HOW MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS MAKE SENSE OF MANDATED REFORMS TO THEIR GRADING AND REPORTING PRACTICES THROUGH QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

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Abstract

Grading and reporting practices in secondary schools have traditionally been designed so that teachers assign a single letter or percentage grade at the end of a term to communicate student learning. Increasingly, leaders of secondary schools have mandated change away from these traditional grading practices to ones that are standards-based. These grades are not aggregated, but divided so that a student’s academic achievement, approach to learning, and their progress are explicitly communicated. This qualitative study investigated the sense-making process of middle school teachers involved in a mandated change to their grading and reporting practices. The findings suggest that the process is complex and multi-faceted, and that the sense-making process is ongoing. In order to be able to effectively utilize the procedures of standards-based grading and reporting, teachers must have a deep understanding of their academic standards and the efficacy to build assessments that elicit the extent to which a student has mastered the intended learning objective. The close analysis of the participant experiences revealed themes across the them in relation to their intentional use of standards, previous teaching experiences, inconsistencies in application of the new practices, high levels of anxiety, time needed for implementation, and positive influence on teaching and student learning. Future studies should investigate factors that influence teacher sense-making during this type of change, the extent to which teacher practices are changed, and the influence that standards-based grading and reporting has on student learning.

Key Words: sense-making, mandated reform, standards-based grading and reporting, secondary schools, standards, implementation
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How Middle School Teachers Make Sense of Mandated Reforms to Their Grading and Reporting Practices

Chapter I: Introduction

Traditional grading and reporting practices in secondary schools are designed so that teachers assign a single letter or percentage grade to communicate student learning at the end of a term. These traditional grades are an average of a student’s performance on varied assessments over the course of a term. Many of the indicators that factor into the grade are from the beginning of the term when students are not supposed to know the material. In essence, often what they do not when they were first introduced to a topic or concept counts towards their final grade at the end of the term (O’Connor, 2009). Many of these traditional grades also include extraneous factors other than academic achievement, such as behavior, effort, or organization (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). The purpose of a grade is to communicate a student’s level of achievement on targeted learning objectives (Brookhart, 2011b). Traditional grading and reporting practices include many factors beyond academic achievement, and the grades do not clearly communicate the extent to which a student has met the learning objectives.

In an effort to communicate student achievement on targeted goals more clearly, standards-based grading and reporting practices were developed. Many secondary schools and districts are mandating a reform in grading and reporting practices for their teachers. In a standards-based grading and reporting system, students are measured on their achievement of individual, targeted learning goals or standards (Guskey, 2009, 2011). These grading and reporting practices often separate the student’s grade into several different components: (1) the student’s achievement on the targeted, academic standards, (2) the behavior of the student, such as, effort, participation, collaboration, and
a student’s overall approach to learning, and (3) a detailed narrative comment written by the teacher to provide an explanation of the student’s progress (Brookhart, 2011a; Guskey, 2011). These features are reported separately, rather than as one aggregated grade (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Reporting learning in this manner allows teachers, students, and parents to more clearly identify areas where a student has been successful and those where he/she still needs further instruction and practice to meet the standards (Brookhart, 1993; Guskey, 2009, 2011). Standards-based grading and reporting practices can provide greater understanding of student learning than traditional practices do.

Secondary school leaders are increasingly mandating transitions away from traditional to standards-based grading and reporting practices in their schools. In these transitions, there are varied ways in which teachers make sense of the mandated changes. For some teachers the transition and implementation of standards-based grading and reporting is successful. Unfortunately, many teachers struggle to fully understand and implement the new practices, and they continue to use traditional practices instead of those that are standards-based (Cox, 2011; Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011). Teachers may not fully understand the new grading practices, and the time it takes to understand and implement them deters some from using standards-based grading and reporting to communicate student learning (Michael, Webster, Patterson, Laguna & Sherman, 2016; St. Pierre & Wuttke, 2015). The focus of this study was to develop a better understanding of how middle school teachers make sense of mandated changes to their grading and reporting practices, from those that are traditional to those that are standards-based. The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows: the problem of practice is presented and is followed by the study’s purpose, the research questions, the researcher’s positionality
on grading and reporting practices and her role in the study is developed, and finally, an explanation of the theoretical framework that guided this study.

**Statement of Problem**

In the last two decades, schools in the United States increasingly have utilized standards to develop their curriculums (Marzano, 2004). Standards are the goals for student learning; they are the descriptions of the general expectations of knowledge and skills development by the end of a grade, course, or term (The Glossary of Education Reform). Standards were developed with the intention of making schooling consistent and equitable for all students by providing learning targets to guide curriculum development and instructional practices for teachers of like disciplines and grade-levels (Marzano & Kendall, 1997). An effective tool to communicate a student’s ability to meet these standards has not been established fully in secondary schools. Many of them continue to use traditional grading practices that average a student’s grade into an aggregated, single letter or number to represent student learning.

To support a transition away from traditional grading practices, many school and district leaders are focusing on the development of a shared understanding of the purpose of grading. Brookhart (2011b) states that this should be the first step in all efforts to reform grading and reporting practices. The purpose of grading is to communicate individual student achievement on targeted goals to students and their parents, and grades should offer reflection opportunities on student strengths and areas for growth (Brookhart, 2011b). With this purpose in mind, there is a shift in the thinking about what constitutes effective grading and reporting practices (Guskey, 2009; Marzano, 2006, 2010; O’Connor, 2009). This shift hinges upon separating assessments into categories “for learning” (assessments that are intended to support the student’s development) and
“of learning” (assessments that are evaluative of the extent to which the student has met the learning task) (Marzano, 2006, 2010). In a standards-based system, assessments are specifically linked to learning targets. A distinguishing factor for standards-based grading and reporting is that only the “of learning” assessments are included in a student’s final achievement grade (Marzano, 2006, 2010). The attention paid to identifying the purpose of grading and differentiating assessment types has facilitated the development of a deep understanding of the value and support for standards-based grading practices (Brookhart, 1991, 1993, 1994; Guskey, 2001, 2009; Marzano, 2006, 2010; O’Connor, 2009).

Although the literature supports the notion that standards-based grading and reporting practices are more effective in communicating student progress towards targeted standards, their implementation in middle and high schools is ineffective at times (Cox, 2011; Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011). Studies have shown (Colby, 1999; Cox & Olsen, 2011; Englehard & Randall, 2009; McMillan, 2009; Michael, et al., 2016; Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011; St. Pierre & Wuttke, 2015; Svennberg, Meckbach & Redelius, 2016) that for many secondary school teachers that have implemented a system of standards-based grading and reporting, their practices have not changed to align with the principals of the new system. Many teachers continue to use ineffective, traditional practices in a standards-based grading and reporting system to communicate student learning (Cox & Olsen, 2011; McMillan, 2009). Some continue to factor in motivation and interest in the subject into grades (Svennberg, et al., 2016). Teachers may continue to aggregate data into one single grade, including formative assessment data, and include effort and behavior as factors in communicating student academic achievement. While many leaders have mandated change in their districts’ or schools’ grading and reporting practices, many of the assessments of the teachers have not changed.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how middle school teachers’ made sense of a mandated reform to their grading and reporting practices during the first six months of implementation. It was designed to understand the influences on the sense making process in this type of change based on an individual’s (1) prior knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, (2) school context and individual situation, and (3) the ways the leaders mandated the implementation of the reforms. It was further proposed that a qualitative interview study was the best research design to explore this in one, international middle school. This exploration provided a deeper understanding of the extent to which teachers’ individual grading and reporting practices were altered during the change process.

Significance of Problem

There has been growing support for standards-based grading and reporting among teachers. However, their implementation has been met with varied success. Previous studies have revealed that while teachers supported the change, there was confusion about the policies and the interpretation and implementation of them varied. When teachers determined grades, they used data from early in the learning process, continued to include effort, and lowered grades on assessments when turned in late. Additionally, high school teachers often used norm-referenced grading rather than a standards-based approach in grades eleven and twelve (Cox, 2011; Tierney, et al., 2011). It was important to better understand the sense-making process in an effort to identify reasons why teachers did not alter their practices to align with the policies. The findings of this study are significant in the standards-based grading and reporting literature because they
develop a deeper understanding of the influences on teachers sense-making during a mandated change to their grading and reporting practices.

Central Research Questions

How do middle school teachers make sense of a reform to their grading and reporting practices from a traditional system to one that is standards-based?

Sub-Questions

1. What is the influence of a teacher’s individual knowledge, beliefs, and experiences on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?

2. What is the influence of a teacher’s situational context within a school on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?

3. What is the intersection between messages about the policy and the teacher’s lived experiences on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?

Positionality

My teaching career has been in varied settings, but my interest in student grades has been a constant. I began my career as a middle school social studies teacher in an affluent district in the Western United States. Seven years into my career, I left the U.S. and began a career as an international educator. I have worked in various American-based, international schools serving ethnically and nationally diverse populations. This transition into the international school setting refocused my career path; I have been an international educator for eleven years now. After fifteen years of classroom teaching, I transitioned to a support position focused on curriculum and assessment development for
the middle and high school. I do not evaluate teachers, but rather, I help them to develop their curriculums and design assessments, and I facilitate conversations around the use of data to support student learning.

In each of the settings of my teaching career one thing has remained constant; students and their parents have been more interested in the grade earned than what the student learned (Brookhart, 2011). “Will this be graded?” and “What can I do to raise my grade?” are common questions asked by students. Rarely does one ask, “How can I improve my use of evidence in my writing?” or “What specific skill am I lacking to really get this concept?” The disconnect between grades and learning has always concerned me. As an educator, my goal is that students are challenged and learning. Ultimately, I want all of them to take personal ownership for their learning. My best hope is that grades are not the focal point of discussions between teachers, students, and parents. Student learning should be the focus.

**Personal Transformation of Grading and Reporting Practices.** On a practitioner level, the scholarship shaped my thinking around grading and reporting practices (Brookhart, 1991, 1993, 1994, 2011; Guskey, 1994, 2003, 2009, 2011; Marzano, 2006; O’Connor, 2009; Reeves, 2008; Stiggins, 2005). My practices have evolved in my eighteen years as an educator. When I first assessed my students, I believed the effort they put into an assignment should be included in their grades. I took off points if an assignment was late or if a student did not put their name on their paper. I gave a number grade to all assignments. These were common practices among my peers as well. Gradually, I moved away from this perspective. I began to question my purpose for assigning a grade. How does effort or lateness communicate what a student knows and is able to do vis-à-vis my learning targets? These additions clouded what I believed a
grade is intended to communicate, so I discontinued the practice. A grade should clearly communicate what a student knows and is able to do in relation to the learning objectives.

As my thinking around grading and reporting practices changed, I began to assess student work differently. Those activities that were part of the learning process and that supported students along their journey were not evaluated in the same way as those assessments that were intended to determine where the student was at the end of the process (Marzano, 2006). Actions that were to guide and support learning were not included in a student’s final grade. My position on grading and reporting shifted so that there was more focus on the targeted skills and the standards of my units and lessons. The process a student engaged in while learning is still important to me, but effort, participation, and behavior are no longer included in the student’s academic grade for the assignment or term. In line with much of the literature (Brookhart, 2011a, 2011b; Guskey, 2009, 2011; Marzano, 2006; O’Connor, 2009), a student’s academic achievement towards the targeted learning goals should be reported out separately from their behaviors. In my opinion, a grade becomes more meaningful when students, teachers, and parents understand where the student is in his/her learning and we can plan the next steps in that journey.

**Grounding Beliefs in the Literature.** I believe that a standards-based grading and reporting system provides more opportunities to communicate the extent to which a student has mastered targeted standards and skills than the traditional system. Because a student’s progress on individual standards is reported out individually in this type of system, all stakeholders (teachers, parents, and students) better understand the student’s situation (Marzano, 2010). This information can be used to fill gaps in their learning, or provide evidence that the student needs to deepen his/her comprehension. In a standards-
based grading and reporting system, a student may extend their time for learning the targeted standards through reteaching and reassessment (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). The ultimate goal of a standards-based grading and reporting system is that students have an understanding of their learning that enables them to take ownership of their progress (O’Connor, 2009).

I am passionate about finding the best solution for communicating a student’s ability to meet targeted standards. Machi and McEvoy (2009) encourage researchers to be passionate about their topic of study. However, they caution that this bias can cause a researcher to be careless in their conclusions, but “careful introspection can bring these views and attachments to the forefront” (Machi & McEvoy, 2009, p. 19). As a practitioner, my bias was grounded in my experiences as a teacher when grades seemed to be more important than the learning. However in the last few years, the scholarly literature has shaped my judgment. It is from this role as a scholar that I continue to build on my understanding of how teachers make sense of the reforms in their own grading and reporting practices.

**Theoretical Framework**

Some transitions to standards-based grading and reporting in secondary schools have been classified as unsuccessful because teachers’ beliefs and practices have not changed during the implementation of the new policy (Cox, 2011; McMillan, 2009; Michael, et al., 2015; St. Pierre & Wuttke, 2015; Svennberg, et al., 2016). A conventional interpretation of policy implementation failure is that either there was resistance to or a lack of understanding of the new policy. This view does not account for those who support the proposed change, but fail in their attempt to implement it (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Spillane, who is an expert on educational reform, policy implementation,
and school leadership, contends that viewing failure in this way neglects the complexity of the sense-making process; it is essentially ambiguous and differentiated for every individual. As stated in Spillane et al. (2002), “Sense-making [of reforms] is not a simple decoding of the policy message; in general, the process of comprehension is an active process of interpretation that draws on the individual’s rich knowledge base of understandings, beliefs, and attitudes” (p. 391). In other words, sense-making is an interpretive process that is influenced by many factors. To really understand policy implementation and explain the influences on its success or failure, one must explore the ways in which implementing agents understand the policy and connect that with their practice (Spillane et al., 2002).

The successful implementation of an educational reform is dependent upon how individuals make sense of policy changes. In making sense of reform, a teacher is influenced by their prior knowledge and beliefs, their contextual setting within the school, and the ways in which the new policy is introduced to them (Spillane et al., 2002). To provide a deeper understanding of the sense-making process in relation to educational reforms, Spillane et al. (2002) developed a cognitive framework to explore how agents make sense of mandated change. This framework was designed to determine the factors that influence an individual’s understanding of the reform initiative.

**Cognitive framework for sense-making.** The purpose of the cognitive framework developed by Spillane et al. (2002) is to characterize the sense-making of teachers in the process of reform implementation. Its development was rooted in how implementing agents construct meaning of the policy in relation to their existing knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Policy messages are presented in varied forms and are not static; the goal of the cognitive framework is to understand how teachers may change
their beliefs and practices based on the conclusions they draw from the way the policy is explained. As stated by Spillane et al. (2002), implementing agents (teachers) must “notice, frame, interpret, and construct meaning” from the messages (p. 392). In other words, teachers must understand, interpret, and make meaning of the policy before any successful implementation. In this framework, the attention is on how teachers construct meaning and new understandings from reform efforts. The focus is on the extent to which policy messages lead to a change in individual teacher beliefs that lead to changes in their practices (Spillane et al., 2002). The cognitive framework involves three distinct influences on an individual’s sense-making: (1) individual cognition, (2) situated cognition, and (3) role of the representation of the policy. Each one of the influences is explained in detail below, and is followed by how the framework connects to this study.

