THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SECONDARY TEACHERS WHO GIVE GRADES AND

FEEDBACK: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Brandon Miles Moore

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

Brian Jones, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Andrea Bruce, Ed.D., Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of secondary teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices at Discovery Hills Unified School District. The theory that guided this study was self-determination theory as it helps explain the motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, for teacher grading practices and the impact of teacher feedback on students. The central question was: What are secondary teachers' lived experiences with grading student work? Sub questions were used to explore the beliefs, decisions, and practices secondary teachers employ when grading student work or providing feedback. The design for this study followed phenomenological research data collection methods to guide the gathering of data from the lived experiences of secondary teachers across the history/social studies and English content areas in three middle and two high schools. Data sources included individual interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing. The data was analyzed via triangulation and thematic saturation. Further analysis included micro coding, memoing, pattern coding, in vivo coding, and member checks. From the analysis of the data, themes were generated and their interpretations detailed. The results of this study revealed that teachers desire training on best grading and feedback practices that will uncomplicate and systematize grades. Moreover, effective feedback practices were found to impact teacher and student motivation for learning in secondary English and history/social studies classes.

Keywords: grading practices, grading beliefs, grading decisions, secondary teachers, teacher feedback, motivation, efficacy

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate this to my wife, Ashleigh, for inspiring me to pursue this doctoral degree and believing in me, even when I doubted myself. I love you more than you will ever know!

To my mother, who taught me the value of education and seeking out of the best books, knowledge, even hidden knowledge. I love you!

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the memories of my father and grandfather; the greatest men I will ever know. Until we meet again!

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This dissertation would never have come to fruition without the support of my chair, Dr. Jones. He could (and should) write the book on feedback practices that motivate students to do and be better at their craft. Moreover, my 2nd Reader, Dr. Bruce, could be the co-author of Dr. Jones' book due to her invaluable, motivating feedback that pushed me to write better than I ever thought I was capable. I am truly thankful you both were willing and able to accompany me on this deeper journey into academia.

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List of Abbreviations

Advanced Placement (AP)

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Standards-Based Grading (SBG)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

There are few things in education held more sacrosanct and personal than a teacher's grades. Discussions surrounding attempts to prescribe or impose a particular way or method of grading on a group of educators are often unproductive and fraught with contention (Anderson, 2018; Tierney, 2015; Welsh et al., 2013; Wormeli, 2018). The issue with teachers holding their grades and grading policies so exclusive and inviolate is worrisome for several reasons, not least of which is the validity and reliability of what their grades purport to measure (Blount, 2016; Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019) and the motivating or demotivating effects teacher feedback has on their students (Koenka et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Since teacher grading practices and policies in public schools face virtually no regulation or constraints, their grades demonstrate what the individual teacher values in his or her students, his or her own self-concept, and what student success should look like (Feldman, 2019). Some teachers may weight their grades to emphasize behavioral skills like participation or timeliness, while a colleague down the hall, teaching the same subject matter in the same grade, may place more emphasis on academic achievement (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019; Link, 2018). This subjectivity and variability are and should be concerning. Moreover, grades are becoming increasingly important and meaningful with regard to a student's future life options. While grades have always been crucial in determining graduation rates, they also influence placement in advanced classes, academic awards, intervention or remediation status, extra-curricular and sporting eligibility, and college admissions (Anderson, 2018; Feldman, 2019; Griffin & Townsley, 2021). Since grades play such a central role in students' lives, it is incumbent upon teachers to get grading right in order to accurately articulate student

achievement, learning, and provide feedback that increases student intrinsic motivation. Chapter One will provide a comprehensive background of the problem, including its historical, social, and theoretical context. Further, this section will include the problem and purpose statements, the significance of the study, the central research question with three sub-research questions, definitions, and the chapter summary.

Background

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of secondary English and history/social studies teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices. To provide a more thorough analysis and contextualization, this section will discuss the problem of invalid and unreliable grading practices through historical, social, and theoretical lenses. The historical context will offer insight into the origins and development of education and variable grading practices in the United States over the centuries to the present (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019; Schneider, 2018; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tyack, 1974). The social context will describe how the subjectivity and variability of secondary teacher grading practices are currently contributing to the invalidity and unreliability of grades and demotivating many students from learning (Anderson, 2018; Battistone et al., 2019; Blount, 2016; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019; Sonnleitner & Kovacs, 2020). A theoretical framework will also be introduced, self-determination theory, to provide a theoretical context (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Historical Context

Education and the evolution of grading practices has been an integral part of American history even prior to the United States' development into its own nation. As colonists from Britain and other European powers crossed the Atlantic during the 17th and 18th centuries, these

colonists brought with them their Judeo-Christian beliefs encapsulated in the King James Bible, along with their Protestant and Puritan creeds (Smith, 2020). Survival was the order of the day, so most learning happened in the home and on the farm (Feldman, 2019; Tyack 1974). As colonists became more established in their "New World," education would move from the farmhouse to the schoolhouse in succeeding generations (Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tyack, 1974). As time progressed and the population grew, the responsibility of educating America's youth would expand into the local community and beyond. With this progression came changes to assessment and the articulation of student learning (Tyack, 1974).

As communities grew in the expanding American states, so too did the need for schooling outside of the home. According to Tyack (1974), one-room schoolhouses were erected all across the country, with teachers hired by the local village or town to educate their children of all ages, paid for by the community members themselves. The curriculum consisted mostly of reading, writing, and arithmetic, with student learning measured by whatever the schoolmaster determined was important for the students to know (Feldman, 2019; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tyack, 1974). In fact, the first grades were generally presented to parents in narrative form, either in writing or verbally, and usually consisted of individual students' behaviors and academic abilities (Schneider, 2018; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tyack, 1974). This worked well for small farming communities, but as urbanization increased and time went on, the one-room schoolhouse faced an increasing number of challenges, especially in the 19th century.

Several social and educational reformers became increasingly concerned with the inequitable learning experiences of America's growing population (Groen, 2008; Smith, 2020; Tyack, 1974). Foremost among these reformers was Horace Mann of Massachusetts. Mann had served on the Massachusetts state board of education during the first half of the 19th century and

believed the best way to reform societal ills was through public education, paid for by taxpayers (Smith, 2020). Mann promoted public education as the "great equalizer" and encouraged the education of both boys and girls in schools (Smith, 2020). However, Mann did not simply want students learning the basic content areas. According to Groen (2008), Horace Mann believed American schoolchildren should be taught civic literacy and behaviors that would indoctrinate them into prudent citizens of the republic who would grow into contributing members of society.

