copy of this document for your 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 understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.





Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Name & Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