**Individual cognition.** Teachers use their existing knowledge to shape new understandings of policy changes. This may lead to mandated changes being implemented in varied ways (Coburn, 2003; Spillane et al., 2002). How individual teachers make new meaning depends on their prior knowledge, beliefs, expertise, values, and experiences. By paying attention to the ways in which individuals interpret the policy messages and the ways that their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes influence the development of new understandings, one can better understand how an individual’s sense-making process is influenced by these factors (Spillane et al., 2002). As such, policy implementation is varied because of the way in which individual teachers make sense of the messages (Coburn, 2003; Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011; Spillane et al., 2002).

Teacher beliefs and practices are rooted in their experiences; these create perceptions about change and shape the way new knowledge is understood (Hoekstra &
Korthagen, 2011). Prior beliefs and practices can pose challenges because the new ideas are interpreted within their current frame of reference, and the understanding of new ideas is significantly dependent upon prior knowledge (Spillane et al., 2002). It is difficult for an individual to restructure their learning, so they interpret the new information through the lens of their old experiences. The danger in this is that the new ideas may be seen as minor changes rather than decisively different from the status quo (Spillane et al., 2002). As seen in studies on transitions to standards-based grading and reporting (Cox, 2011; McMillan, 2009), some reform efforts may have been ineffective because teachers did not see the changes as critically different. Many teachers have blended their traditional practices with those that are standards-based (Svennberg, 2016). Their prior experiences shape the ways that they make-sense and meaning of the mandated change.

Another factor that may lead to differentiated implementation of mandated change is that the reforms may seem familiar. Individuals may “encode new data” by fitting it into what is known, or they may encode without really examining the implications of what is already known (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 398). In other words, teachers might interpret a policy so that it is essentially the same as their existing beliefs (Spillane et al., 2002). This may lead to an assimilation of new understandings with existing ones (Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011). Educational reform efforts require new ways of thinking, but when individuals are making sense of new ideas, they may gravitate towards approaches that are “congruent” with their existing practices (Coburn, 2003, p. 4). This may result in surface-level shifts instead of deep changes. As stated by Coburn (2003), “The question is: Do teachers’ encounters with reform cause them to rethink and
reconstruct their beliefs? Or do they alter reforms in ways that reinforce or reify pre-existing assumptions?” (p. 5).

Surface-level shifts also can be a result of the fact that teachers are often novice implementers of the policy and lack prior experience with the proposed change. They may not have the proper understanding of the practices being mandated (Fullan, 1991). Without a deep understanding of the policy, the changes to teachers’ practices remain only surface-level instead of fundamental or deep (Spillane et al., 2002).

Given the influences of teachers’ prior knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, new educational policy can be interpreted differently by individuals (Spillane et al., 2002). Teachers who share a common language around the policy may have differing interpretations. This can be attributed to varied learning opportunities, such as readings, professional development, guidance and support. Spillane et al. (2002) found that in an examination of studies on policy implementation, the varied interpretations of policy by teachers were not from a lack of effort or rejection of it. Instead, their prior beliefs and experiences impacted how they made sense of the new policies.

**Situated cognition.** The sense-making of teachers also is influenced by the multiple dimensions of organizational structures within which they are situated. Practices and common beliefs of departments, social networks, professional affiliations, and traditions have an impact on sense-making (Spillane et al., 2002). In schools there are many different contexts, and these can affect how individuals make sense of reform. In these contexts, a collective sense-making may form and their shared norms and values may provide a guide for how individual teachers may make sense of reform (Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013).
The ways in which secondary schools are arranged is significant to the sense-making process because it may create distinctive subcultures within a school. Teachers are grouped with peers who teach within the same discipline and who are seen as experts in their subject area (i.e., biology, mathematics, history, etc). Their expertise can be problematic because reform often implies that there should be improvement, and this could cause some teachers to question elements of the mandated changes (Reeves, 2008). For example, they may question who defines the reform, how improvement is characterized, and what makes the reform legitimate (Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013). A teacher’s immediate professional environment is a main frame of reference for his/her teaching beliefs, knowledge, and instructional practices. The shared understandings of groups act as filters for reform efforts and may influence how teachers make sense of them (Spillane, et al., 2002). The situated context of individuals must be considered in understanding how individuals make sense of reforms (Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013).

**Role of representation.** Policy makers propose reforms, but teachers have the responsibility of enacting those policies. Teachers weigh the benefits of a new policy in relation to their current practices and their responsibility for their students’ progress (Cohen, 1990). The way in which a policy is presented to teachers can impact the interpretation of its benefits. A key factor in this element of sense-making is language, and it is often imprecise (Spillane et al., 2002). Different people may believe they are saying the same thing, but the messages may not be alike. The structure of organizations also can contribute to how the policy message is portrayed to the implementers, and this can contribute to multiple and contradictory understandings (Spillane et al., 2002). In order for the reform to be enacted similarly across a school or district, the language
defining the changes needs to be consistent. When the policy signals are clear, they are more likely to be interpreted in similar manners (Cohen, 1990).

Spillane and Zeuli (1999) define the space where the language of the policy meets the teachers’ practices as “enactment zones” (p. 407). The success of implementation is characterized by the extent to which the policy signals are: (1) “social rather than individualistic”, (2) “involve deliberations with others, including reform experts,” and (3) “include material resources … that support those deliberations” (Spillane & Zeuli, 1999, p. 407). The more each factor is inherent in these zones, the more fundamental the changes are to individual beliefs and practices. The representation of the policy to teachers needs to be done so that they can understand the scope of the reform and identify changes needed in their teaching routines. Teachers that are more social and engage in deliberations with their peers are more successful in altering their practices to meet the policy demands (Spillane & Zeuli, 1999).

**Organization of the Study**

Chapter One presented the problem of practice, which is the ineffective implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices by secondary school teachers during mandated change. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature on the development of standards-based curriculum, characteristics of grading and reporting practices, and transitions from traditional to standards-based grading and reporting practices. Chapter Three presents the research design, including a rationale for the chosen methodology, as well as the processes used for participant selection and recruitment, data collection, and analytical procedures. Chapter Four shares the findings of the study, and Chapter Five presents them in relation to the theoretical framework and the literature reviewed, and highlights the significance and limitations of the study.
Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review is organized in a thematic structure centered on the standards-movement and the evolution of grading and reporting practices. In this review, there is a focus on the development of the standards-based movement and curriculums, how student learning has been communicated traditionally, and the impact of grading and reporting practices on student learning. While the educational literature strongly supports a continuation of the standards-movement, the implementation of new grading and reporting practices has been ineffective in some secondary settings. There have been roadblocks in many schools’ attempts to implement standards-based grading and reporting practices. The impact of these roadblocks on reform will be outlined; these roadblocks serve as the justification for this study on how teachers make sense of a reform to their grading and reporting practices.

Development of Standards-based Curriculums

In 1983, A Nation at Risk, published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, prompted a reform movement to standardize the educational experience for all students in the United States. The report stated that there were high levels of illiteracy among the educated adult population, and claimed that the average graduate from public schools and universities in the United States were not as well educated at they had been in the previous decades. The study attributed the deficiencies to a lack of uniformity among educational settings, coupled with the belief that there were low standards for students and teachers. Because of this, the development of standards-based curriculums began in the United States.

The standards-based movement started as an attempt to reform the national education system, but there was not a clear consensus on the need for standards-based
curriculums by national policy makers. Some educators and policy makers argued that the standards-movement would drain resources from low-income schools and further burden those who historically had been underachieving (Marzano & Kendall, 1997). In the early 1990s, some believed the reform movement was dead because it failed to take root at the national level. However, Marzano, who has an extensive research background in effective instruction and assessment strategies, and Kendall (1997) asserted “that the logic behind organizing schooling around standards [was] so compelling as to make standards-based reform something that schools and districts [implemented] even in the absence of federal or state mandates or incentives” (p. 6). Individual teachers, schools, and districts continued the reform efforts because of the perceived value of organizing curriculums around standards. This work by individual schools and districts answered some of the questions raised by policy makers at the federal level, and provided the needed influence for continuing the movement in schools.

At the national level, there were disagreements on the content and form of standards. Policy makers and some educators initially questioned the standards-based movement because it was believed that the developers were taking schools away from their central purpose of educating students (CPRE, 1993). This claim was made because the content of some standards were not purely academic. They included affective outcomes that were focused on values, such as “students shall understand and appreciate others” (CPRE, 1993, p. 4). Critics also raised questions about the need for specificity of the standards. Many believed that there should be a balance between being explicit and having flexibility to interpret them for differing educational contexts (1993). In effort to refute these claims and provide greater clarity in the standards movement, Marzano and Kendall (1997) tackled this issue by identifying two major kinds of standards: content
and performance. Content standards specify what a student should know and be able to do, while performance standards identify the ways in which that knowledge and skill should be demonstrated (Marzano & Kendall, 1997). These distinctions offered clarity for many educators, and provided momentum for the reform and the development of criterion-referenced standards.

**Development and influence of criterion-referenced standards.** As the reform movement progressed, a key development was that of criterion-referenced standards. These focused on individual student achievement towards targeted learning objectives. Guskey (2001), who is an educational researcher with an extensive background in effectively communicating student learning, identified the merits of criterion-referenced standards in comparison to the norm referencing of the traditional system. In the traditional, norm-referenced system, a student’s performance was compared to the other students in their class; this facilitated competition between students (Guskey, 2001). The students often were ranked and much of the grading was done on a bell curve. This competition, as Guskey (2001) stated, was “detrimental to relationships—both among students and teachers” (p. 20). There was reluctance by students to help one another or work together to support deeper learning for all because their grade depended on how well they did compared to those other students. With a shift to criterion-referenced standards, where students are assessed individually against targeted objectives, cooperation among students accelerated. In this system, the evaluation of a student’s performance is not linked to the evaluation of their peers, and instead it is based on individual performance on targeted objectives (Guskey, 2001). This shift in thinking was integral to the development of the standards movement. Schools in the U.S. today use criterion-referenced standards, and focus on individual student achievement (Stiggins,
As is explained in greater detail below, the development of criterion-referenced standards was essential to the emergence of standards-based grading and reporting.

**Grading and Reporting Practices**

Until the recent standards-based reform movement, there had been little revision to grading and reporting in secondary schools since the early 1900’s (Marzano & Kendall, 1997). In recent years there has been a significant movement to revise grading and reporting practices, but many secondary schools continue to use traditional practices (O’Connor, 2009). In the traditional system, a student acquires points over a designated amount of time on many different learning tasks. These points are then added up and a single grade is assigned (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). These grades are reported out as a letter (A – F) or as a percentage that represents the average of all of the student’s scores for the grading period (Reeves, 2008). As the standards movement has continued, there is a growing body of literature that supports the reform to how student learning is communicated and discredits the use of traditional grading and reporting practices.

**Case against traditional grading and reporting practices.** As stated earlier, many voice concerns about employing traditional grading and reporting practices to reflect student learning (Mcmillan, 1977; Brookhart, 1993, 1994, 2011b; Marzano & Kendall, 1997; Colby, 1999; Guskey, 2001; McMillan, Myran & Workman, 2002; Cox, 2011; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; Stiggins, 2005; Tierney, Simon & Charland, 2011). Guskey and Jung (2006) argue that the key drawback is that single grades are impossible to interpret. They often include many factors beyond a student’s academic achievement and do not provide a clear indication of the progress a student has made towards the learning objectives (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Students and parents cannot identify strengths or areas for growth to continue the student’s progress (O’Connor, 2009).
Traditional grades merge scores from assessments into one final grade. Teachers use a wide variety of criteria to determine grades of which students are unaware and do not understand (Cizek, Fitzgerald & Rachor, 1995; Muñoz & Guskey, 2015). These grades come from different types of assessments (i.e., tests, quizzes, projects, homework) that serve different purposes. They may also include scores for punctuality and classroom participation (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015). Some may even include cooperation and group effort (Cizek, et al., 1995). These factors make these grades impossible to interpret for students and their parents (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015). As stated by Muñoz and Guskey (2015), in order for grades to be understood, they should be based on “explicit criteria derived from the clearly established learning standards” (p. 66). Traditional grades do not support students in their learning because they are not linked to clearly defined goals that provide clear understanding of their achievement.

Additionally, there is a common misconception that traditional grades motivate students. While this may be somewhat true for higher achieving students, for those who are not as successful, grades often intimidate rather than motivate them (Stiggins, 2005). Students often are only provided one opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a traditional grading system (Guskey, 2011). If they fail at this attempt, they may be blamed for it because failures may be seen as student problems rather than issues with instruction. Students who fail may lose motivation. This is because they cannot interpret the grades and identify ways to improve. They may begin to question their ability as learners and withdraw from educational activities. (Guskey, 2011; Stiggins, 2005).

If the purpose of grades is to communicate learning so that students, their parents, and teachers can identify strengths and areas for growth, traditional grades do not match this purpose. They are difficult to understand and interpret, and include many
factors not directly related to student achievement. However, as will be explained in
detail below, finding a solution to address these issues is complex.

**Complexity of solving the grading issues.** There is agreement in the literature
about the ineffectiveness of traditional grading and reporting to communicate student
learning, however the creation of a “solution” is complex because there are significant
disagreements about which practices are the most effective. These are primarily focused
on two areas: (1) the elements that should be included in a student’s grade, and (2) how
their grades should be communicated.

One of the integral disagreements is on the value of effort in grading practices.
Effort is included because of its perceived positive influence on students, especially those
who are lower achieving. In the early literature on the value of including effort in a
student’s grade, McMillan (1977) claimed that even though praise did not have as much
impact on higher achieving students, including effort increased the motivation of those
who were less skilled. Brookhart (1993) also concluded that lower achieving students
were supported more when their effort was included in grading practices. Cox (2011)
identified that many teachers believe that by including effort, they are “keeping the hope
alive” for many students. McMillan, et al. (2002) countered this perspective by stating:
“Teachers…may be allowing students who are not competent, as well as their parents, to
believe that they demonstrate needed knowledge and skills” (p. 212). In other words,
including effort in a student’s grade may provide a false impression to the student and
his/her parents that they have met the learning targets. This is an important point in the
discussion because students are being rewarded with higher grades to help increase or
maintain their motivation. However, their true achievement is not communicated to
students, their parents, or other interested stakeholders (McMillan et al., 2002). By
including effort in a student’s academic grade, they cannot take ownership for what they know and are able to do in relation to the targeted standards. The student may have significant gaps in their learning and are not prepared for what comes next.

In his attempt to deal with issues of motivation and the complexity of identifying the best grading and reporting practices, Guskey (2001) distinguishes between three criteria for creating grades: *product, process and progress*. When using the product criteria to assess a student, the focus is on what the student knows and is able to do at a specific time. Previous attempts at learning are not factored into this grade. In contrast, when teachers employ the process criteria, the focus is on how a student created their final product, rather than on the product itself. The progress criteria focuses on the growth a student has made, rather than on how their final product rates in relation to the identified standards (Guskey, 2001; Guskey & Jung 2013). Measurement theorists argue that in order to truly understand what a student has learned, the product criterion is the correct way to report student achievement (Guskey, 2001). In slight contrast, Guskey and Jung (2013) and O’Connor (2009) support the inclusion of all three types of grades when communicating student learning. However, reporting out on each of the criteria separately is important for communicating student learning effectively. These distinctions are the basis of the claim for implementing standards-based grading and reporting.

**Value of standards-based grading and reporting.** Standards-based grading and reporting practices separate out a student’s academic achievement from the process undertaken to reach that achievement. They are dependent upon assessment practices that are aligned to targeted standards and the communication of student learning based on those objectives. In this system, teachers evaluate student performance on identified standards, and then report out a student’s achievement on the individual standards.
separately (Guskey & Jung, 2013). If executed correctly, the communication of student learning is far more effective than the single grade given in the traditional system.