Horace Mann's ideas spread rapidly. Categorically, they were reified into what is now known as the Common School Movement (Smith, 2020). Several states joined with Massachusetts in creating Common Schools funded by local and state taxes and advanced the idea of education as a tool for civic duty (Groen, 2008; Tyack, 1974). It was through these initial iterations of public schooling and curriculum that involved not just academics, but developing desired behaviors, that the traditional grading practices of the 20th century would emerge. Feldman (2019) described 19th and early 20th century society's value on compliance, effort, silence, obedience, and punctuality as the principal behaviors wanted by an industrializing economy and workforce. Thus, these qualities and characteristics carried over into modern grading policies (Feldman, 2019).

Though it was not initially articulated as "grading," prior to the 20th century, student learning was generally conveyed in narrative form, both in writing and orally to a student's parents (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). However, as secondary schools developed and became increasingly diverse and content areas created more narrow objectives, narrative forms of grading grew especially complex and fraught (Brookhart, et al., 2016; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). In their seminal work, Brookhart et al. (2016) reviewed over 100 years of empirical research on grading practices in the United States to determine what grades truly measured. As part of their

examination of the literature, they presented studies done as early as the 1890s that critiqued and questioned the reliability and validity of the omnibus grade teachers were reporting at the secondary level. Interestingly, they found elementary schools retained the more accurate narrative form of grading that focused on what students have actually learned, with a separate report for student behaviors. Unfortunately, the secondary schools, in an attempt to simplify the growing complexity of their content areas, had sacrificed reliability and validity by incorporating non-cognitive factors into their academic grading policies (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019).

Moreover, moving to the 100-point scale in order to report single letter grades in the early 20th century invited further criticism. Feldman (2019) argued that streamlining grades in this manner was a direct result of the burgeoning growth of industrialization carried over from the 19th, into the 20th century. The public-school classroom and the school system in which it was situated, was another form of proliferating the factory model that produced the kind of workforce America's capitalistic economy demanded (Feldman, 2019; Schneider, 2018; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Regardless of its origin the 100-point grading system became the norm in American classrooms, and its reliability and validity continue to be questioned. Further, several scholars have described the mixture of desired behaviors and academic achievement as one "hodgepodge" letter grade that has attempted to report too much information in one form (Brookhart et al., 2016; Buckmiller et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2020). These findings raise concerns, not only of the reliability and validity of teacher grading practices, but also of their accuracy and worth.

Social Context

As the 21st century continues to unfold, the traditional grading practices of the previous century are still utilized by teachers across the nation. Despite the growing body of research and

expert advice that problematizes the 100-point grading scale, teachers not only struggle to give it up, but many still defend it and some school districts even require it (Anderson 2018; Battistone et al. 2019; Blount, 2016). Guskey and Link (2019) have speculated that new teachers maintain traditional grading methods because of increasing accountability requirements, being overwhelmed by classroom instructional demands, and a reliance on experienced teachers already established grading policies. Still other scholars have found that many teachers feel their grades are one of the few tools they have to increase student motivation (Blount, 2016; Feldman, 2019), reward the effort of students who are not meeting grade-level proficiency (Chen & Bonner, 2017; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019), or to teach students the soft skills needed to be successful in the 21st century workplace (Kunnath, 2017; Sonnleitner & Kovac, 2020). Of additional concern is the lack of training and motivation on the part of teachers for grading itself.

Despite the necessity and importance of grading, assessment, and feedback in education, teachers report being ill-prepared by pre-service teaching programs for these tasks (Battistone et al., 2019; Sonnleitner & Kovac, 2020). Consequently, many teachers lament the responsibility of grading and providing feedback, reporting the exercise of grading as one of their least favorite activities inherent in their profession (Blount, 2016; Sonnleitner & Kovac, 2020). Moreover, the reporting of grades to students, parents, administrators, and other stakeholders can lead to conflict when grades and grading practices are perceived as unfair, not measuring what students actually know or can do, or the teacher beliefs and values of what grades should measure do not align with the values and beliefs of the other interested parties (Pratolo & Purwanti, 2021). Interestingly, student perception of fairness in a teacher's grading practices appears to have an effect on their learning. For instance, student motivation, satisfaction, and affective learning were revealed to be related to how fair the student perceived the teacher grading practices and

procedures to be (Chory-Assad, 2002; Sonnleitner & Kovac, 2020; Wendorf & Alexander, 2005). Of note, these variables are also related to the teacher's professional satisfaction and self-efficacy, which supports a reciprocal relationship. In other words, when students perceive teacher fairness in grading, teacher self-efficacy in grading practices and feedback also increases (Sonnleitner & Kovac, 2020). The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of secondary English and history/social studies teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices.

Theoretical Context

Several studies have been conducted on secondary teacher grading practices (Anderson, 2018; Brookhart, 1994; Brookhart et al., 2016; Cox, 2011; Feldman, 2019; Guskey & Link, 2019; Lipnevitch et al., 2020; McMillan, 2019; Olson & Buchanan, 2019; Sun & Cheng, 2014). In nearly all these studies, grading and measurement experts like Brookhart (1994, 1997, 2016), Guskey (2008, 2012), McMillan (2003, 2019), and Townsley (2014, 2019), assert the best way to maintain accurate grades that measure student academic achievement and increase intrinsic motivation for learning is the implementation of standards-based or mastery grading systems. In these systems, grades are all dependent on mastery of academic objectives or standards and non-cognitive factors are measured in a separate grade. Further, these experts prefer grades be reported in narrative form (Brookhart et al., 2016; McMillan, 2019) or on a numeric four- or five-point scale (Townsley, 2019), similar to elementary or primary grade teachers. In this way, students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders are provided accurate data that measures student progress, process, and product (Guskey, 2008, 2012) in separate grades for cognitive (e.g. academic achievement) and non-cognitive (e.g. effort, timeliness, work habits, learning skills) factors. Theoretically, reporting student academic achievement and non-cognitive factors

separately provides a more comprehensive and accurate picture of student accomplishment in school.