Along with better communication, there are many merits to a standards-based grading and reporting system. It mandates purposeful planning and alignment of standards with the needs of individual students and promotes learner-centered classrooms. The primary focus for the teacher shifts away from what they are teaching to what their students are learning (Colby, 1999). When this happens, what a student has learned becomes more transparent, and this provides the student more opportunities to take ownership for their learning and the continuation of it (Marzano, 2004).

Standards-based grading and reporting practices support learning by making the process more transparent. They also increase the time students have to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to move forward in the curriculum. Students are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of the subject matter. An important distinction Marzano (2006) makes is that in a traditional grading setting, the “time spent in school is constant; learning is varied” (p. 138). In other words, students are expected to master set objectives in the same amount of time, and when one unit is finished, the students move onto the next unit whether everyone has mastered the intended objectives or not. Under standards-based grading, the time needed for learning is varied. Students are provided multiple and differentiated opportunities to meet the standard before moving on with the curriculum (Marzano, 2006).

A key to being able to provide more time for learning is that assessments are tied to specific standards, and they provide valuable information for teachers, students, and parents about where students are in mastering those objectives (Guskey, 2003). These assessments, if designed effectively, should be fair measures of a student’s ability to
apply the knowledge they have learned. The results should provide descriptive feedback about the extent to which the student has met the targeted goals and what warrants re-teaching (Guskey, 2003). This supports students in taking more ownership for their learning because they understand where they are in meeting the educational targets and they have an understanding of their next steps.

Brookhart (2011a) uses self-determination theory to explain the impact this type of feedback has on internal motivation. When students can take more ownership for their learning, and are allowed to continue to work on skills yet unlearned, they find internal motivation to persevere through challenges and this facilitates self-efficacy (Brookhart, 2011a). When students have more ownership and greater self-efficacy, the effect on student success is positive. Ownership of learning by students means that there are a decrease in the number of failures and remedial courses, and an increase in the number of electives for students. There is also an increase in positive behavior for students and improved morale for both teachers and students (Reeves, 2011). In short, students are more engaged in the learning process, have greater opportunities, and in turn, their overall achievement is higher.

**Implementation of Standards-based Grading and Reporting**

The literature supports the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices to provide clearer communication of student learning, but it does not provide a clear path for implementing the new practices. This shift is not a simple process, and for secondary school teachers it requires the repurposing of grades and significant changes to their practices.

Guskey and Jung (2006) suggest a process for redefining the purpose for grading centered on these questions: “What information do we want to communicate? Who is the
primary audience for the information? How would we like that information to be used?” (p. 23). In discussions about grading and reporting, all teachers and administrators must be included. There must be a safe environment for teachers to “evaluate their assumptions” about grading (p. 12). The practical place to begin the transition to standards-based grading, or as Brookhart (2011b) terms it, “learning-focused grading” (p. 10) is to start simply by talking about grading. For a successful transition to standards-based grading and reporting, these discussions should be done at the earliest stages (Brookhart, 2011b). When this is done, then the reformation of its format will be less complicated, and the end result will be more accepted by all stakeholders. When the purpose is clearly defined, it can act as the compass for the implementation on new grading and reporting practices (O’Connor, 2009).

Once the purpose for grading and reporting is established, the literature (Brookhart, 2011a, 2011b; Colby, 1999; Guskey, 2001; Marzano, 2006; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011) offers many suggestions for ways to implement them, however does not provide a step-by-step process. There is not a specific process outlined because there is disagreement in the literature on the degree to which grading and reporting practices must be transformed at the beginning of the reform process for the end result to be successful. There is not a consensus on how to support teachers in the transition. In essence, there is a lack of consensus on the process and timing for creating a successful transition to a standards-based grading and reporting system.

The literature supports a full-scale shift to standards-based grading and reporting as the ultimate goal. In this shift, some voices support incremental changes to practices if that is what is needed to produce buy-in from teachers for the reform. The belief is that incremental changes will foster further reforms over time (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011;
O’Connor, 2009). Especially in secondary schools where traditional grading and reporting practices have been institutionalized, the elimination of traditional grades may take more time to gain community support, and incremental changes may be necessary. In some cases, Marzano and Heflebower (2011) suggest that combining grades with measurement topics is a starting point. For example, a school could include a traditional letter grade in the top portion of the reporting system, and then include a bar graph to indicate the levels of achievement on specific topics in the course. They also suggest that students should be provided multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning. In their opinion, these changes will foster momentum needed for further revisions (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). O’Connor (2009) agrees that some small changes to grading and reporting practices can positively impact student learning and foster momentum for further reforms. The changes he suggests include the elimination of zeros for missing work and the elimination averaging of all grades for a term. He also suggests that by separating out academic achievement from a student’s behaviors, grades become more focused on what a student has learned. These smaller and varied steps in reforming grading and reporting practices are rooted in the need to tailor the reform efforts to meet the needs of a school or district.

On the other hand, Brookhart (2011b) does not support incremental changes. She argues for a complete overhaul of the grading and reporting system by reconceptualizing the design of grades. It is her belief that without a complete overhaul, the reformed grading and reporting system suggested by others may be more confusing than the traditional grades they are replacing. In order to address teacher concerns and to produce buy-in for the reform, Brookhart (2011b) stresses the importance of beginning with a conversation that outlines the purpose of grading and staying focused on that topic. The
underlying objective is to be open and honest from the start that the intended outcome is a shift in grading practices.

Change leaders should make it known from the onset that a shift in grading and reporting practices is the end goal of the reform process because that is what is best for student learning. They also need to allow the time and space for teachers to arrive at this understanding on their own (Brookhart, 2011b). In order for teachers to develop this understanding, it is imperative that there is support from administrators and that professional learning opportunities are provided (Colby, 1999). Time to discuss and facilitate a smooth transition is essential (Guskey, 2001). To Brookhart (2011b), the most effective way to reform is to allow time and space for teachers to alter their beliefs about grading and reporting before implementing any change to their practices. This belief is in contrast to those who support small changes in the early stages of attempts to alter beliefs and practices on grading and reporting.

Due to the varied interpretations of the process of reforming grading and reporting practices, the success of implementation in secondary schools has been varied (Cox, 2011; Michael, et al., 2016; McMillan, 2009; St. Pierre & Wuttke, 2015; Svennberg, et al., 2016; Tierney, et al., 2011). There are several reasons for this, and a very significant one is the necessity of reforming teacher beliefs and attitudes towards grading and reporting student learning (Brookhart, 2011b). Unfortunately, many transitions are centrally mandated, leaving teachers out of the discussions. In these situations, individual beliefs and practices are not changed in many cases (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011).

Recent literature has focused on understanding why the implementations of standards-based grading and reporting practices in secondary schools have had varied results (Cox, 2011; Michael, et al., 2016; St. Pierre & Wuttke, 2015; Randall &
Engelhard, 2009; Svennberg, et al., 2016; Tierney et al., 2011). These studies confirm that while schools may mandate grading policies, unless teachers’ assumptions are addressed first, the implementation will not be consistent among teachers from the same school or district. Even where district policy mandated specific grading requirements, without a clear consensus or understanding, teachers interpret those policies how they choose, and some teachers choose not to follow district policy at all (Randal & Englehard, 2009). Some of the variations in success are due to the fact that teachers were not ready for the mandated change when the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting took place (Brookhart, 2011a; Michael, et al., 2016; St. Pierre & Wuttke, 2015).

This was further understood when Cox (2011) studied a large, urban school district where a mandated reform to grading and reporting was in process. While there were some areas of success, the interpretation and implementation of the district proposed reforms was left to teacher discretion. This study revealed a clear lack of consensus in the understanding and interpretation of grading and reporting practices; this was true for the district as a whole and for departments within individual schools. Additionally, Michael, et al. (2016) and St. Pierre and Wuttke (2015) both concluded that lack of understanding of the practices, and the added time needed for successful use of them, contributed to implementation issues. Tierney et al. (2011) stated that the lack of a common understanding of the reform and shared definitions of key terms also determines the extent to which reforms are successful. It is imperative that there is a common understanding of the policy so that the interpretation and implementation are cohesive. As will be explained below, this logic of developing a common understanding extends to designing assessments that are standards-based.
There also must be a shared understanding of how to develop effective assessments. Many teachers lack the experience in designing effective assessments that are based on measurement theory or tied to targeted standards (McMillan, 2009). Without proper training, teachers may revert to designing assessments in the ways in which they are comfortable (Guskey, 2011; O’Connor & Wormeli, 2011). To counter this and provide support for designing effective assessments, teachers must collaborate with their peers to ensure that the assessments they create are aligned to the targeted standards (Brookhart, 2011a; Reeves, 2008). This collaboration, however, challenges the long time tradition of teacher autonomy (Reeves, 2008). The lack of assessment literacy among teachers and the challenge to their autonomy can negatively impact the successful implementation of grading and reporting practices that are aligned to specific standards. There have been pockets of success in reforms to teacher beliefs and practices in secondary schools, but many factors have slowed the success rates in many cases.

**Summary and Implications**

The development of standards-based grading and reporting practices are a facet of the larger standards-based curriculum movement. A transition to these practices improves connections between teaching, learning, and assessment, and provides richer communication of student learning to students, parents, and other stakeholders. To increase student learning, and to maximize a student’s time spent engaging in learning tasks, standards-based grading and reporting provides clearer data for teachers so that they can better tailor their lessons to meet the individual needs of their students. Grading and reporting practices that focus specifically on the extent to which a student has met the targeted learning goals allow students to have a better understanding of their strengths and areas for growth. With this greater understanding, students can take more ownership
for their learning. Students who have an understanding of where they are in their learning journey achieve more than students who do not (Marzano, 2004).

While there is evidence that standards-based grading is a better way of communicating student learning, there are many challenges to implementing it. School leaders must engage their communities in professional discussions about the purpose of grading, and eventually come to the consensus that it is to communicate student learning. The literature provides some practical strategies for a successful transition and implementation. Ultimately, the school must determine how to employ the practices in their own context.
Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of a qualitative study is to describe and interpret the experiences of research participants in a specific context (Ponterotto, 2005). It focuses on depth rather than breadth, and provides a lens for understanding specific situations and moments in time. It helps us to understand individuals and groups more comprehensively (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative research supports us in understanding how findings might be transferable across similar contexts and populations (Kvale, 2011). This particular study was designed to support an increased understanding of teacher sense-making in the context of a mandated change to teacher grading and reporting practices. The central question for this study was: How do middle school teachers make sense of a reform to their grading and reporting practices from a traditional system to one that is standards-based? The focus was on understanding the ways that individual teachers in one international middle school have made sense of changes to their grading and reporting practices during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting, and the factors that contributed to their sense-making process.

Research Design

The research design was developed in accordance with the tenets of a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists believe that the reality of an individual is constructed and hidden in their mind. It is only through deep reflection that the meaning of their reality will surface (Ponterotto, 2005). Qualitative interviewing allows for this reflection to take place and the stories of humans to be told. Through the sharing of these stories, humans get to know each other more deeply. We learn about our collective experiences and understand our hopes and fears; they are often very interesting, dramatic, and easy to understand (Drew, Hardman & Hosp, 2014; Kvale, 2011). Our stories are
shaped through the narrative experience. Interviews foster the construction of knowledge by supporting the cognitive function of organizing and expressing ideas (Kvale, 2011).

Qualitative interviewing provides access to the ways humans experience and make sense of their world (Kvale, 2011). As stated by Warren (2011), the interviewer is attempting to “derive interpretations” from the story, and “aiming to understand the meaning of the respondent experiences” (p. 2). This is based on a conversation where the emphasis is on asking questions and listening intently to the response. The purpose of qualitative interviewing is to provide a deeper understanding of a subject through the creation of new knowledge (Drew, et al., 2014). As stated by Kvale (2011), “the research interview is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between interviewer and interviewee” (p.2). It is an exchange between two people with common interests; the goal is to remain open to the story of the participants (Warren, 2011).

In order for the creation of new knowledge to occur, we must examine how stories unfold and analyze the entire phenomenon to develop a broad understanding. This is done through qualitative interviewing. All events and behaviors are connected, so we must explore the phenomenon and include all the data to understand the full story (Drew, et al., 2014). The interview is used to “gain insights” and understand opinions, attitudes, experiences of those involved, and serve as a way to understand how the interviewee is processing the experience (Rowley, 2012). It should be used when one is trying to look for variations in the sense-making process, explore contradictions, or understand the key events or turning points in the process for participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A broad understanding is developed through qualitative interviewing because participants use their own words to tell their stories (Drew, et al., 2014).
One should select qualitative interviewing when more evidence is needed to deeply understand the personal experiences of the people involved in the phenomenon (Rowley, 2012). We choose the method when the topic extends beyond more than one setting, and when we are trying to establish or understand if there are patterns or themes in particular respondents (Warren, 2011). Accumulating knowledge in this way contributes to the understanding and development of concepts and theories among topics that have smaller sample sizes and lack a global setting (Drew, et al., 2014). The explorative qualities of interviews have the potential to uncover new theories about the phenomenon or provide further descriptions of existing ones (Kvale, 2011).

Human experiences are unique to the individual. The data collected in a qualitative interview should be treated as an account where we can investigate the sense-making of the individual. This is accomplished by engaging them in the explanation of their story (Warren, 2011). As stated by Warren (2011), the goal is “to unveil the distinctive meaning-making actions of interview participants” (p.6). The analysis of how they developed and ordered their story supports the construction of new knowledge (Roulston, 2013). The reliability and validity of this knowledge is then shaped by the development of analytical, reasoned judgments. These stem from studying the phenomenon and theorizing the extent to which the findings might be able to occur in another setting with similar characteristics (Kvale, 2011). The heart of the qualitative interview is to foster an understanding of the stories and connect the knowledge about them to other theories (Drew, et al., 2014).

Humans are the most sensitive instruments for investigating and understanding our own meaning making (Kvale, 2011). Semi-structured interviews support this because they allow the flexibility to ask probing questions or to extend a line of questions to get
more information about the phenomenon. Follow-up questions seek more clarity or search for implications to the answers of the main questions (Rowley, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Through qualitative interviewing, hypotheses and definitions of the story emerge and change with the development of the study and the unfolding stories of the participants (Drew, et al., 2014).

This study employed qualitative interviewing. It was determined as the best method for understanding the individual sense making process of the participants involved, and to identify themes that could potentially exist in similar situations. My role was to construct a research protocol that allowed the participants to tell their stories and surface their sense-making process through deep, individual reflection. I was a co-participant to the extent that I developed trust, understanding, and respect with the participants through careful listening and the adjustment of questions in response to their comments. By developing relationships built on the characteristics of conversational partnerships with the participants, I helped them uncover their experiences and the ways in which they made sense of reforms to their grading and reporting practices (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I focused on: (1) how an individual’s beliefs, values, and attitudes, (2) how their context and situation, and (3) the role of the representation of the reform impacted changes in their grading and reporting practices.

Participants

The participants were seven teachers who were engaged in a systematic, organizational transition from traditional- to standards-based grading and reporting practices in a single, international middle school. They were recruited for the study through a sampling of convenience. The sample was chosen to represent the diverse disciplines (i.e., math, language arts, science, world languages, etc.) in the setting. Each
participant had been a full-time teacher in the school, and they were all in a similar phase of implementation of the new grading practices. Each one had been using the practices for six-months and were still attempting to make-sense of the reform.

**Recruitment and Access**

The participants’ protection was the utmost focus and all ethical considerations were addressed. Approval from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought prior to contact with any participants. To gain access, I obtained approval from the institution through the director of the school and the middle school principal. After consent from the institution and IRB approval, I sent an email to the entire faculty of the middle school. The purpose of the email was to explain the study, the requirements for participation, and asked for volunteers. Thirteen teachers expressed interest. Ultimately, seven were selected because their collective experiences offered wide variation in both teaching experience and discipline taught.

**Data Collection**

All participants in the study participated in semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The participants were able to discuss topics that were important to them and were prompted to expand on their ideas. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes in length. They took place in a mutually agreed upon locations; six of the interviews were conducted in a private room on the school’s campus and one in the participant’s home (Creswell, 2013).

**Data Storage**

The collection and storage of data was my sole responsibility. I audio recorded each interview and then transcribed them verbatim. All files were secured in a password-protected computer, and all paper copies were stored in a locked filing cabinet. As per the
guidelines of the National Human Subjects Board, the data will be stored for three years
before being destroyed permanently.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The participants of this study were treated in accordance with the guidelines of
Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). There was strict adherence
to these policies. The participants in the study were not given any financial incentive. To
protect the identity of the participants, the data was coded and participants were given
pseudonyms.

Each participant received full disclosure of the details of the study, and was
provided with the opportunity to ask questions that clarified its purpose. Prior to their
consent, each participant was informed that their participation was completely voluntary,
and that they could opt-out at any time during the interview. They also were informed
that their identity would be kept confidential. Participants signed an informed consent
form before their interview. Due to my relationship with the participants as a mentor in
the reform process, there was a specific clause to address this on the informed consent
form. The participants were assured that the content of their interview would not be
communicated to their supervisor or be used in any way to evaluate their performance.

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure and maintain trustworthiness in the study, several steps were taken.
Once I had transcribed the interviews, each participant received a copy for review. None
of the participants asked for changes. The confirmed transcripts were used in the analysis,
and to develop the findings and themes.
Demographics of Participants

All of the participants were a part of a mandated change to standards-based grading and reporting. All had previous teaching experience in another school and in multiple grade-levels. At the time of the study, each of the participants was a full-time teacher in the middle school at the site where the study took place, and each was utilizing American-based standards as the basis of their curriculum. They had been employing standards-based grading and reporting practices for six months. Each one was a member of several, collaborative teams, including: (1) grade-level, departmental team ranging from 2-4 members; (2) a whole school, departmental team ranging from 5-9 members; and, (3) a grade-level team of mixed-discipline teachers ranging from 12-15 members. In the written analysis of the interviews, all specific departmental affiliations were intentionally left out and all names were pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

I followed recommendations for novice researchers from Smith (2004) and Smith et al. (2009) when I analyzed the data. The process is outlined in greater detail below, but the essence of the analysis was to examine each interview independently before moving onto any cross-analysis. The analysis started with a detailed examination of each interview until there was some degree of closure. After each one was analyzed independently, cross-interview analysis was completed to identify areas of convergence and divergence for the participants (Smith, 2004).

The initial analysis was to read and re-read the interview, and to stay focused on the participant in order to engage with their experience. This close reading created a deep understanding of the narrative that would not have been possible with a quick reduction of the data. The second step was to start the initial analysis by noting areas in the
narrative that highlighted how the participant understood and thought about the phenomenon of changing their grading and reporting practices. These initial notes and comments were grouped into three broad categories: (1) individual, (2) contextual, and (3) interpretation of the message. This stage was to engage in analytic reflection of the text by asking questions about the meaning of words or phrases. This was followed by an attempt to identify what it meant for the participant.

Once the initial comments were written, the analysis turned to developing emergent themes from the data. There was an analytic shift at this point. The focus was on the initial notes instead of the transcript itself. The goal at this stage was to produce concise statements of what was important for the participant through interpretation. Emergent themes attempted to capture and reflect the understandings of the participant. At first, the themes were captured chronologically. After the initial development of chronological themes, the researcher searched for connections across these themes. This step of analysis focused on mapping out how the themes were related by drawing together the emergent ones. These were identified as the most significant and interesting aspects of the experience for the participant. This level of analysis included the analytic processes of abstraction, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function to bring the themes together (Smith et al., 2009). These processes allowed me to look for patterns and connections across the emergent themes. At this point, the analysis was still focused on the individual participants, not on the entire set of participants in the study. Once this process was completed for one interview, it was repeated in its entirety on the subsequent ones.

The final stage of analysis involved looking for patterns across the themes from the individual participants. This was done by asking questions about the themes, looking
for commonalities, and renaming the themes as necessary. This level was more theoretical in nature, and I was identifying if there were dual qualities to the findings (Smith et al., 2009). In other words, I was identifying ways that the participant experiences were unique to the individual, but also represented similarities with the experiences of other participants. The individual cases had themes from the participant’s experiences, and the participants shared some common themes that supported generalizations about their experiences across the study. This final stage of analysis revealed similar themes across the experiences of the participants.

**Coding**

Once the transcription was completed for all of the interviews, the coding of the data was completed in several stages. I: (1) listened to the interview and read along with the transcripts, (2) took descriptive notes from the transcripts, (3) identified themes from the notes, (4) categorized the themes (individual, situated context, message, or interpretive), and lastly (5) grouped themes by content. In keeping with the recommendations from Smith et al. (2009), each individual experience was analyzed prior to looking for generalizations across the set of experiences.

The tables below illustrate a very limited sample of the coding process; they were intended to provide a tangible example of the process used to code each of the individual experiences. Table 4.1 indicates the color codes used to initially classify the responses. These colors linked participant comments to the research questions that they answered.
Table 4.1: Research Sub-Question Color-Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color &amp; Category</th>
<th>Research Sub-Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>green – individual</td>
<td>What is the influence of a teacher’s individual knowledge, beliefs, and experiences on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blue – situated context</td>
<td>What is the influence of a teacher’s situated context within a school on their sense-making process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orange – message</td>
<td>What is the intersection between messages about the policy and the teacher’s lived experiences on their sense-making process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pink – interpretive</td>
<td>No question was associated with this color; it was used to code the participant’s interpretive comments about their experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 was included as a sample of the coding of the interview transcripts. The first column is an excerpt from the transcribed interview, and the second is a sample of the descriptive notes. The last one shares the themes that were connected to this part of the participant’s experience.

Table 4.2: Sample Coding of Interview Transcript

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1: Transcription</th>
<th>2: Descriptive Notes</th>
<th>3: Identified Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>318 I feel like I cannot give kids feedback… I mean I can, but I feel like its most meaningful when they know what this looks like and we name and notice it. So then, when I say I noticed you did this or how about you try this … and here is the bump up, they know what it means…</td>
<td>Cannot give kids feedback unless they have deep understanding of the standard - supports students understanding of their work - supports students being able to see “bump up”</td>
<td>proper feedback = deep understanding of standards kids need to know standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>319 ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>320 I have been lucky to talk to people that are positive and for it, and that’s my circle. Um, you know cause that there are other people that would probably not be for it or against, and they were not in my circle. So I didn’t have that influence … influence was pretty positive.</td>
<td>Lucky to be surrounded by people that “are positive and for it” - “that’s my circle” Those against it not in his circle. Positive influence</td>
<td>positive influence by those around not connected to those against the change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.3 is a sample of the categorizing themes grouped by content. This stage was completed for each individual participant prior to identifying themes across the case.

Table 4.3: Sample Categorizing of Themes Grouped by Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situated Context</th>
<th>Grade-Level Departmental Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>similar pedagogy with team</td>
<td>very close with team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>it's been an awesome experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iterative collaborative cycle</td>
<td>iterative cycle done with teammates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>enjoy challenge of interpretation of standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive influence by those around</td>
<td>takes time to build relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>collaborative cycle not always smooth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reflect together</td>
<td>systematic reflection at end of all units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>safe to not know and understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group values reflection</td>
<td>group benefits from reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>young teachers more adaptable</td>
<td>young teachers not connected to past curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>team all for implementation</td>
<td>standards-based grading and reporting = increased calibration and consistency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

A qualitative interview study was deemed the best suited for examining how teachers make sense of a mandated change to their grading and reporting practices. Once all individual interviews were analyzed and understood, I was able to cross-reference individual themes to determine areas where there was a convergence among the participants’ experiences. The narrative accounts honored the individual experience, and once developed, they were used to look at the experiences of all the participants. The following chapter outlines the themes that were identified through the analysis.
Chapter IV: Report on Research Findings

Introduction

Standards were designed to identify the learning targets for students, and were organized by discipline and grade-level. Standards-based grading and reporting practices were designed with the purpose to communicate the extent to which a student has met these learning goals. In an effort to align grading practices with standards-based curriculums, an increasing number of schools and districts have mandated the implementation of these modern grades in lieu of traditional grades. The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to understand how teachers in one private, international middle school made sense of a mandated implementation of standards-based grading and reporting. Through a sampling for convenience, seven teachers participated in semi-structured interviews and shared their experiences and interpretations during the first six months of the implementation process. After the interviews, each participant experience was analyzed individually. Once this was completed, the analysis focused on the interviews collectively to determine if there were general themes about the experiences across them. The purpose of this chapter is to define the site, share summaries of the participant narratives, and the key findings from the analysis of their experiences.

Description of Site

The study took place at a single international, middle school, catering to the expatriate community of the city in which it is located. The site is part of a larger, private school that serves students from pre-Kindergarten through grade twelve. The school’s students originate from 54 different countries, and about 30% are English-language learners. The data from external assessments shows that the students from the school outperform their peers in all groups to which they are compared.
While the school is not in the United States, its curriculum is American-based, and the standards used to define the academic programs include the Common Core State Standards for literacy and math, Next Generation Science Standards, Core Arts Standards, and others of a similar origin. The faculty at the school are mostly American or host-country nationals. All hold degrees from Western universities and valid teaching licenses, and 76% hold advanced degrees. The faculty is experienced and 80% have been teaching for over nine years. At the time of the study, the middle school teachers had been utilizing standards-based grading and reporting to communicate student learning for six months.

Prior to the implementation of the new grading practices, the school had been preparing for the change for two school years. During this time, the middle school administrative team had been providing professional learning for teachers, developing the framework for the system, and working collaboratively with teachers to make important decisions surrounding the implementation. The faculty supported the administration in developing the reporting framework. They were part of determining the achievement scale for grading student academic achievement and in defining the learning behaviors that would be part of the reporting system. They had been involved in developing the purpose statement for grading and in the design of the standards-based report card. The faculty had been an integral part of the decision-making process to determine how the school would implement the new grading and reporting system.

This site was chosen because of the participants’ stage of implementation of standards-based grading and reporting. The interviews took place in the early part of the second semester in the first year of implementation. The teachers were developing assessments by directly utilizing content-area standards, and had completed a full cycle
The school had produced standards-based report cards at the end of the first semester. All of the teachers that participated in the study supported the reform to their grading and reporting from the beginning, and all continued to at this time of the implementation.

**Central Research Question**

How do middle school teachers make sense of a reform to their grading and reporting practices from a traditional system to one that is standards-based?

**Sub-Questions**

1. What is the influence of a teacher’s individual knowledge, beliefs, and experiences on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?

2. What is the influence of a teacher’s situated context within a school on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?

3. What is the intersection between messages about the policy and the teacher’s lived experiences on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?

**Participant Experiences**

During the interview, each participant shared their professional background, the ways their colleagues influenced their implementation, and then they discussed the influence of the messages about the change on their experiences. Over the course of their interview, each one interpreted and analyzed their experiences while answering the research questions. Their accounts included a:

- descriptions of their background,
• use of standards in their discipline,
• definition of standards-based grading and reporting,
• impressions on the influence that colleagues had on their experiences,
• impressions on the influence that standards-based grading and reporting had on their students,
• impressions of the role of the message in their experience,
• analysis of the implementation,
• perceptions about their need for continued implementation.

**John** has been a teacher for 16 years in several U.S. public schools and in one international school. Much of his experience was as an elementary teacher, in many different grades. For several years he has employed standards-based grading and reporting practices in various elementary settings. John believed that as an elementary teacher, he needed to understand the standards of many disciplines. This was because he was a generalist who taught many subjects and changed teaching assignments often. He has been a middle school teacher for two years, and initially described the standards-based grading and reporting practices in the middle school as “a more intense version” than those he previously employed as an elementary teacher.

**Use of standards.** John explained that his use of standards had increased, and that they acted as the anchor for his curriculum. In the middle school, he engaged in an “iterative cycle” with his peers to unpack the standards in an effort to understand their meaning and goals for students. They met regularly for this work. At times, they repeated the process on the same standard in an attempt to truly understand its learning outcome. He felt that using student work was the best way to actually understand the learning
demands on the students. He believed that the process of understanding the standards should be completed in collaboration with other teachers, not in isolation. He also thought that a deep understanding of the standards was essential for developing assessments that are reliable, consistent, and accurate. For John, the standards-based grading and reporting practices in the middle school resulted in a much deeper understanding of the standards than in his previous elementary settings.

**Definition of standards-based grading and reporting.** John defined standards-based grading and reporting as “simple.” He explained that it was a system that communicated what teachers taught based on the assessments in the course.

**Situated context.** He described his relationships with his grade-level, departmental team as positive and collaborative. He explained that his team “fully supported” standards-based grading and reporting and often engaged collaboratively in the iterative process that John deemed essential for understanding the standards. An important characteristic of this group was that they were not “tied to the past curriculum” and wanted to revise their units and assessments to support the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting.

In contrast, John described the rest of his departmental team differently. This team was comprised of all of the teachers in the school that taught the same subjects as John. He expressed frustration because there were disagreements about how to interpret standards and a lack of understanding of the vertical articulation of those standards. He stated that even though standards were not new to the teachers, some of them did not understand what they were teaching. These same teachers were unwilling to engage in a process to unpack the standards on a deep level, and this frustrated him.
**Influence on student learning.** John described the impact of standards-based grading and reporting on students as positive. His impression was that students knew the learning targets and could better understand the extent to which they were meeting those targets. He indicated that this was because the feedback given to students in a standards-based system was better than in a traditional system.

**Messages from administration regarding implementation.** John believed that the messages from leadership had been collaborative and responsive to the needs of the stakeholders (students, teachers, and parents). He felt that the decisions made by the leadership had not been “top-down,” and this created more support. At times, however, he felt that there were some “mixed messages” from the leaders on the ways to employ standards-based grading and reporting. He felt that some messages did not match the goals of the new system and confused teachers and students, and he thought they were essentially made to support the parents. An example he gave was that a mid-semester progress report was mandated, and it was very laborious for he and his peers. He felt that the only reason that report was developed was because parents did not yet understand the new system. He thought that the online grade book provided the same information, and the progress report was redundant. Even though there were extra time demands and some confusion because of the messages, John said that he trusted the leaders in this process and had “great respect” for them.

**Continued needs for supporting implementation.** John described the need for continued implementation of standards-based grading and reporting from a departmental lens. He explained that in his department, the teachers did not understand how the standards are vertically aligned and connected from year-to-year. He thought that his peers focused too much on understanding the learning objectives of their specific grade-
level. This caused disagreements regarding the interpretation of them and how students demonstrated that they were meeting them. In an effort to increase the reliability across the department, he explained that teachers needed a deeper understanding of the standards and the ability to identify specific traits in student work. In order to do this, they needed more collaborative time for reflecting, defining, and understanding them through the evaluation of student work samples. John also expressed that the stakeholders needed to be patient. He felt that as time passed, teachers would deepen their understanding of standards-based grading and reporting.

*Overall impressions.* John explained that the experience was stressful. To him, all of the teachers were “very stressed because they were trying to do too much at once.” He also stated that he believed with time people would become more comfortable with the new system. He shared that while he fully agreed with the implementation of new grading and reporting practices, there were too many new expectations for teachers all at once and it was too stressful for them.