Prior to this, however, was a lack of a theoretical framework centered on grading and grading practices. Brookhart (1994) called for the use of Deci and Ryan's (1980) self-determination theory (SDT), since there was little congruence between teacher grading practices and the advice of measurement experts, a problem which continues today (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019; Townsley, 2019). SDT posited that, to the extent events (a) enhanced perceived competence; (b) advanced the perception or awareness of an internal locus of control or causality; and (c) were not controlling, but informational, they would be considered intrinsically motivating (Brookhart, 1994; Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985). In essence, if done correctly, teacher feedback and grading practices have the potential to increase student intrinsic motivation for learning instead of acting as an extrinsic or controlling motivator. Thus, understanding the rationale behind what secondary teachers believe a grade should measure, what decisions they make to arrive at the grade they issue, and what type of feedback they employ when grading student work is critical to furthering the claims of SDT. The primary claim being that people are prone toward psychological integration and growth, mastery, connection, and learning, if the conditions are robust and supportive (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Thus, effective feedback and reliable and valid grading practices should, theoretically, increase student intrinsic motivation for learning. Consequently, this study will incorporate SDT as a theoretical framework and potential philosophical explanation of the forthcoming responses of the co-researchers or participants on their grading beliefs, decisions, and practices (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Problem Statement

The problem is that secondary teachers demonstrate high levels of variability and

subjectivity in their grading practices, procedures, and feedback, resulting in invalid and

unreliable grades that have the potential to demotivate students (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman,

2019; Guskey & Link, 2019; Koenka et al., 2021; Kunnath, 2017). Measurement and grading

experts have found extensive variation in teacher grading practices and procedures within and

across academic departments and grade levels at the middle and high school grade levels

(Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Link, 2019). Often, the overall grades teachers assign are

described as including a 'hodgepodge' of factors beyond academic achievement (Kunnath, 2017).

These factors, deemed non-cognitive in nature, include but are not limited to effort,

improvement, punctuality, compliance, attitudes, and behavior (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey &

Link, 2019; Kunnath, 2017; Lipnevich et al., 2020). Moreover, the subjective decision-making of

secondary teachers on which factors should be included in their students' grades has led to

assertions of grade invalidity and unreliability (Brookhart et al., 2016). Additionally, teacher

feedback on assessments that accompany the score provided is often overlooked or dismissed by

secondary students who deem their score as all that matters, thus limiting opportunities for

student self-reflection and improvement (Gan et al., 2021; Koenka et al., 2021).

These phenomena of teacher grading practices and feedback require study because the

grades teachers assign play an integral part of students' lives. Despite their unreliable, subjective,

and variable construction, grades remain the primary measure of student educational

performance (Feldman, 2019; Guskey & Link, 2019). Teacher-assigned grades determine student

placement in advanced or remedial courses, promotion between grade levels, college admissions,

participation in non-academic activities, and potential scholarships (Anderson, 2018).

Furthermore, there is a paucity of qualitative research on the decisions and beliefs that influence

individual teachers' grading procedures, practices, and type of feedback (Guskey & Link, 2019; Kunnath, 2017; Lipnevich et al., 2020).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of secondary English and history/social studies teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices. At this stage of the research, the lived experiences of the secondary teacher participants will be generally defined as the individual beliefs about what factors go into a grade, the decision-making processes that influence the grades teachers communicate, and the grading and feedback practices teachers have chosen to implement in their classrooms. The theory guiding this hermeneutic phenomenological study was Deci and Ryan's (1980) self-determination theory (SDT). In brief, SDT posits that teachers either automatically or consciously structure their grading practices and feedback based on attitudes, values, beliefs, and programs (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2020). These behaviors could potentially be motivated by extrinsic or intrinsic motivating factors. Moreover, SDT argues performance feedback can have mixed meaning, or functional significance, to the student recipient (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Functional significance is divided into controlling and informational significance, where controlling significance is experienced when feedback is perceived as the teacher trying to pressure the student toward specific outcomes or behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In contrast, informational significance is optimal because it is relevant to efficacy or aims to highlight the student's areas of competence and help them improve (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Effective grading practices necessitate constructive, informational teacher feedback which potentially will increase student and teacher efficacy and motivation in a reciprocal relationship.

Significance of the Study

As grades continue to play a significant part of the education process in America's public schools, understanding them and ensuring that grades are accurate, valid, and reliable is crucial. This section will discuss the significance of this study from theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives.

From a theoretical lens, the use of self-determination theory (SDT) in this study presents an expandable and expansive framework which ensures a unified perspective on myriad phenomena that transcend several theories on grading and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Examples include praise (Kanouse et al., 1981), student and teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986; 1997; 2001), goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000) measurement (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985), feedback (Ryan & Deci, 2020), and evaluations (Ryan & Deci, 2019). This study contributes to the theoretical underpinnings of the problem of teacher grade variability, subjectivity, and ineffective feedback practices by capturing the intrinsic motivators (e.g. teacher beliefs), extrinsic motivators (e.g. influences on teacher decision-making), and motivational strategies (e.g. effective teacher feedback) expressed by the secondary teacher participants themselves. Further, SDT postulates most current teacher grading practices act as a demotivator for students to learn by curbing autonomy and attempting to control (Ryan & Deci, 2019, 2020). For instance, grades by themselves generally do not supply feedback that is relevant to competence. In fact, grades usually just provide information on where students stand relative to their peers, a practice which potentially impedes autonomous motivation, especially for the lower achievers (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Several quantitative studies used survey data of large samples and applied SDT to demonstrate the demotivating effects of ineffective teacher grading practices, procedures, and feedback (Klapp, 2015; Krijgsman et al., 2017; Nolan, 2020). However, to date, few

qualitative studies on grading practices using SDT are extant (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Consequently, there is a need to have and understand a more detailed picture of motives, practices, and experiences of teachers who grade student work which can translate into everyday use.

From an empirical lens, a large and growing body of research exists on the phenomenon of teacher grading practices. However, while studies have discussed teacher grading practices and procedures (Anderson, 2018; Guskey & Link, 2019; Feldman, 2019, McMillan, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2009, 2010), beliefs and decisions (Bonner & Chen, 2021; Cheng & Sun, 2015; Kunnath, 2017), and types of feedback (Boud & Dawson, 2021; Gan et al., 2021; Henderson et al., 2019; Koenka et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2020), none have examined all of these aspects of the grading phenomenon together using qualitative methodology. Furthermore, nearly all the extant literature has used quantitative methods (Anderson, 2018; Bonner & Chen, 2021; Cheng & Sun, 2015; Boud & Dawson, 2021; Henderson et al., 2019), with a small sampling of mixed-methods studies (Kunnath, 2017; Torres et al., 2020). Thus, this study aimed to capture teacher voice concerning the shared lived experiences surrounding their grading beliefs, the decisions they make on what factors should be included in their grades, and the feedback practices they employ. The qualitative nature of this study facilitated deeper understanding of the grading phenomenon and provided rich, thick descriptions and results for the use of various educators (e.g. secondary teachers, administrators, directors of curriculum and instruction).

From a practical lens, the literature suggests many secondary teachers do not enjoy grading or can even articulate current best practices, which often results in demotivating, unreliable, invalid, or inaccurate grades (Battistone et al., 2019; Blount, 2016). New middle and high school teachers have reported a lack of training in this area in pre-service programs, with

most of what they know about grading coming from on-the-job experience (Battistone et al., 2019). Thus, the teacher participants of this phenomenological study should benefit the most as they were immersed in the data collection and the resulting self-reflection. The literature reviewed and the results of this study should help the teacher participants, secondary teachers, their administrators, and the secondary director of curriculum and instruction at Discovery Hills Unified School District to construct systems and procedures that allow for more equitable, accurate grading practices and effective feedback that should improve student motivation and efficacy (Gan et al., 2021; Koenka et al., 2021). Beyond the participants and their school district, this study helps fill the theoretical and methodological gap in the literature and provides more clarity for future pre-service teachers as they prepare to enter the teaching profession.

Research Questions

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the central research question should be an all-encompassing, broad question that communicates the phenomenon being studied. Further, the sub-research questions will anatomize the central research question into more detailed, smaller parts, grounded in the theoretical framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This hermeneutic phenomenological study was guided by one central research question and three sub-research questions. In order to better understand the lived experiences of secondary teachers who give grades and feedback or the phenomenon of teacher grading practices, the following research questions were constructed.

Central Research Question

What are secondary teachers' lived experiences with grading student work? The central research question for this study was derived from the problem and purpose statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and focuses on what it is like to be a middle or high school teacher who grades

student work as part of their profession. The literature suggests secondary teachers often present subjective, variable grades based on their values, beliefs, feedback practices, and other influences (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019; Guskey & Link, 2019; Koenka et al., 2021; Kunnath, 2017). However, current research does not capture teacher voice using qualitative methods to determine what these beliefs, decision-making processes, and feedback practices are and the reasons they might be subjective and variable.

Sub Question One

What are the beliefs of secondary teachers about what should be represented in a student's grade? This sub-question concentrates on the motivation behind teacher grading practices and what teachers understand or believe a grade measures. Self-determination theory posits teachers provide feedback and either consciously or automatically structure their grading practices based on programs, beliefs, and attitudes (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2020). These behaviors are potentially motivated by several factors, including outside or extrinsic factors and intrinsic motivating factors. This question aims to discover and explore what those theoretical attitudes and beliefs are in the minds of secondary teachers.

Sub Question Two

How do secondary teachers make decisions about grading student work? This sub-question concentrates on the decision-making processes teachers enact that influence the grades they issue. According to SDT, teachers make grading decisions based on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors, including the response of stakeholders when grades are published, ensuring grades are perceived as fair, and the belief that grades are effective motivators for student achievement (Blount, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2019, 2020). However, the literature does not explain how these decisions are made and what the process looks like.

Sub Question Three

What feedback practices do secondary teachers employ when grading student work? This final sub-question concentrates on understanding teacher feedback practices and how effective or ineffective they may be. Ryan and Deci's (2020) SDT asserts teacher feedback can have controlling or informational significance, where feedback that is perceived as controlling will result in demotivation for student learning and effort, and feedback perceived as informational, helpful, or revealing areas to improve will increase student intrinsic motivation. This question aims to gather empirical data using qualitative methods to determine if the data supports these assertions made by SDT.

Definitions

1. *Amotivation* – Lack of perceived value, interest, or intentionality (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

2. *Cognitive Grading Factors* – Only academic achievement as measured on summative assessments is included in the final grade (Brookhart et al., 2016).

3. *Extrinsic motivation* – Engaging in behaviors for reasons other than the internal or inherent satisfaction of doing so; behavior driven by external punishments and rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

4. *Grades/Marks* – The summary of assessment results articulated as a letter or number via two processes: (1) rating or scoring student work (e.g. performances, assignments) and (2) generating a final grade based on the total collection of work (Tierney, 2015).

5. *Intrinsic Motivation* – pertaining to activities done for their inherent enjoyment and interest, or activities done "for their own sake" (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

6. *Non-Cognitive Grading Factors* – Including student behaviors, such as effort, ability, improvement, work completion, and other behaviors, in the final grade (Brookhart et al., 2016).

7. *Omnibus grade* – The inclusion of multiple factors, such as participation, effort, or attendance, in addition to academic achievement, in the overall grade reported at the end of a term or semester (Brookhart et al., 2016).

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of secondary English and history/social studies teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices. In their current form, the grading practices and procedures of secondary teachers continue to be under the exclusive purview of each individual teacher. In several states, the grade issued by the teacher of record is protected by state education law or code (Feldman, 2019). Consequently, the problem this study aimed to address is the high levels of subjectivity and variability in secondary teacher grading practices, procedures, and feedback that result in invalid and unreliable grades and their demotivating effect on students (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019; Guskey & Link, 2019; Koenka et al., 2021; Kunnath, 2017). Chapter One introduced the problem and purpose of this study and provided background and context on the problem of grade validity, reliability, and variability, through historical, social, and theoretical lenses. The theoretical, empirical, and practical significance of the study were also articulated, along with the central research question, three sub-research questions, and definitions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to better understand the lived experiences of secondary teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices. In this chapter, a review of the literature is systematically conducted to examine the role teachers' grading beliefs play in determining what factors go into their grades and the feedback they provide their students. Further, Chapter Two provides a review of the contemporary literature on the topic studied. The first section articulates a theoretical framework of self-determination theory and how it relates to teacher beliefs about grading, feedback, and grading practices. Additionally, research on grade validity and reliability, motivators for teacher grading practices, and the reciprocal relationship between teacher feedback to students and self-efficacy is synthesized. Finally, a need for the current study is presented to fill a gap in the relevant theoretical literature. In short, there is a paucity of qualitative studies using self-determination theory that inform and explore teacher motives, practices, and experiences that relate to providing feedback and grades to their students.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that guided this research and provided its theoretical framework is Deci and Ryan's (1980) self-determination theory (SDT). Richard Ryan and Edward Deci are the theory's originators, and its first iteration was rooted in explorations and examinations of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2019). SDT grew quickly to encompass facets of extrinsic motivation and began addressing issues in the life sciences such as relationship satisfactions, personal goals, wellness, and education (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Most importantly, SDT is a motivation theory which pushed back on behaviorist meta psychology that dominated

the science of motivation in the mid-20th century (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2019). In other words, while behaviorists focus on sources of motivation outside of the person, SDT is primarily concerned with the self as an integrative, active part in the motivation process (Ryan & Deci, 2019).