*Melanie* has been a teacher for eight years in two different international schools. All of her teaching experience was in a middle school setting. She described her current school as “fantastic, but high pressure” and her colleagues as collegial and collaborative.

*Use of standards.* Melanie did not have experience utilizing standards in her curriculum or grading prior to the implementation. They have become integral to her instruction since, and were centered at the core of all of her lessons, assessments, and units. She described the work of unpacking and understanding standards as complex, rewarding, and frustrating. They clarified the learning objectives and grade-level expectations for her students. Melanie spent considerable time attempting to understand the standards, and she thought that she needed more time to complete this process.
**Definition of standards-based grading and reporting.** When asked how she would define standards-based grading and reporting, Melanie simply stated that it was “equal to learning.” The system was designed so that identified learning goals were targeted towards specific standards. She indicated that quality assessments were a key component in the system. She did not understand traditional grades and that her previous “grades were guesses and terrible.” Melanie believed that she was giving her students better feedback, and their standards-based grades were more closely tied to their learning.

**Situated context.** Melanie described her grade-level, departmental team as very supportive. This group spent considerable time collectively unpacking and debating the meaning of standards. To interpret and understand the standards, the group used student work. Melanie stated that the samples from students made the “standards meaningful, tangible, and deepen[ed] understanding” for the group. This work was not always smooth because there were disagreements regarding the interpretation of standards. She said her work with her larger departmental team was “problematic.” She explained that some teachers clung to past practices and were resistant to changing their assessments. Melanie described times when other members of her department did not agree with an element of the standards used to develop the curriculum, and because of this disagreement, dismissed the entire standards-based grading and reporting system. She believed that these experiences slowed the group down in their implementation process, and that some teachers continued to be resistant to the changes.

**Assessment practices.** Melanie stated that her “assessment practices have changed more than her grading practices.” This was because her assessments were more deliberate and intentionally designed around standards. Her assessments only focused on individual
standards. Each summative assessment required a rubric, and their development had been difficult. She described the revision of assessments and rubrics as “tons of work.”

**Influence on students.** Melanie’s experience with standards-based grading and reporting was very positive. She felt that the standards were linked together from grade level to grade level, and this supported student learning. Students were able to self-assess and explain where they were in meeting the targeted learning objectives. They could better determine what their next steps should be in their learning. She stated that it was “pretty cool” to see kids learning.

**Messages from administration regarding implementation.** Melanie expressed concern for what she called a “philosophical mismatch” between the implementation process and the philosophical grounding of standards-based grading and reporting. She believed that the building-level administrators were too focused on the needs of the parents. One specific area of concern was in relation to the expectations for the online grade book. She explained that the directions regarding usage of the tool were confusing and did not support the philosophical beliefs of the new system. She was disappointed that the rationale for the expectations seemed to focus on the needs of the parents instead of on those of students and teachers.

**Overall impressions.** Melanie reflected on her experience by stating that she “learn[ed] something new daily” and that the transition has been a “monumental” change directly connected to her beliefs on teaching and learning. She was excited for the future, and felt that as teachers grow in their ability to use the standards, the positive influence on student learning should deepen as well.

**David** has been a secondary teacher for his entire career, and described the school’s philosophy as progressive-leaning in theory but not always in practice. He
described the culture of the school as “confused,” and that the teachers and administrators tried to do too much at once. He was concerned that the administration was trying to change the culture of the school without changing the infrastructure (class sizes, number of classes, time usage, etc.). He believed that teachers at his school held themselves to a high expectation and wanted perfection from the beginning. Because of this, many people had been upset and down on themselves since the implementation of the new grading and reporting practices.

**Use of standards.** His use of standards had changed significantly during the implementation. Standards-based grading and reporting was transformative for him because he became more intentional about what and why something was taught. In his previous teaching experiences, he taught what most interested him rather than being guided by standards. He questioned the extreme emphasis on standards, and wondered how to find balance between teaching to your passion and being completely focused on specific learning outcomes.

**Definition of standards-based grading and reporting.** When asked to define standards-based grading and reporting, David simply defined it as “what is taught and assessed is known by both the teacher and the student.” Assessments were built to assess a student’s understanding of individual standards. Everything was more intentional.

**Situated context.** David’s experience with his departmental team had its positive and negative moments. He described the teachers as “well-intentioned, good teachers”, and that standards-based grading and reporting had created more intentional agreements between the teachers on their curriculum and assessments. However, he expressed a concern that many of the members of his department were behind their peers in the implementation process. On the whole, he was concerned that the department was not as
standardized as one would hope in a standards-based system. His interpretation was that the department needed more help understanding theirs. As a whole, they were “using their gut” to determine the proficiency levels for the standards. They talked about them broadly, but had not collaboratively defined the levels of achievement for individual ones. David believed that the interpretation of student achievement was very different from teacher to teacher.

**Influence on students.** Even though he had struggled at times with the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting, David believed that it was positive for student learning. This was because the students understood clearly where they were in meeting the learning objectives.

**Messages from administration regarding implementation.** David spent considerable time reflecting on the role of the administrators and their messages during the implementation. He was a member of the leadership team of the school, and he thought that this “shielded [him] from unintentional messages” regarding the change. He was “more in the thick of things” and was afforded “more context” for the expectations of teachers. He had concerns about how his peers were internalizing and reacting to what they heard. He sensed that there was considerable anxiety among the teachers.

There were several messages from the administration that he believed were misinterpreted by the teachers. One of those was the constant reference to and increased expectation of more feedback. The unintended message was that feedback was more important than other elements of teaching. The quantity of feedback that was expected was time consuming and produced high levels of anxiety among the faculty. Another example was the administration’s message “to do the best you can, and then go back and revise.” He thought that this was intended to be inspiring, but unfortunately he believed
that it sent the message that teachers were not doing enough. In the end, David thought that these messages had unintended consequences on teacher morale and produced high levels of stress among the faculty.

He also reflected on the clarity of the communication by the administration regarding changes made during the implementation. David indicated that there was confusion regarding why the administration made changes to the grade book expectations mid-semester. There also was confusion regarding the decision-making process on the whole. David believed that the administration needed to prioritize the changes that they asked the teachers to implement. He thought they were trying to implement too many changes at one time.

**Continued needs for supporting implementation.** David explained that the middle school faculty needed time to fully understand the new system. All parts of the standards-based grading and reporting system took considerable time to implement. One specific element of the system that needed further support was a deep understanding of the levels of achievement, also known as proficiency levels. These define a student’s learning towards identified targets, and the use and understanding of them varied among teachers in his department considerably.

**Overall impressions.** David described this year as “the most anxiety-producing year.” He was figuring out the standards-based system, but felt that he was only at the beginning of this process. He stated that he “fake[d] it sometimes” and things were often “trial by error and fire.” David said that he was doing the best he could at the moment and he was “okay” with that.
Abigail has worked for 10 years as a classroom teacher in the middle school setting. Abigail described her current school program as “open … current and topical” in what was taught and how it was delivered.

**Use of standards.** Abigail described her use of standards as very intentional; they drove planning, instruction, and feedback. There was a more intentional focus on grade-level standards than ever before. She thought that her situation was unique from the other teachers in the school because she was looking for the balance and “nexus” between academic standards and the language acquisition needs of the students that she served. Her implementation of the new grading practices had been “crazy” and “intensive.” She stated that she felt “overwhelmed” and “exhausted” when she thought about the future. There was considerable work that still needed to be completed in order to fully understand the standards of her discipline and effective assessment practices.

**Definition of standards-based grading and reporting.** When asked how she would define standards-based grading and reporting, Abigail defined it as a system to communicate, “how students [were] doing vis-à-vis our standards and expectations in our content areas.” It was intended to be a system to “talk about what kids [were] learning and where they [were] in their learning journey.” It had taken considerable time for Abigail to sort out the parts of the system.

**Situated context.** Abigail’s experiences were steeped in her need to make sense of the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting and the connection between academic standards and language acquisition for English-language learners (ELLs). The situational context for her departmental team was unique because their charge with students was two-fold. Their courses were intended to focus on the standards of their discipline, as well as English-language acquisition. In Abigail’s opinion, “no one thought
through how the shift to standards-based grading and reporting would impact English-language learners.” On her departmental team, no one was an expert in standards-based grading and reporting and they were trying to figure it out together.

Abigail was looking for ways to “bring disparate initiatives together.” She described it as a “roller-coaster” that included excitement, frustration, and enlightenment. She believed that through “deep, dark frustration” the departmental team was figuring out how to support ELLs in this change. She thought that struggling and working together “kept you in it.” She stated that she would have likely “opted out” if she had been alone in the implementation process.

**Influence on students.** Abigail felt that the change had been positive for students. With the type of feedback that was provided in the new system, her students could better understand where they were in mastering the academic standards of the grade level and in acquiring the English language. She explained that teachers had identified ways they could support students more directly from the data they had collected. The grades were more descriptive and tied to intentional learning objectives. Student achievement supported the rational for and the placement of students in the ELL program. Overall, the system had increased the clarity for students and parents about the learning expectations for students, and supported the teachers in understanding the needs of their students.

**Messages from administration regarding implementation.** Abigail shared that she trusted the leaders of the school with regards to the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting. She recalled extensive opportunities for learning about it in the years prior to the implementation. She understood and agreed that a shift in grading and reporting practices was in the best interest of the students and provided deeper levels of communication regarding learning.
Abigail recalled that at the beginning of the implementation year, the message from the leaders was to “try things out and revise as necessary.” She liked the freedom to try things out and get “messy,” but also felt vulnerable and unsure of how to proceed at times. While she appreciated the opportunities to try things out, she felt that some of the practices she was being asked to explore did not “jive” with the philosophical grounding of standards-based grading and reporting. She also felt that some of the expectations were not connected to student learning and confused the faculty, students, and parents. For example, the administration asked teachers to complete a mid-semester progress report and Abigail did not understand what purpose it held. She felt that it was confusing and did not communicate effectively student progress.

**Continued needs for supporting implementation.** Abigail thought the school administrators needed to clarify the ways student learning should be communicated. She was “still struggling” with this and was “not quite sure what to report on” for a student’s approach to learning. She also stressed the need to evaluate how ELLs were affected by reporting their learning against grade-level standards when they did not have the language skills needed to access the curriculum. She felt that the administrators needed to better understand how ELLs were impacted by the change in grading and reporting practices, and after that they needed to support the work of the departmental team in making this shift positive for their students.

**Overall impressions.** Abigail was supportive of the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting. She understood that there were positive gains in her students’ learning due to the intentionality of the new system. While the implementation had been challenging from her perspective, she believed in the potential of the system.
Stephen’s educational career has been in diverse settings. The majority of it was in a middle school setting, and he also had experience as an elementary and high school teacher. His experience was in public schools in the United States and other international schools similar to his current school. He thought these experiences influenced how he made sense of the changed grading practices in his current setting.

**Definition of standards-based grading and reporting.** Stephen defined standards-based grading and reporting as a framework for moving students forward, and a system that provided clarity for teachers, students, and parents of the learning targets. These practices provided specific understanding about where students were in meeting the identified standards.

**Use of standards.** Stephen used standards to tailor lessons and develop formative and summative assessments. He taught students in multiple grade levels at the school, and indicated that this supported his understanding of the progression of the standards from year to year. This understanding allowed him to scaffold his lessons to better meet the individual needs for his students. However, he felt that he still needed to work to better understand the progressions of standards between grade-levels in his discipline.

**Situated context.** Stephen talked at length about his departmental team and their collaboration during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting. He described his department as “collaborative” with a “high level of thinking.” As a group, they worked together to understand the content of the standards and the progressions between each of them.

One of the key tasks the group worked collaboratively on was the building and “tweaking” of assessments to foster a deeper connection to the standards that were targeted. As a group they defined and calibrated the levels of achievement for each
assessment. Stephen believed that due to the shift in grading practices, his department had thought “more deeply about assessment this year.”

Stephen also discussed the influence that an educational consultant, not affiliated with the school, had on his departmental team. He believed that his understanding of the standards and effective assessment practices had significantly improved because of the consultant. He described the experience as a big turning point and one where a “light bulb went off” in his head. He discussed how she had showed him “the way” in the development of lessons and assessments, modeling for students, and in scaffolding to meet individual student needs. Stephen felt this experience was “monumental” to his departmental team’s development of a shared understanding of their standards and more effective instructional and assessment practices.

**Influence on students.** Stephen believed that standards-based grading and reporting was good for his students. They more deeply understood what they were learning, and because of this, reflected more accurately on where they were in meeting the standards.

**Messages from administration regarding implementation.** Stephen shared only a little bit of his experience regarding the messages. His impressions were that the administration did a “good job” making the teachers think about reporting and assessment. He also felt that he was “in the loop” regarding parent feedback on the new system, and that the administration was working “hand-in-hand” with the teachers during the implementation.

**Overall impressions.** Stephen shared that over his career “things always change[d],” and at the moment “this [was] the best, most accurate reporting.” He had a hard time at first knowing how to use the online grade book, but after he sought advice
from peers, he felt that he had figured it out. At the beginning of the implementation process he “stressed out too much” and was “over doing it and over thinking it.” Stephen explained that the simpler you made standards-based grading and reporting, the more powerful the system was for supporting student learning.

**Cynthia** has been a teacher for over 20 years. In her career, she taught in elementary, middle, and high schools. She had previous exposure to standards-based grading and reporting practices. As an elementary teacher, she graded students on learning progressions, and had experimented with standards-based practices in her prior high school setting. None of her experiences were as extensive as the practices that were implemented in her current school.

**Use of standards.** Cynthia has attempted to use standards for much of her career, and her use of standards has increased over time. Standards were linked more closely to her instruction and assessments than at any other time in her career. These changes were largely due to an outside consultant that supported her in understanding the standards of her discipline. This learning enabled her to use the standards more intentionally when she developed the assessments for her classes. Since the implementation, she used shorter and more focused summative assessments to understand the extent to which her students had met the learning objectives. In addition, her students were given “many opportunities to meet the standards” in the new grading and reporting system. These changes fostered a “better understanding of student achievement” in relation to the standards.

**Definition of standards-based grading and reporting.** Cynthia defined standards-based grading and reporting practices as those that focused on what students were supposed to be learning. Specifically, the system identified the extent to which students demonstrated they had mastered the standards. She included that the purpose was to
communicate a student’s progress made towards meeting the goals and areas where continued growth was needed.

**Situated context.** Cynthia was greatly influenced by the colleagues in her previous school setting, and shared that she had many informal conversations with them and they had “a big impact on [her] thinking.” She was moved by a previous colleague who said that, “grades [were] not [her] grades, but the kids’ grades.” These experiences supported her in deepening her understanding of the standards-based practices in her current setting.

She spoke of her current departmental colleagues as a “collaborative, experienced group.” As a departmental team, they met and revised assessments, developed rubrics, defined levels of achievement, marked anchor papers, and looked at student work. All of their summative assessments targeted standards and each assessment had a specific rubric. Cynthia reflected that even though we did “not all think alike, we complimented each other.” They were “in a good place” and the system supported student learning. There was still quite a bit of work needed by the departmental team to make it better.

**Influence on students.** Cynthia focused on how standards-based grading and reporting practices were positive for her students during much of the interview. Overall, she felt that the students were more focused on their learning, rather than on their grade. Students better understood where they were in meeting the targets and what they needed to work on to continue building their understanding. She felt this was because her assessment practices supported students and the feedback she gave them was better.

Cynthia was aware of a shift in the attitudes of her students and the way they approached their learning. She believed her students were more excited to learn. They felt that it was okay to make mistakes and were under less pressure than in the previous
system. They also understood what they were working on to improve and this built up their confidence. Cynthia felt that she knew more precisely where her students were in meeting the standards because of her changed assessment and grading practices.

(Messages from administration regarding implementation.) Cynthia did not elaborate on her experiences with the messages during the implementation. Most of her reflection was positive. She said the administration was “doing a great job” and that she supported them.

(Continued needs for support.) Cynthia stated that an area that needed improvement was the use of the grade book as a communication tool. She wanted the teachers in the school, specifically those in her department, to be more consistent. She wanted everyone to be more reflective on the ways they communicated to students and parents. Many students and parents were confused because there were inconsistencies in how the teachers used the online grade book.

(Overall impressions.) Her experience with standards-based grading and reporting was positive. It had been “a lot more work, but I know my kids better”. She felt that the practices were beneficial to her teaching practice and for improved student learning. Cynthia said that it was “easy to see the positive influence on students,” and she was “excited” about the new system.

Andrew’s teaching experience has been in an elementary school, but he has been a middle school teacher for three years. As an elementary teacher, he did not use traditional percentage or letter grades, but mentioned that he was not sure how he determined the grades for his students. He stated that his elementary “students didn’t worry about their grades.” When he transitioned to the middle school, they were using traditional grades to communicate student learning. He said that he “never understood
what the grades meant” and the students were too focused on their grades and not on learning. In a traditional grading and reporting setting, he did not think that his students were getting the input they deserved on their learning. He fully supported the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting.

**Use of standards.** Although his usage of standards had increased, Andrew’s connection to and understanding of the standards in his discipline was limited. The standards rarely informed his instruction or assessments. This was not because he did not value standards, but because he believed that his standards and benchmarks were a “bit tricky” and “too innate.” They were too focused on content and not focused on skills. To make sense of them, he modified their content and structure to fit his needs. These standards were then used to develop assessments and inform his instruction.

Even though the standards were altered, Andrew became more intentional about using them in the new grading and reporting system. He said that this was “kind of liberating” for him. They supported the development of rubrics with his colleagues, and this increased the commonality among his departmental team. Although he felt that the standards were starting to inform his practice, he was trying to understand how his students progressed in their learning through them. He was not sure that the assessments he designed were measuring student achievement in the appropriate ways; he wanted to continue to work on the intentional connection of standards to assessments.

**Definition of standards-based grading and reporting.** Andrew defined standards-based grading and reporting very concisely. It was a system where teachers used standards to assess students along their learning journey. They were designed to communicate where a student was in their learning and to support their continued progress along the continuum of learning.
Situated context. Andrew described the culture of the school as one in which he felt trusted and respected. He believed that his “professional background and research was respected when he was giving opinions.” He was provided many opportunities for collaboration, considerable resources, and the autonomy to teach using the pedagogy that matched his philosophy and beliefs on learning.

He explained that the collaborative work with his colleagues was successful sometimes and deeply frustrating at other times. The work were “exciting” because they were able to make progress on the alignment of assessments and pedagogy. He also described the experiences as “very frustrating.” There was a conflict within the group about the extent to which they needed to hold on to their assessments and instructional tools from the past and what needed to change. This tension was rooted in “philosophical differences” in pedagogy, and because of these differences it was very difficult to move forward. Some were “unwilling to change their minds.” Working with his departmental team was challenging. This was because the members were steadfast in their beliefs, and most of the time nobody was willing to compromise to move forward.

Andrew explained the ways that the departmental team came together to try to create consistency within the department. “Most of the time spent together [was] for planning” and not reflecting on student work or calibrating. As a department, they talked very broadly about student achievement, but never spent time defining it. He did not work with his colleagues during his designated collaborative planning time. He believed that some of the reason for not collaborating was because of the philosophical differences. The teachers on his departmental team were using different resources and their assessments were not alike. He explained that things were changing slowly, and in the future, he believed the department would be more consistent.
Instrumental to Andrew’s sense-making were his non-departmental colleagues. He was most influenced by informal conversations with the teachers on his grade-level team. Conversations in the hallway with teachers from different disciplines provided “food for thought” on assessment and grading. Additionally, his cross-discipline, grade-level team was very important to his sense-making. The members of the team shared the same students and discussed their achievement in multiple ways. Those conversations shaped the way Andrew implemented standards-based grading and reporting with his students.

**Influence on students.** He described the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting as one that had been positive for his teaching practice and for his students. In the traditional system, his students worried about their grades and were very focused on them. In the new system they were more concerned about their learning rather than the grade they earned. The students did not dwell on their grades. Instead, they reflected on what they did correctly and what they needed to improve. Andrew believed that he could support his students on an individual level better because they both understood their strengths and areas for growth.

**Messages from administration regarding implementation.** Andrew broke up the messages regarding implementation into two time periods: (1) the preparation and learning before the implementation, and (2) the first school year of implementation. He felt that there was considerable preparation for both the teachers and parents leading up to the shift. His department had time to prepare assessments and work to understand the standards. He was philosophically prepared to implement the new grading and reporting practices, and was unsure what else could have been done prior to the shift.
During the implementation the message from the administration was too focused on parents. There were high expectations for communication with the parents. One specific example was the expectation that all teachers used their grade books to communicate student learning with them. Traditionally teachers used the grade book to track student learning, and it was not used as a specific tool for communicating with parents. This new expectation confused him and made him unsure how to use it. He felt it took considerable time for teachers and made it so they were unable to focus on planning or working collaboratively to understand the new system.

**Continued needs for support.** Along with continuing to understand how to use the grade book to communicate student learning, Andrew expressed a need to better understand how to assess and report student behaviors. Initially he was very excited about separating learning behaviors from academic achievement in a student’s grade. He was surprised by how confused he was when he tried to figure out how to assess and track a student’s approach to learning. It had been “more of a struggle than [he] thought it would be” and it really “confused” him. This also was difficult for the other members of his department, and in order to try to make sense of the behavior side of the grading practices, the team decided to take the time to define learning behaviors in the context of their discipline. This was important for building a deeper understanding of how to assess and report on learning behaviors. Andrew felt this was a critical component to the new system and he wanted to continue to deepen his understanding of it.

**Overall impressions.** Andrew’s experience with standards-based grading and reporting was both positive and negative. He thought that his students were benefitting from the new practices because they took more individual ownership of their learning. However, he felt that he never had enough time to be adequately prepared. This year had
been “more overwhelming” than any other year in his career. Andrew believed that the intense focus on communicating to parents took away from his ability to prepare lessons and assessments, and this negatively influenced student learning.

**Findings**

The use and understanding of standards was at the heart of the participants’ sense-making during the mandated change to standards-based grading and reporting. This was revealed in all of their experiences. Each one drastically increased their use, and worked collaboratively with their peers to understand them. Standards drove the development of assessments and were the focus of reporting. They faced similar challenges in understanding how to use their grade books, unpacking the messages from the change leaders, and having enough time to complete the work. This led to inconsistencies in application and high levels of anxiety. In spite of the challenges, all of them supported the new system. The purpose of this section is to explain the general themes that surfaced from analysis of the participant experiences.

**Intentional use of standards.** One theme that emerged from all of the participant experiences was their more intentional use of discipline standards. They did not start from common ground in their understanding or use of standards, but all of them described an increase in using them to plan units, assessments, and instruction. David stated that he had a “very different relationship with the standards” than previously, and he spent considerable time understanding what they were asking of students. Cynthia said that she “thought more deeply” about what she was teaching since the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting. The intentional use of standards was integral in the sense-making process for all of the participants.
An essential component of using the standards was first to unpack them so that
the participants understood what the learning targets were for their students. This fostered
deeper understanding of the expectations for students embedded within the standards, and
supported the development of assessments that were more aligned with the learning
objectives. For those teachers that taught multiple levels in the same discipline, they
developed a clearer picture of the progressions of learning between the grades. For
many, this deeper grasp of the standards supported the development of units that more
intentionally linked learning targets to assessments in an effort to better understand the
extent that students were meeting them.

Several participants described an iterative cycle used to unpack the standards that
depended upon working collaboratively with their departmental teams. A few of them
described using samples of student work to understand the demands of each one and to
define the levels of achievement on the individual learning targets. There were variations
in the characteristics of the collaborative process, but a common outcome was that
working together fostered more consistent interpretations of the standards among
colleagues. The participants noted that this contributed to a common language among
teachers and a shared understanding of the expectations of students in their discipline.
This work was time consuming and sometimes difficult. Even so, Abigail said that
working collaboratively to unpack the learning targets kept teachers “in the game,” and
provided energy and motivation to complete the work.

Another factor that influenced their understanding and use of the standards was
the support of consultants from outside the school. A few participants referenced how
experts in different fields supported them in growing their knowledge of the standards. A
common characteristic for those who mentioned these experiences was that they had been
collaborative and inclusive of their departmental peers. They benefited from learning together, and many fostered more knowledge about the learning targets and the development of appropriate ways to assess students on them.

Additionally, participants explained how their assessment practices were drastically different because of the new grading and reporting practices. Most assessments were created collaboratively with those teaching the same courses and with direct connections to targeted standards. This enhanced their ability to determine whether a student had met the intended objectives. The assessments tended to be shorter and more focused on a few standards. Often they had clear rubrics that defined the levels of achievement and described the criteria for meeting the standard. Extensive time and energy was spent collaboratively planning and revising units and assessments.

There was considerable growth on the part of the teachers in intentionally building standards-based assessments. Several of the participants indicated that most of their collaborative time focused on the development and revisions of their units and assessments, and this meant that very little time was spent collaboratively marking them or calibrating the grades. They felt they should have come together after the assessment had been administered to determine the levels of achievement, but this did not happen for most of them. This led to inconsistencies in the grades that were assigned on collaboratively developed assessments. The participants felt that they needed more time and support to increase their consistency when determining a student’s grade in relation to the identified learning goals. Even though there still was room for improvement, all of them identified that they were more confident in how to assess students on targeted learning goals because they understood the standards more deeply.
Another finding that influenced the participants’ sense-making process and use of standards was their previous teaching experiences. Those who taught classes across multiple grade levels in the same discipline expressed having a deeper grasp of the standards and the intended learning targets. These participants better understood what it meant for a student to achieve them. They knew the learning expectations in several grade levels and could more easily identify the extent to which a student had met them. Those with a more sophisticated insight across grade levels placed more value on standards when developing curriculum and assessments.

Additionally, another factor that contributed to the participants’ application of standards in their practice was their background and teaching experiences in either elementary, middle, or high schools. Those teachers who had elementary teaching experiences were more comfortable with utilizing standards to develop assessments and to report student learning. They expressed that, while the new expectations were more detailed, they had a baseline understanding of the system. Those educators whose only previous teaching experience had been in middle or high schools, had limited exposure to utilizing standards and needed more support in understanding their role in the new system. The previous experiences of these teachers made their journey to understanding their standards and the new system for communicating student learning longer than their peers with elementary experiences. This also contributed to the inconsistencies in the application of the practices across the participant experiences.

**Inconsistencies in application of practices.** All of the participants discussed that there was increased calibration of student learning outcomes among teachers and more common assessment practices. Even so, there were significant inconsistencies in the implementation of the system. These were connected to: (1) the interpretation of
standards and revision of assessment; (2) the calibration process used to determine the level of student achievement on an assessment; and, (3) the utilization of the online grade book for tracking and communicating student learning.

While there were many positive experiences of working collaboratively to understand the standards, this work posed some challenges for all of the participants. The struggles were rooted in the time that it took to work with one another in order to develop a common understanding of the standards. Most of them felt that their peers were not resistant to the implementation of standards and that they theoretically supported it. However, some of them mentioned that members of their departmental team had significantly different interpretations of the standards, and this made the process longer. Several of them also described times when there was resistance by some of their colleagues to alter their existing assessments so that they were more standards-based. There were disagreements regarding what could remain from their past units and assessments and what needed to be changed in the new system. These instances slowed down the implementation process for the participants because they had to spend valuable time attempting to come to an agreement with their peers before they could move forward. Even with the varied challenges that collaboration posed, all of the participants recognized that this work was essential for the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting.

Another factor that was vital for the implementation process, but had much inconsistency, was the process to identify and define the levels of achievements for the targeted standards. All of the participants explained the ways they determined a student’s level of achievement in relation to the goals, and there were significant variations in the approaches. Rubrics were an important part of this for all of the participants, and they
were intended to support the calibration of student achievement. However, the rubrics varied in structure and use. Some of them included descriptions that defined levels that were rooted directly from the standards. Others had blank spaces on the rubric instead of descriptions of the different levels because they were unsure of how to develop a rubric to determine a student’s grade based on the standards. David stated that he used “his gut” when grading because he was not sure what else to do. Some shared experiences of defining the different levels with their colleagues prior to students taking an assessment. Others stated that this happened after they had completed the assessment. The processes also differed because some teachers worked collaboratively with members of their department, while for others it was done in isolation. The calibration process significantly varied among the participants and was a major contributor to the inconsistencies in implementation.

There also were discrepancies in calibration procedures across departments because of the standards that were used in varied disciplines. Those that understood the standards of their discipline had more consistent and collaborative calibration practices. For those who still had considerable work left to deeply understand or who disliked the content of the standards, there were more inconsistencies in the ways they defined the levels of achievement on their assessments. Even though some departments or teachers had greater efficacy for defining the levels of achievement, many expressed that there was a need to continue to develop consistent ways to determine whether or not a student met the learning targets.

One challenge that all of the participants discussed was their confusion in utilizing the online grade book. This led to considerable inconsistencies in its use across the school and within departments. They struggled to understand how to record student achievement
and student learning behaviors on the targeted standards. At the beginning of the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting, teachers were instructed by the administration to try things out and determine what made sense for their context. This fostered inconsistencies in the use of the grade book school wide. Many felt that there was a lack of clarity on how to use the grading tool and they were confused by the complexity of recording student achievement in a standards-based way. Some teachers even created their own system for tracking student learning outside of the online grade book. Every participant expressed that there was more work needed to understand how to effectively use the online grade book for the purpose of recording and communicating student achievement and learning behaviors. The uncertainty contributed to anxiety that the participants felt during the implementation of the reformed grading procedures.

**Heightened anxiety.** All of the participants expressed that they understood the theoretical underpinnings and need for the changes to their grading and reporting practices. They supported the transition, and many indicated that they felt prepared prior to the implementation. Even though they thought that they were ready for the it, all of them expressed that they had anxiety in the transition. David described the implementation year as “the most anxiety-producing year” of his career. The angst was rooted in two common characteristics: (1) there were not clear guidelines from the change leaders, and (2) there were too many changes to their teaching practice at once.

In the preparation for the implementation of new grading and reporting procedures, the participants said they were offered considerable professional learning opportunities. Many indicated that they felt ready for the change and supported it theoretically. However, once they started using standards-based practices many felt overwhelmed and unsure about ways to effectively employ them. Much of their anxiety
stemmed from the lack of clear guidelines from the change leaders. The literature offered
guidelines for preparation needed to justify the changed grading practices, but it did not
indicate a clear path for the implementation of the new practices. As the teachers began
employing new grading procedures, the administration asked for teachers to “try things
out” and see how they worked. They then asked them to reflect on the success of what
they tried, and then revise their practices to make them better over time. This message to
try things out and revise as needed produced high levels of anxiety for many of the
participants. It would have benefited many of them if the guidelines had been clearly
outlined at the beginning of the change to provide guidance for utilizing standards-based
grading and reporting procedures.