Deci and Ryan (1980) describe SDT as a combination of situational variables (environment) and person (individual) affecting behavior. Further, SDT posits there are two types of motivated behaviors: automated behaviors and those that are self-determined, based on extrinsic and intrinsic needs. The key difference in these behaviors is that automated behaviors are not chosen consciously, while self-determined behaviors are. Some examples of automated behaviors might include biting one's nails or using eating utensils during mealtime. These actions are considered mindless and happen automatically. However, self-determined behaviors are those which are chosen consciously in the service of extrinsic or intrinsic needs, like learning to ride a bike or mountain climbing (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Teachers provide feedback and either consciously or automatically structure their grading practices based on programs, beliefs, and attitudes (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2020). These behaviors are potentially motivated by several factors, including outside or extrinsic factors and intrinsic motivating factors.

Some theoretical key terms require definitions. According to SDT, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are centralized through different constructs and lenses (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In the classroom context, intrinsic motivation refers to activities engaged in for their own sake or for innate enjoyment or interest. Conversely, extrinsic motivation refers to activities engaged in for reasons other than innate satisfaction. Extrinsic motivators depend on a teacher or student's internalization of motivators or consequences (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Teacher type and amount of feedback, coupled with or without a grade, has been perceived historically as

an extrinsic motivator (Blount, 2016; Bonesrønning, 1998), or by others, as an extrinsic

demotivator in students (Kunneth & Suleiman, 2018).

Furthermore, performance feedback has functional significance, according to SDT. This

functional significance is further bifurcated into controlling and information significance (Ryan

& Deci, 2020). The originators of SDT, Ryan and Deci (2020), have asserted, "Informational

inputs tend to enhance intrinsic motivation and internalization. In contrast, feedback can have a

controlling significance when experienced as pressure toward specific behaviors or outcomes"

(p. 6). In other words, informational inputs have significance when they are efficacy relevant,

meaning the feedback highlights areas of competence and helps the person improve.

Unfortunately, the common usage of grades in secondary classrooms are often perceived as

controlling by their students and consequently, an extrinsic demotivator (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The type of teacher feedback and grading can affect students' motivation, and therefore efficacy,

differently. Consequently, how teachers give feedback is increasingly important to explore.

Moreover, SDT claims teacher beliefs, attitudes, and practices surrounding feedback and

grading can support student autonomy. Autonomy support is defined as teacher policies and

practices that allow students choices, listening to student perspectives, and possibilities for

students to take initiative and ownership of their schoolwork (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In the event a

teacher requires something to be done, a thorough and appropriate rationale is provided for

students. For example, when having students write a complex, multi-paragraph essay, the teacher

would include a detailed grading rubric for students to use during the writing process and explain

how the writing relates to specific literacy standards students need to master. Further, teachers

who support student autonomy are theorized to produce students with more self-esteem,

perceived competence, and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The same can be said for

higher perceptions in teachers of their own classroom and grading autonomy and self-efficacy.

Consequently, the theoretical framework for this study has been generated from SDT. If teacher feedback that focuses on growth, encouragement, and improvement, has been determined to improve intrinsic motivation and student self-efficacy, then a case being made for how teacher beliefs about grading may influence or impact the feedback they provide is relevant and needed. For example, if the teacher values effort or compliance, will those values be reflected in the feedback and grade issued to the student? Or is content or literacy more valued? As previously demonstrated, there are several assertions and correlations made by SDT, especially between student autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2019, 2020), self-efficacy in a secondary school's context (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997, 2001), and teacher feedback and grading practices (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The vast majority of the empirical literature concerning factors that go into teacher grades, and their subsequent grading practices and feedback, has been quantitative (Anderson, 2018; Bonner & Chen, 2021; Brookhart et al., 2016; Cheng & Sun, 2015; Boud & Dawson, 2021; Henderson et al., 2019; Kunnath, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). The theoretical gap in the literature concerning SDT needs qualitative research to effectively get at the heart of the teacher beliefs that inform their feedback and grading practices. Perhaps what teachers believe should be included in a grade is a factor that might lead to invalid or unreliable grading practices and policies and feedback which is either demotivating students, or at least amotivational. In this study, amplifying teacher voice through qualitative methods has helped reveal that connection.

Related Literature

To explore and analyze the teacher grading beliefs that motivate student learning and build student autonomy and self-efficacy, understanding the grade itself, what it represents, and its importance are necessary. Interestingly, research has found that several factors go into a

teachers' grades, especially since grading autonomy is often codified in state education laws (Feldman, 2019). These factors are generally based on the individual teacher's values, beliefs, attitudes, and other extrinsic motivators (Anderson, 2018; Brookhart et al., 2016). Due to the increasing importance of grades at the secondary level and how they impact class selection, college admission, participation in secondary and collegiate sports, and graduate studies, grade reliability and validity must be examined (Anderson, 2018; Feldman, 2019). Since SDT theorizes multiple factors that influence teacher and student motivation and self-efficacy, a more extensive review of the research is necessary. An examination of literature on factors that go into a teacher's grade, grading practices and policies, and teacher feedback is required for building a foundational understanding of what influences teacher and student motivation and self-efficacy in a reciprocal relationship.

Factors Included in a Grade

The components that make up a grade vary within and among states, districts, schools, and even departments. In their seminal work that synthesized 100 years' worth of quantitative research on grading, Brookhart et al. (2016) expressed the multidimensionality of grading as measuring mostly academic achievement. However, the authors found that grades also included non-cognitive factors that are valued by teachers like effort, participation, ability, improvement, attention, and work habits. While all of these factors are important in assessing the whole student, the validity and reliably of an omnibus grade has been called into question recently by several scholars and educators (Anderson, 2018; Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019, Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Guskey & Link, 2019). Furthermore, even though educational specialists, grading experts, and classroom teachers may hope or claim that grades only or primarily report

what students know and are able to do, the evidence suggests this may not be the case (Brookhart et al., 2016).

By way of illustration, every grading period, term, or semester, secondary teachers across all content areas are required to gather evidence on how students are performing using multiple and varied sources to finalize their students' grades. Most teachers include students' quizzes, reports, projects, written compositions, and examinations as part of the overall grade (Guskey, 2020). Still others will incorporate data on turning assignments in on time, class participation, homework completion, effort, group collaboration, and appropriate behavior (Cox, 2011; Duncan & Noonen, 2007; Guskey, 2020). Each teacher will enter this conglomeration of data into a grading program which calculates the overall single grade for them and is disclosed on the final report card (Guskey, 2020). Interestingly, since these omnibus grades are generated via a computer-based program using a mathematical algorithm, the common perception by educators is that they are as objective, reliable, and valid as possible (Blount, 2016; Guskey, 2020). Upon further examination of the literature, however, grade validity and reliability may be more elusive than previously understood (Guskey, 2020).