The participants indicated that the lack of clear guidelines resulted in
inconsistencies in implementation among the teachers in the school. In order to develop
greater consistency, the administration then revised their expectations for teacher
implementation. However, many of the participants expressed that the changes created
confusion for them because they did not understand why and for whom some of them
were being made. Several teachers expressed concern that the modified expectations were
not in-line with the research on standards-based grading and reporting and seemed to be
more focused on parent concerns with the new system rather than student learning. An
example mentioned by several participants was the introduction of a mid-semester
progress report, and some of the requirements were counter to their understanding of
standards-based grading and reporting. This was important because when the leaders
changed their expectations, and those did not match with the their own beliefs and
understandings, the participants tried to find ways to reconcile the differences for
themselves. This heightened their anxiety because they were attempting to make sense of
the new practices from the theoretical foundation and some of the expectations did not match their understanding.

For many, their anxiety also was heightened because there were so many changes to their teaching practices occurring at once. The reform was technically to the ways they graded and reported student learning, but this led to the need to change many other areas as well. They had to make significant modifications to their assessments and instructional practices, and these changes were dependent upon a deep understanding of the standards of their discipline. In addition, they were expected to grade student behaviors and provide extensive narrative feedback to students. There were many changes needed to employ the new procedures. Some felt that during the transition they were not being good teachers because they were not perfect from the beginning, and this lack of confidence contributed to their unease. Some of the participants questioned the decision to implement so many changes at one time, and wondered if spacing out the implementation of the product and process grades would have lessened their anxiety.

**Time.** The time it took to implement standards-based grading and reporting was an important factor in all of the participant experiences, and each one discussed the need for more of it. This was expressed in two different ways: (1) more time to work with their colleagues to deepen their understanding of the standards, to develop assessments, and to calibrate student achievement; and (2) time to develop efficacy with the standards-based grading practices. Many felt that their anxiety would lessen and they would become more comfortable in the new system over the course of time.

One factor that was persistent across all of the experiences was the considerable amount of time needed to effectively use standards-based practices. The foundation of the new system was that assessments were aligned to standards, and that each one had clearly
defined levels of achievement. Each participant spent considerable time doing this work with his or her colleagues. Many commented that they needed more time to collaborate, plan, and assess student work, but there was not increased time allotted for them to do this task. They felt that the expectations for working collaboratively were greater, but the time for doing this had not increased.

They also referenced that they needed more time to deeply understand the practices and get more comfortable with them. These were connected to honing their instructional and assessment practices in relation to grading and reporting at the standard level. Many discussed that they need for more time to understand their standards and the demands on their students. There were several references to allowing time to pass so that all of the teachers at the school developed increased support for the new system and improved confidence with standards-based grading and reporting. When asked what was needed to continue the implementation, all of them mentioned time to deepen understanding of their standards, revise or develop new assessments, and to further their efficacy in the new system.

**Continued support.** As teachers reflected on the experience as a whole, even though there were challenges and it was very time consuming, they remained supportive of the standards-based practices. They were committed to the theoretical foundation of the new system, and there was evidence from their perspectives that standards-based grading and reporting supported student learning. All of them discussed the positive influence that the new practices have had on their teaching practice and student learning. They knew their students’ levels of achievement better and could differentiate for their needs more effectively. They felt that their assessments were more consistent among their colleagues, and some mentioned that these were more effective in measuring student
achievement than they had been in the past. These factors contributed to the feeling that their communication with students and parents was more focused on student learning and was positively influencing it.

The notion that if there is improved communication of learning, students could take more ownership of it is the foundation of standards-based grading and reporting. There were consistent references to students having deeper understandings of the learning targets and their achievement of them improved. The students in their classes could self-assess more accurately to identify and understand the next steps in their learning. All of the participants indicated that the change to standards-based grading and reporting had been positive for their students, and because of this, they continued to support the implementation of the new practices.

Conclusion

While participants had unique experiences with their implementation of the mandated change to their grading and reporting practices, there were generalizations across their experiences. All felt that the new system was better for students because both the teacher and the student had a clearer understanding of the extent to which the targeted standard was met and could better determine next steps. This was because the participants had deeper knowledge of the standards in their discipline and used this to create assessments that were connected directly to the standards. There were common struggles for the participants in relation to the time needed to collaborate with their departmental teams and to employ the practices. Similarly, they all spoke to the lack of clarity on how to use the grade book effectively. These struggles contributed to inconsistencies in many different facets of the grading and reporting system. There was heightened anxiety among the participants during the implementation, and all felt this would lessen over time as
they grew in their efficacy to use the reformed practices. In spite of the time commitment, increased levels of anxiety, and inconsistencies in the application, all of the participants continued to support the mandated change of their grading and reporting practices.
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

Introduction

Grades share the extent to which a student has met the intended learning targets. Traditional grading practices fold all aspects of a student’s achievement into a single, aggregated grade. Standards-based grading and reporting practices separate a student’s grade into more specific categories: their approach to learning (process), their academic achievement (product), and the strengths and areas for growth through a narrative comment (progress) (Guskey, 2001). The purpose of this study was to understand the sense-making process of teachers in a mandated change from traditional to standards-based grading and reporting practices. Through a sampling of convenience, I focused on the experiences of seven teacher participants in one, American-based, international middle school. The close analysis of the their experiences revealed themes across the case in relation to their intentional use of standards, previous exposure to standards and standards-based grading practices, inconsistencies in application of the new practices, high levels of anxiety, time needed for implementation, and positive influence on teaching and student learning. The purpose of this chapter is answer the research questions and to discuss the implications of the findings in relation to the literature and theoretical framework. Included also are the research limitations of this study, recommendations for future studies, and my personal action plan.

Central Research Question

How do middle school teachers make sense of a reform to their grading and reporting practices from a traditional system to one that is standards-based?
Sub-Questions

1. What is the influence of a teacher’s individual knowledge, beliefs, and experiences on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?

2. What is the influence of a teacher’s situated context within a school on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?

3. What is the intersection between messages about the policy and the teacher’s lived experiences on their sense-making process during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices?

Discussion of Themes and Findings

The literature provides support for developing an understanding of why the shift away from traditional grades is critical. It also offers guidelines for how change leaders might justify and potentially structure a reform of grading and reporting practices (Brookhart, 2001b; Guskey & Jung, 2006; Marzano, 2006; Marzano & Heflebower). However, the literature does not offer the same support when leaders are implementing or when teachers begin utilizing the practices. In previous studies on the topic of grading reform, it was determined that many teachers continued to use elements of traditional practices after a mandated shift to standards-based grading and reporting had been completed (Cox, 2011; Svennberg, et al., 2016; Tierney et al., 2011). A simplistic explanation for the failure of teachers to implement reforms has been that they were against them. However, this does not account for those who supported the changes theoretically and did not alter their practices to match the new demands (Spillane et al., 2002). Standards-based grading and reporting is extremely complex and takes
considerable time and energy to implement effectively. A common characteristic among all of the participants of this study was that they supported the mandated reform from the beginning. They were attempting to meet the demands of the reform, and they continued to support it through the challenges of the implementation.

**Complexity of standards-based grading and reporting.** The results of this study provide scholar practitioners and change leaders with an increased understanding of the complexity of implementing a standards-based grading and reporting system. On the surface, it might simply look like eliminating traditional practices and replacing them with those that are standards-based. However, developing efficacy in this complex system takes considerable time. The participants were tasked with evaluating the extent to which a student had met the learning targets of individual standards, their approach to learning, as well as provide extensive narrative comments regarding potential next steps for them. In order to be able to effectively do this, they needed a deep understanding of the academic standards of their discipline and how to design assessments that elicited accurate information regarding student achievement on them. An extension of this was then to record standards-based grades in ways that made sense to themselves, students, and parents. The participants needed considerable time to make sense of the changes and to develop efficacy in utilizing the mandated procedures.

In the literature on the development of a standards-based reporting system, Guskey (2001) explained that a successful one should have three components: *product*, *process*, and *progress*. The participants in this study had an understanding of the characteristics of each component, and they were involved in defining how each one would be utilized in their grading and reporting system prior to implementation. They were grounded in the idea of communicating student learning through the different
components. However, many felt overwhelmed with the magnitude of the new system when all of their grading practices changed at once. The narrative comment (progress) was not challenging or a significant change of practice for the participants, as this has been an element of report cards for a long time. However, both the product and process components of the new system created obstacles for the participants and this led to inconsistencies in their implementation.

The communication of academic achievement through the product component is directly connected to the development of standards-based assessments. Standards are not new to education, and have been the basis for American-based curriculums since the 1990s (Marzano & Kendall, 1997). However, the participants in this study did not directly utilize standards to design units or assessments until they were responsible for reporting out student achievement against the standards. As was discussed previously, this took considerable time and effort on the part of the teachers to understand their standards and then design assessments to support students in meeting them. Additionally, the communication of a student’s process was challenging for many of the participants. They identified that learning behaviors were not easily connected to assessments, and there were not clear guidelines on how to collect data or communicate this aspect. They felt that reporting out on how a student approached their learning seemed quite subjective, and this created great confusion for the participants.

The complexity of these two components created high levels of anxiety for the participants, and this should be considered when implementing standards-based grading and reporting. It potentially could have been lessened if there was intentional spacing out of the implementation of the different components. Leaders could ask teacher to employ either the product or process element one year, and then add the other one the following
year. This could allow teachers the opportunity to gain efficacy in one domain at a time, potentially making the implementation of the system as a whole less overwhelming. Even though they were asked to implement all components at once and faced challenges in doing so, all of the participants continued to support the changes to their grading and reporting because of its perceived influence on student learning.

**Student ownership for learning.** A notion in the literature on standards-based grading and reporting is that when learning is communicated in this manner, students are able to take more ownership for their learning and it increases their self-determination (Brookhart, 2011a). This has the potential to occur when there is purposeful planning and alignment of lessons and assessments to meet the needs of the students (Colby, 1999; Marzano, 2004). In this study, there were many references to teachers knowing their students better and being able to differentiate for the individual needs of the learners in their classroom. In turn, the participants indicated that their students also were able to self-assess more accurately and plan next steps in their learning. Brookhart (2011a) contends that this type of understanding motivates students to continue to develop their self-efficacy and find the internal drive to persevere through challenges. The participants noted that this was a key factor of why they continued to support the reform through the challenges they faced.

**Sense-making of grading reform.** To understand how the participants in this study made sense of the changes to their grading and reporting practices and the implications of them, a discussion of the theoretical framework that guided this study is important. The framework, constructed by Spillane, et al. (2002), was chosen because it was developed specifically to deepen the understanding of the ways educators make sense of reforms. Through careful analysis of the participant experiences, it was revealed
that the sense-making process involved in the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting is influenced by an individual’s background, school context, and interpretation of the messages. It cannot be considered as a one-time event, and should be seen as a multi-faceted process that remains incomplete until the teachers have made sense of the link between standards, assessments, and grading. The theoretical framework supported the evaluation of the connection between an individual’s background and experiences, context(s) in the school, and interpretation of the reform messages on their sense-making process (Spillane et al., 2002).

**Influence of individual knowledge, belief, and experiences.** The sense-making process of an individual hinges upon the coupling of their previous experiences with existing beliefs and knowledge to shape their new understandings (Spillane et al., 2002). Regardless of previous background, each participant was more intentional about using the standards in their disciplines. However, their individual backgrounds shaped their depth of understanding, use, and support for the standards. Their prior knowledge and experiences influenced their sense-making process. These factors provided the lens through which the implementation of new grading practices transpired (Spillane et al., 2002). While it was consistent throughout the experiences that intentional use of standards increased, the level of application varied because of the standards themselves and the participants’ previous teaching experience.

In the school where the study took place, the curriculum had been developed with direct reference to academic standards. Yet, all of the participants indicated an increased use of the standards of their discipline to shape the learning opportunities for students and for determining grades since the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting. This did not occur to the same degree for all of them, and the variations may be
linked to the design of the different discipline’s standards or complexity in understanding them. Some participants thought that their discipline standards were strong. While it was time consuming to unpack them, some felt they were able to effectively utilize them during the process of developing lessons and assessments. This led to greater efficacy in communicating student achievement in relation to the standards. On the other hand, some participants shared that the language in their standards document was ambiguous and it was difficult to understand the learning targets. Additionally, some thought that the targets were too specific and limited the learning experiences for their students. A few of these participants changed the language of the standards so that they could make them more applicable in their contexts and use them more effectively to design units or assessments. This added to the complexity of understanding the system and they faced more challenges in implementation. Even though these variations existed across the experiences, deepening their knowledge and use of their discipline standards was essential to the individual sense-making process for every participant.

An additional factor that influenced everyone’s sense-making process was their previous grading and reporting experiences. For the most part, none of them had been held accountable for utilizing the standards or for reporting out student achievement in relation to them. Some participants previously had been exposed to or utilized standards-based grading and reporting, but none of these experiences mirrored what was expected in this reform. While they had an awareness of the standards of their discipline, they had not been an integral part of the design of their unit plans or assessments prior to the mandated changes. There were participants that expressed deeper understanding of their standards and more familiarity with standards-based grading practices than their peers.
Several participants shared how they had used standards to support the determination of what would be taught and assessed during each unit in previous settings. There were two common factors in these experiences. Those who taught the same subject across different grade-levels discussed using the standards to understand the learning progress between the levels. Others with elementary backgrounds were responsible for teaching several content areas to one group of students. In this capacity, they relied on the standards of their grade-levels to guide unit plans and assessments.

Additionally, many previously had exposure to utilizing standards as the basis for communicating student learning. Those participants with an elementary background all discussed using standards or criterion to determine student achievement in that setting. Elementary school programs have used standards-based practices to communicate student learning for several years (McMillan, et al, 2002). Although they were asked to employ standards-based practices and utilize standards differently in this reform, the participants who had previous exposure were not forced to change in ways as radical as those who only had utilized traditional grading.

In contrast, teachers who had limited experience using standards or exposure to standards-based grading practices had to make changes that were more substantial during the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting. They were not as familiar with their content standards because they had not utilized them as much to determine what should be taught and assessed. For those teachers with only secondary experience, they had less connection to their discipline standards. Reeves (2008) described that secondary teachers historically have been specialists in their field and often hold degrees not only in teaching, but also in their content area. This has contributed to a culture of autonomy in secondary schools. Instead of using the academic standards to develop units
and assessments, they use their background in the content area to drive the curriculum and determine the extent a student was learning (Reeves, 2008). There were many times in my teaching career where the decisions about a course that I was teaching, from its syllabus to how grades were calculated, were mine to make. When teachers have this level of autonomy, it can contribute to questions about the need for any reforms to their teaching practices (Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013). While the participants in this study all supported the implementation of standards-based practices, there were still individual questions regarding the need for specific standards or their direct connection to grading.

**Influence of situated contexts.** In addition to individual experiences and knowledge, the situated contexts of teachers influence them when making sense of mandated changes. They are often members of one or more groups, and all members are at their own place in understanding the reform. This influences the collective sense-making of groups because it is inherently an individual and ongoing process (Spillane et al., 2002; Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013). The context of the school and varied settings the participants were engaged in had an influence on their sense-making process, and findings emerged from the analysis that supported understanding how their experiences were shaped by these contexts.

The participants in this study were members of multiple groups, and several of them compared the characteristics of those that were successful to the ones that were slower in their collective sense-making of the change. Groups that had greater success included members who had similar individual backgrounds and were in a more common place in their understanding of standards. The groups that moved slower through the implementation process consisted of members: (1) whose previous experience was more traditional, (2) who struggled to identify the intended learning targets within the
standards, or (3) who questioned the value of their standards document. Even though some were more successful, these groups were an important part of the individual sense-making process for all of the participants because they offered opportunities to deepen their understanding of the reform.