Grade Validity

When articulating the validity of a grade, one must examine what the grade actually measures. A grade is valid if it measures, or assesses, and articulates student academic achievement in the content area being studied (Brookhart et al., 2016). For instance, in a study done on teacher summative assessment practices and their validity, Black et al. (2010) discovered the teacher participants had not really considered the validity of their assessments as part of their pedagogy. It was not until the teachers were asked what it meant to be good at math or English that they began to have more productive conversations around creating more valid

summative assessments in their content areas (Black et al., 2010). Teachers began to define a summative assessment as valid if it specifically measured what a student knew and was able to do on the standard or objective being measured by the assessment. As a result of there being very few forums for discussing grading practices, individual teachers remain in their own echo chambers, "validated by little except inertia and the vague sense that students seem to be getting the grade they deserve" (Feldman, 2019, p. 5). Thus, the research invariably reveals a student's final grade ends up being a hodgepodge of non-cognitive and cognitive evidence as measured by the professional judgment of the teacher (Feldman, 2019; Guskey & Link, 2019). This amalgamation of factors in a grade that leads to questionable validity are compounded by the current accountability culture and high-stakes assessments, which are designed to measure student academic achievement only (Guskey & Link, 2019). Further, eligibility for advanced placement courses, college admittance, and entry into graduate programs can all be affected by invalid grades that do not accurately measure what a student knows and is able to do.

However, others have contended that grades which include non-cognitive factors are valid if those factors were measured intentionally in the grade (Anderson, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). For example, Anderson (2018) found supportive evidence which demonstrated predictive and descriptive validity in cumulative grades as measured by Grade Point Averages (GPAs). More specifically, cumulative grades were found to be positively correlated to high school diploma completion, test scores on achievement tests, grades in college over multiple years, and increased chances of earning and completing a college degree. All GPAs in Anderson's (2018) findings utilized traditional grading practices that intentionally included non-cognitive factors like participation and effort in their overall grades. Research like this counter the prevailing narrative that in order to be valid, grades should only include student academic

achievement (Anderson, 2018, Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). While this research muddies the proverbial waters surrounding grade validity, the issue of validity becomes more concerning when students attend post-secondary institutions and are not able to perform at the academic levels needed, despite their secondary GPAs claiming they have the requisite knowledge and skills to do so. Moreover, if secondary schools wish to develop students into lifelong, independent, self-directed learners, grades should not be seen simply as motivators, but as a communication tool (O'Conner, 2009). When only academic achievement is reported in the grade, and behaviors are reported separately, then valid grading practices are arguably attained and students can better understand that school is primarily about learning and not chasing points (Anderson, 2018; O'Conner, 2009).

Grade Reliability

Of growing concern across the literature is the reliability of grades (Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Guskey & Link, 2019). In part, this concern is over inter-rater reliability, or grades from teacher to teacher on the same assessments and in the same type of courses (Anderson, 2018; Griffin & Townsley, 2021). This lack of reliability in grades is evident in the "easy" teacher and the "hard" teacher, as so many secondary students throughout the United States have opined. The lack of consistency between grading within and across schools and even within and across departments in the same school, speaks to the subjective and individualized nature of grading. Scholars have found teacher grading criteria and practices vary significantly between teachers at different schools (Anderson, 2018), teachers within the same schools (Guskey & Link, 2019), and in a few cases, even the difference between making the honor roll or failing a class depended on the grading practices of the teacher (Griffin & Townsley, 2021). This variability in grading has led parents, communities, and researchers to question the reliability of grades as a whole

(Feldman, 2019; Griffin & Townsley, 2021).

More specifically, grade reliability across disciplines has been identified in the literature. Secondary teachers have demonstrated variability across disciplines, where mathematics teachers generally use a points-based approach to grading while English, science, and history use a criterion-based orientation (Pasquini & Deluca, 2021; Townsley, 2022). Interestingly, most teachers surveyed in the research concerning the objectivity and reliability of the factors used in their grades reported the numbers and rubrics as demonstrative of objective scoring (Blount, 2016; Millet, 2018; Pasquini & Deluca, 2021; Townsley, 2022). According to these secondary educators, grades were not given or assigned, but evolved from numbers affixed to various assessments and assignments in an illusion of objectivity (Blount, 2016). This version of objectivity has been equated with accuracy, fairness, and reliability in the minds of secondary educators across the four core academic disciplines (Blount, 2016; Pasquini & Deluca, 2021).

Furthermore, regardless of the subject being taught, correlations have been found between teachers who display higher levels of leniency with lower levels of grade reliability (Millet, 2018). Additional variables that may play into the level of grade reliability across the four disciplines are variations in true ability of students (Millet, 2018) and class sizes (Sonner, 2000). In agreement with self-determination theory, Blount (2016) has asserted that "grades are motivating only as a medium of exchange in a system that requires them as the medium of exchange" (p. 334). Though teachers may perceive their grades as reliable, earned by their students and not given by the teacher, and an incentive or reward that motivates their students, the literature claims otherwise, primarily due to the variability over inter-rater reliability among the teachers themselves (Blount, 2016; Millet, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2020). What is more, the decisions teachers make when grading play an integral role in the process of determining grade

validity, reliability and their effect on intrinsic motivation, regardless of context.

Teacher Grading Decision Making

The factors included in a teacher's grade are directly influenced and correlated to the decisions teachers make in generating them (Pratolo & Purwanti, 2021). Recent studies reveal some teachers believe grades should not only be used to assess the competencies of their students, but also to motivate them (Pratolo & Purwanti, 2021) and measure their life skills and experiences (Riley & Ungerleider, 2019). For example, Pratolo and Purwanti (2021) found that teachers included soft and hard skills, along with academic achievement, in their decision-making on student grades. Hard skills were defined as speaking and writing, while soft skills included attitudes, attendance, and work ethic. One concerning result of Pratolo and Purwanti's research was the decision of teacher participants to lower their standards for an 'A' grade or upgrading the grade of their students so it would reflect an 'A' because of institutional pressure and a lack of 'A' marks in their courses (Pratolo & Purwanti, 2021). These findings are consistent with self-determination theory's assertion that teachers can, and often do, base their grading practices on programs and institutional influencers (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Grading decisions like these only serve to inflate the grades found in higher education and further deteriorate their already tenuous validity and reliability.