While some of the participants had previous exposure to standards-based grading and reporting, they were figuring out the new system and making sense of the change together with their peers. When the group collaboration was effective, it was a source of inspiration and staying power for the participants. It offered time to research, understand standards, and for thinking together. It also offered opportunities to hear varied perspectives and expand the lens through which individuals were making sense of the changes. In these groups, the members provided intellectual and emotional support in understanding and implementing the new grading and reporting practices.

In contrast, there were times when the collaborative contexts provided barriers in the process and slowed down the implementation of the new practices. The participants discussed how some of their peers were not familiar with or did not value the standards of their discipline. In the collaborative effort to unpack standards, differences of opinion arose regarding the interpretations of them. These disparities often were rooted in differing beliefs about the depth of change needed. It was difficult for some teachers to restructure their understanding. They attempted to make sense of the practices through their old beliefs and practices (Spillane et al., 2002). The participants shared examples of times when there were disagreements about the extent to which the assessments and curriculum needed revision. Some members of a group might have felt that many of their past assessments and practices were in line with standards-based grading and reporting, while others firmly believed that very few honored the new system. It took considerable
time to develop collective agreements on the ways the new grading practices would influence their curriculum and assessments.

The amount of time needed to build agreement among teachers was extensive. There were structures in place to support this collaboration, but the time needed and offered were not equal. To collectively make sense of the reform and to develop new practices, the groups had to come to agreement on their grading and assessment practices. Individuals followed this by shifting their practices to be in line with the change. This process was dependent upon the beliefs, practices, and past experiences of each individual and their intersection with those of the other members of the group. It was quite complex. Every participant expressed a need for more time to support the collective understanding of the multi-faceted system.

In the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting, a teacher must have a deep understanding of the standards of their discipline and the efficacy to develop assessments based on them. While there were some challenges, the collaborative efforts supported the understanding of the depth of change needed in the new grading system. These efforts supported more intentional agreements between teachers of like subjects and the development of more consistency on what to teach and how to assess students. The situational contexts and the collaborative dialogue were important in developing common agreements among teachers, and will likely be an important factor in continuing to make grading more consistent.

Intersection between policy and lived experiences. School leaders are the policy makers and responsible for mandating change and defining the expectations. Teachers are responsible for implementing the changes and altering their practice (Cohen, 1990). The way in which a new policy is shared influences a teacher’s sense-making process
(Spillane et al., 2002). The spaces where the language of the policy meets the teachers’ practices are called the “enactment zones” (Spillane & Zeuli, 1999, p. 407). These zones are influenced by the extent that the policy messages are: (1) shared socially, (2) change agents are offered the chance to deeply discuss the reform, and (3) the amount that they are supported with resources grounded in research (1999). In a mandated reform, success is determined by the extent to which the enactment zones have these characteristics. A reform in grading practices changes over time as teachers continue to make sense of the practices and as policy makers make alterations to their expectations. Therefore, this type of change has many enactment zones. The analysis of the participant experiences highlighted that variations in the characteristics of their enactment zones were influential on their sense-making processes.

The analysis of the participant experiences also revealed two different phases of the interpretation of the messages from the change leaders during this reform: (1) the phase before implementation to understand the need for the change, and (2) the phase when teachers were utilizing standards-based practices to communicate student learning. The first phase of implementation is the messaging of the need for the reform prior to the changing of practices. It is when leaders share the intent and need for the mandated change. Practices have not yet changed. Instead, teachers are provided with the opportunity to begin to understand and make sense of the future changes to their grading and reporting practices (Brookhart, 2001b; Guskey & Jung, 2006). At this point, the participants were attempting to understand the reform and determine the extent that they approved of and supported the changes.

Prior to the implementation, each one agreed that a reform to their grading practices was necessary. A factor that influenced this was the ways that the message of
the need for change was shared and processed with the faculty of the school. The learning about it was social, and teachers were working collaboratively in whole school meetings, as well as in departmental teams, to understand it. This phase was connected to clear reasons for making the shift, and offered opportunities for rich deliberation. Many of the participants commented that these factors fostered their deep support for the change. The messaging had a positive influence on the sense-making process for them. The success of this phase provided an anchor when they faced challenges during the implementation.

The second phase of the messages from leaders started when the standards-based practices were being utilized to communicate student learning, and all of the stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, and students) were making sense of the new system. The sense-making process was ongoing and the messaging from the change leaders influenced their process. The leaders asked for teachers to “try things out,” reflect on their successes, and then make changes as needed. They did not offer specific guidelines for teachers on how to utilize the reformed grading practices, and instead gave options for experimentation to determine what would be best for students. This contributed to the inconsistency of teacher practices and caused confusion for some of the stakeholders.

In reaction to this, the leaders altered their message and asked teachers to modify their grading and reporting practices in an attempt to make them more consistent and understandable. They provided more specific guidelines to follow, and many of the participants stated that some of these seemed to be in contradiction to the research base of standards-based grading and reporting. They felt that they were mainly to address parent concerns, and did not support teachers or students. For example, the implementation of a progress report at a time when students were still very early in their learning seemed to conflict with the research for a few participants. Another example was that if a student
demonstrated a beginning level of understanding on a standard, teachers were asked to write a comment in the grade book for parents to review. For some teachers this was counter to the learning process and they felt it stigmatized students. A reason that there may have been disconnect between the message of modified expectations from the change leaders and the participants could be their different roles in the implementation process (Spillane, et al., 2012). The leaders were tasked with justifying and supporting the sense-making process of all stakeholders during the implementation, while the participants were responsible for implementing the reformed grading practices. The participants described this time when they were enacting the change and continuing to make sense of the messages about the reform as less social, lacking deliberation, and disconnected from the research.

The messages during the time when teachers were first utilizing the practices also heightened anxiety for some of the participants. While the message to experiment and try out different ways of implementing the changes was liberating for some, for others it was the source of considerable stress. They would try out new practices and then reflect on their successes, and were making modifications regularly as they developed a deeper understanding of their standards and greater efficacy in assessment literacy. This was time consuming, and the continuous revisions and reflection caused some participants to question their ability as teachers.

Even though the participants faced challenges during the implementation and initial utilization of standards-based grading and reporting practices, all of them expressed ongoing commitment to the change and continued to work to makes sense of the reformed procedures. Their understanding of the need for the change, along with the collaborative nature of the situational context, fostered deep support for the new system.
The participants were willing to work through the difficulties to deepen their efficacy in utilizing standards-based grading and reporting practices for the purpose of communicating student learning.

**Research Limitations**

There were limitations to this qualitative interview study. It was based on the personal experiences of only seven, experienced teachers from one, international middle school. The participants were determined by a sampling of convenience, and their demographics were not representative of all middle school teachers. Each one supported the implementation of standards-based grading and reporting practices, and were dedicated to developing an understanding of the system and employing the practices. They continued to support the reform through the challenges that were presented. Additionally, these participants had been utilizing standards-based practices for only six months, and were still in the process of making sense of the new system. While they provided valuable insight into how they made sense of the mandated change, they indicated that there was considerable work to be done before the implementation process would be complete.

There are limitations to the generalizability of the findings of this study. The site where the study took place is a private, international school. The school’s students are high performing against their normative peers and the teachers are highly qualified educators. The findings may be generalizable in other international schools with similar backgrounds and private or affluent schools in the United States. However, the finding may not be generalizable in public schools where the students have lower socio-economic status or the teachers have less experience or fewer qualifications.
Additionally, as a member of the organization for the past four years, I had access to the site. I understood the context of the school and process leading up to the implementation. I also had positive and trusting relationships with all of the participants. These factors might have influenced my analysis. In an effort to minimize this, I used member checking and followed an explicit path for individual analysis prior to examining the case as a whole. However, it is likely that my proximity to this case influenced my thinking about it.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study revealed that a mandated implementation of standards-based grading and reporting was significantly more complex than simply implementing new practices. More studies are needed to build on our understanding of the ways teachers make sense of this type of change. These might focus on comparative studies across cases in different contexts to determine if the findings of this study are evident in others. This study took place in a private, international school. Evaluating the extent that these findings can be generalized across settings, in both other international schools, as well as public or private schools in the United States could deepen the literature on this type of change. It also might be beneficial to compare the sense-making process between groups who teach the same discipline and then evaluate the findings of those studies. This would support understanding the extent to which teachers of varied content areas share similar experiences. Along the same lines, studies that focus on the extent that collaboration between teachers of like classes or subjects supports successful implementation would continue to build the understanding of the sense-making process. Additionally, it would be important to understand the characteristics of teacher grading practices 18 – 24 months
after the implementation to support understanding the extent to which they had changed after considerable time utilizing standards-based grading and reporting procedures.

The literature supports the implementation of standards-based practices largely because there is a perceived positive influence on student learning. However, there have been limited studies to back this claim. Future studies on the extent to which this is true are vital to the continuation of this reform movement. Likewise, the extent to which standards-based assessments positively influence student ownership of learning and increases their motivation for it would strengthen the literature on the topic. There have been very few studies that focused on the specific ways students are influenced by the reform of grading and reporting practices.

**Personal Action Plan**

As a leader in my school, I plan to use this research to support our continued implementation of standards-based curriculums. This study made me more aware of the complexity of the sense-making process in the shift to standards-based grading and reporting and its connection to curriculum development and assessment design. Our high school is currently in the early stages of the implementation of standards-based grades. As the school moves through this, the findings will help to guide me as I support teachers and the school administrators through the change. As an expert in curriculum design, I can offer to support teachers in collaboratively unpacking standards and developing assessments targeted to them. I also will support the school as a whole in deepening their understanding of the levels of achievement and calibrating their grading practices.

Additionally, my school is part of a larger network of international schools. Many of these schools are thinking deeply about changes to their grading practices in their middle and high schools. I plan to reach out to the organization and offer to share my
findings with other school leaders at an upcoming conference. Through this organization, I can collaborate with educators in similar roles to plan for and support their teachers in changing grading practices. This also would provide the opportunity for me to understand if the challenges faced by the teachers at my school are seen in other schools as well, and to collaborate to find ways to support all educators making this shift.

**Conclusion**

The mandated change from traditional to standards-based grading and reporting is a growing trend in secondary schools. The research on the transition to standards-based grading and reporting identifies the reasons for their implementation, but offers little guidance on how teachers should employ the practices. To fully realize this reporting system, teachers must have a deep understanding of the standards of their discipline, know how to develop effective assessments to understand whether a student has met the standards, and provide effective feedback that supports learning. They must communicate learning so that all interested stakeholders can understand a student’s strengths, areas for growth, and continued learning needs.

The analysis of the experiences of the participants in this case revealed trends that support the development of a deeper understanding of the sense-making process of teachers in a shift from traditional to standards-based grading and reporting. There was extensive time needed in order to complete this process, and collaboration was necessary to develop consistency among teachers in employing standards-based practices. The implementation caused high levels of anxiety among all of the participants. They were not only experimenting with the new grading practices and making sense of the procedures, they also needed to revise their units and assessments to be in line with standards-based procedures. The participants all felt that they needed to use the new
practices for a longer period of time to truly understand and effectively execute the grading system. Even though it was time consuming and created stress, all of the participants in this study continued to support the change because they believed that it was positive for student learning.

Teacher sense-making of a mandated change to their grading and reporting practices is extremely complex. While change leaders might spend considerable time building an understanding of the need for the reform, it does not equate to the successful implementation of standards-based grading and reporting. It is essential that leaders continue to support their teachers with time and collaborative structures that develop a collective understanding of the system during the implementation. It is in this stage that teachers are truly making sense of the changes to their practices. If they are not provided support, they may not fully implement the new practices or may choose to revert to traditional ways of developing assessments and communicating student learning.
References


*Developing content standards: Creating a process for change.* (1993). Policy Brief:

Consortium for Policy Research in Education.


Appendix A

Interview Protocol Form

Teacher Interview Protocol

Interviewee (Title and Name): ______________________________________

Interviewer: _____________________________________________________

Date: _____________________________________

Location of Interview: ____________________________________

Teacher Sense-Making Interviews

Part I: Debriefing Statement and Signed-Consent Form (5-7 minutes)

Debriefing Statement

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the experience of transitioning from traditional to standards-based grading and reporting. This research project focuses on the experience of how teachers make-sense of a reform to their grading and reporting practices. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into the ways your beliefs and practices have been impacted by this transition in grading and reporting practices. We also hope to better understand the impact that your previous experiences, school context, and the message about the reform on your transition in grading and reporting practices.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [if yes, thank the participant and turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet my human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form?
I have planned this interview to last about 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Interviewee Background

How long have you been a teacher and in what contexts?

Have you ever worked in a previous school that has employed standards-based grading and reporting practices?

Part II: Objectives (45-60 minutes): to obtain the participant’s insights, in his/her own words, on their experience in reforming their grading and reporting practices.

Prefatory Statement: I would like to hear about your experience in transitioning to standards-based grading and reporting in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences or transitions that you encountered during the transition and your perspective at various times. Your responses may include both experiences at this school and previous ones.

1. In your own words, what is standards-based grading and reporting?

2. How have your grading and reporting practices changed in the past year?
   a. Follow-up: Can you provide specific examples of how your practices have changed?
   b. Follow-up: Do you find that your beliefs about grading and reporting have changed?

3. How have your colleagues supported you in the transition to standards-based grading and reporting?
   a. Follow-up: Can you provide specific examples of how your colleagues have impacted your transition to standards-based grading and reporting?
   b. Follow-up: Do you believe that your department or grade-level teams have impacted your transition positively or negatively?
4. How did the professional learning about standards-based grading and reporting influence your transition?
   
a. Follow-up: Can you provide specific examples of learning opportunities that supported your transition?

b. Follow-up: Can you provide specific examples of learning opportunities that did not support your transition?

5. What other information about your experiences in transitioning to standards-based grading and reporting do you feel supported/hindered your transition?
Appendix B

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education Program

Name of Investigator(s):
Principal Investigator - Karen Harbeck
Student Researcher - Jessica Krueger

Title of Project: How Middle School Teachers Make Sense of Reforms to their Grading and Reporting Practices: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are a faculty member in a school that is undergoing a reform in grading and reporting practices by transitioning to standards-based grading and reporting.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to develop a deeper understanding of how teacher beliefs and practices change in reference to grading and reporting. The purpose is to understand how a teacher’s previous knowledge, context in the school, and understanding of the reform movement impact changes to their beliefs and practices on grading and reporting. These understandings can provide information that will help support more effective transitions to standards-based grading and reporting.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in one interview. You will be given the opportunity to review the transcription of the interview before the data is used.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you, which may be on the American Embassy School campus, at your home, or via Skype. The interview will take about one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort for you if you choose to participate in the study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help other schools going through similar reforms better understand how teachers make-sense of the reform so that they can plan for effective transitions.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

At the end of each session, the researcher will transcribe the interviews verbatim. After each interview has been transcribed, the researcher will destroy the audio files. All files will be secured in a password-protected computer, and all paper copies will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. They will be maintained on hard drive of a password-protected computer.

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What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Jessica Krueger, the person mainly responsible for the research at krueger.je@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Karen Harbeck, the Principal Investigator at k.harbeck@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
There is no monetary compensation for participation in the study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There should not be any costs incurred to participate in the participation. There is no fee for parking at the American Embassy School.

I agree to take part in this research.

______________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part

______________________________
Printed name of person above

______________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

______________________________
Printed name of person above