However, grading decisions made by teachers can also enhance the reliability of their grades. Of note, grade reliability can be improved when teachers are clear on the criteria they decide to measure, are consistent in their measurement decisions, and use simpler grading scales with less distinct categories (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Interestingly, describing, identifying, and ultimately deciding on clear criteria is one of the most difficult aspects of teacher grading decision making (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019; Jonsson et al., 2021).

Moreover, it is incumbent upon teachers to ensure these criteria do not just reveal how compliant their students are, but actually report student learning (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). The ability of students to follow classroom procedures and directions is not what is being measured in a valid grade. The criteria should delineate student performance quality with enough clarity that grader agreement and student understanding are both achieved (Brookhart et al., 2020; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Additionally, to improve consistency in grading, Guskey and Brookhart (2019) recommend teachers use rubrics, grade student work anonymously, intermittently have a colleague who is knowledgeable in the content area regrade work that has already been graded, and use a model answer to calibrate the expectations for student work. The authors contend that teachers who decide to follow these suggestions will construct grades which are more accurate, reliable, defensible, and meaningful.

Relatedly, the decisions secondary teachers make concerning grading practices and assessment strategies also vary by the subject being taught. In particular, English and history teachers have been found to emphasize non-cognitive factors like work habits, ability level, effort, and attention in their grades at a much higher rate than science and mathematics (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Jonsson et al., 2021). Moreover, mathematics put less emphasis on assessment strategies that included group or individual projects, constructed responses, essays, and oral presentations (Duncan & Noonan, 2007). As might be expected, English, history, and science teachers included constructed response assessments far more than objective exams, performance quizzes, or assessments created to primarily measure recall of facts, which were favored by mathematics teachers (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Jonsson et al., 2021). Of note, these studies used quantitative methodologies of data collection and analysis, to include survey data analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and Wilks' Lambda for main effect (Duncan

& Noonan, 2007). In contrast, this study utilized qualitative methodologies for data collection of secondary teachers to gain deeper insight into their lived experiences on what and how they decided to grade.

Undoubtedly, there is room for improvement with grading. For instance, while the factors teachers include in their grades are generally based on traditional grading practices, grades which are determined effectively can help teachers, students, administrators, and parents comprehend what learning has occurred and decide the appropriate selection of next steps in resourcing, planning, and teaching (Brookhart et al., 2020). Taking small steps can have large results. Examples include basing grades on a collection of meaningful evidence, allowing time for practice via formative assessments which are not graded, and only including evidence of learning on current achievement instead of an average over a course of time (Brookhart et al., 2020; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). By following the aforementioned recommendations, student intrinsic motivation for learning will, theoretically, improve (Ryan & Deci, 2020). As self-determination theory postulates, when teachers incorporate increased student autonomy in the classroom, students are more likely to take initiative and ownership of their schoolwork (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Conversely, student and teacher self-efficacy and motivation can be negatively affected by unreliable grading practices and the creation of grading systems where two students with extremely different behavior and academic performance profiles can and often do receive the same grade (Feldman, 2019).

Grading Practices and Policies

An understanding of grade validity or reliability would be incomplete without an exploration of the policies and practices teachers use in generating their grades. A growing body of research has examined how teachers decide what factors will be included in their grade books

(Bonner & Chen, 2021; Chen & Bonner, 2017; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019), but to date, the why behind these factors has remained elusive in the literature. In a study of the decision's teachers make to determine their grades, Kunnath (2017) discovered varying themes in grading practices, rationales, and influences. Themes for grading influences included administrative pressure to avoid assigning low grades, perceptions from external forces like parents and other teachers, and the teacher's own philosophy or lived experiences with grading. Grading rationales included balancing between helping students succeed, grade rigor, and class level, where advanced classes received far more accurate grades, which only measured student academic achievement, than lower-level classes which included student effort and compliance as part of the grade (Kunnath, 2017).

Moreover, when it came to grading practices, teachers demonstrated that while academic achievement was the greatest factor in determining their students' grades, non-academic factors like ability-level and effort were included (Kunnath, 2017). McMillan (2019) corroborates these findings, asserting teachers will often use both objective and subjective factors in determining their grades. Notably, the researchers only infer teacher motives for grading the way they do, claiming teachers care about fairness and helping their students succeed, but not providing empirical evidence to support their claims (Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2019). The lack of teacher voice in these studies leaves a qualitative gap in the literature this study aimed to fill.

Communicating grades, or marks, as they are sometimes called, involves the teacher in a few processes. One of these is providing scores and feedback on student work, such as assignments or assessments (Tierney, 2015). Another is calculating the final grade or mark for each student based on the accumulation of work or evidence of learning over the course of a grading period or semester (McMillan, 2011; Tierney, 2015). Both of these processes require

professional decision-making that is determined by the teacher's experience, beliefs, values, best

subjective judgments, and external pressures (McMillan, 2011; Tierney, 2015). Consequently,

grading is seen as a morally charged aspect of a teacher's career because judging student work

involves an inordinate amount of power (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002; Ryan, 1997; Tierney,

2015). This means that the grading policies and practices teachers choose to employ will vary

from teacher to teacher and grade to grade, and the enduring complaint of students across the

United States will continue to hold validity: some teachers grade harder than others. Since these

practices and policies are determined by teachers' values and beliefs, understanding the teacher

beliefs that influence their grading practices and policies is of significant worth.

Teacher Grading Beliefs

Any policy or practice generally originates with a personal or group belief. What

individuals and groups value will often contribute to their beliefs. Researchers have found

varying factors via survey data and interviews that reveal teacher beliefs and what they perceive

to value in their grades (Bonner & Chen, 2021; Cheng et al., 2020, Chen & Bonner, 2017; Link,

2018). Some of these teacher beliefs and values included grading practices that focused on

controlling student behavior or classroom management (Bonner & Chen, 2021; Link, 2018),

fairness and motivation (Cheng et al., 2020), leniency (Millet, 2018), being part of the learning

process, student encouragement (Bonner & Chen, 2021), and a perceived need to prepare

students for the 'real world' (Chen & Bonner, 2017). Also, data from China and Canada revealed

teachers who were questioning the very need for grades and instead expressing the value of their

feedback on formative assessments as the cause of increasing student intrinsic motivation for

learning, as opposed to constantly trying to earn points (Cheng et al., 2020). To be clear, grades

in the United States do not appear to be going anywhere any time soon, but the argument has

been made by some advocates to eradicate grades all together (Anderson, 2018; Guskey, 2020; Hall & Meinking, 2022; Kohn 2011; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020). As grades are most likely here to stay, teacher beliefs about them are still relevant.

Additional motivators have been found in the research to influence teacher beliefs about grading. Kunnath and Suleiman (2018) found a relationship between high poverty schools and teacher grading practices. Within these schools, the authors postulated decision-making factors teachers considered when determining their grades. These included external factors like district policies and state assessments, classroom realities like disruptive behavior, absenteeism, and heterogeneity, and internal factors like values, beliefs, teacher knowledge, and expectations. Conversely, while values and beliefs may direct teacher grading practices, Malouff and Thorsteinsson (2016) found grading biases may also play a role, especially with students who belong to specific ethnic or racial groups, students who have been negatively labeled due to past poor performance, or students who were even perceived to be less attractive. In essence, the more subjective grading beliefs and their subsequent practices are, the more variable and inaccurate a student's grade can become. Inaccuracy in grading can lead to parents, administrators, and other stakeholders losing trust in the educational institutions that issue the grade, and potentially lead to students entering higher education unprepared for its academic rigors (Feldman, 2019).

Experience in the teaching profession, coupled with traditional versus progressive philosophies, may also account for variation in teacher grading beliefs. Teachers with more years in the field and a traditional view of grading continue to perpetuate what Rasooli et al. (2022) refer to as a 'testing culture.' In this type of culture, students are not involved in a collaborative effort to construct assessments. In fact, the teacher is charged with designing instruments which

should be sound measurements of student achievement. Students are then graded, measured and ranked based on the results of the teacher-crafted assessment (Rasooli et al., 2022). Behaviorist and scientific measurement learning theories are arguably direct influences on the testing culture maintained by veteran educators (Chen & Bonner, 2017; Rasooli et al., 2022).

In contrast, novice teachers and teacher candidates who are just exiting contemporary pre-service programs indicate proclivities toward sociocultural and social constructivist learning theories, with a focus on using formative assessments in the classroom to promote and support student learning (Chen & Bonner, 2017; Rasooli et al., 2022). Moreover, these newer teachers are encouraging active student collaboration in the process of assessment through the use of results to help students self-regulate their learning and providing instructional opportunities for peer- and self-assessment (Rasooli et al., 2022). It should be understood, however, these studies used teacher participants who were all self-reporting via questionnaire. Once again, there is a paucity of qualitative data which could explore teacher rationales and interpretations of their responses to the grading scenarios encountered. This study sought deeper, richer, and thicker results by allowing teachers of varying experience to voice the reasoning behind their beliefs and practices.

Teacher perceptions of grading, judgments, and stereotypes also appear to play a role in their beliefs concerning grading policies and practices. Riley and Ungerleider (2019) found several internal and external belief factors which influenced teacher grading practices after interviewing 21 middle school teachers. These factors included the teacher's teaching philosophy, how much training on assessment the teacher received, the grade level of the teacher, their class sizes, and even the teacher's attitude or temperament while grading. In addition, the literature reveals many teachers judge grading as one of the most anxiety-causing,

arduous, and concerning aspects of their job (Blount, 2016; Riley & Ungerleider, 2019; Sonnleitner & Kovac, 2020). Of note, some teachers regard the performance of their students as a direct reflection of their own ability to teach (Riley & Ungerleider, 2019), while others express pride in giving few A's to their students and perceive their colleagues who assign too many A's as not having enough rigor in their classrooms (Blount, 2016; Feldman, 2019). Teachers who hold stereotypical views of different student groups have also been found to hold lower expectations for said groups and consequently skew their grades accordingly, often creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Jussim, 2012; Riley & Ungerleider, 2019). These findings are concerning because they each play a direct role in the variability and inaccuracy of grades. In part, this study explored teacher beliefs about grades and grading and how those beliefs influenced their grading practices and procedures. Consequently, an examination of different types of grading practices currently being utilized in 21st century classrooms is relevant.

No More Zeros

In answer to the inaccuracy and variability of teacher grading practices and policies which use the traditional 100-point scale, some educators have pushed for a no-zero policy in their schools and districts (Reeves, 2004; Yaffe, 2017). Reeves (2004) began questioning the mathematical and logical accuracy of issuing zeros because the interval between letter and numerical grades is 10 points. So, 90-100 is generally an A, 80-89 a B, 70-79 a C and so on. However, if a teacher assigns a zero as a student's score, the interval between the F and D adds up to 60 points (Reeves, 2004). Grading experts argue that for a student to come back from such a deficit is nearly impossible and demotivates many students from even trying (Guskey, 2020; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019; Reeves, 2004; Yaffe, 2017). Instead, advocates for the no-zero policy of grading contend secondary teachers should either shift to a four or five-point scale

(Reeves, 2004; Yaffe, 2017), abandoning the 100-point scale altogether, or replace the zero with a 50, so the interval between grades stay at 10 (Yaffe, 2017).

Markedly, there is a paucity of peer-reviewed research on the effectiveness of the no-zero grading policy. Despite the lack of research on the policy, school districts across the country have adopted it, citing anecdotal evidence (Balingit & St. George, 2016). Examples of such evidence include proponents who claim fairness, equity, and engagement of the most at-risk students when no-zero policies are implemented (Balingit & St. George, 2016; Yaffe, 2017). Other proponents admit the policy is not a fix-all but will continue to implement it as they perceive its use provides hope and encouragement for students who may be underachieving (Balingit & St. George, 2016). Further still, some high school principals across the United States claim the no-zero policy will push students to keep trying, even and especially when they do not understand a learning concept after it is first encountered (Balingit & St. George, 2016; Reeves; 2004). Opponents are not so sure of the efficacy of such a policy.

The no-zero policy is not without its detractors. Caneva (2014) asserted that after implementing a no-zero policy in her school, students still fell into the academic or behavioral categories they always had. Some groups of students opted out of certain exams, knowing they would receive a 50 in place of a zero, no matter what. Others who did not complete their class work, continued to be delinquent in this area. Those who chose not to do homework before the policy, continued not doing homework after the policy was implemented. Thus, in Caneva's (2014) estimation, a no zero policy lowered expectations for student academic achievement and the students behaved accordingly. Further, Chowdhury (2018) challenged the no zero policy and claimed such policies lead to grade inflation, which negatively affects students, educators, the institutions they serve, and the nations from which they come. Therefore, while several

secondary teachers and school districts still implement no zero grading policies, more are turning

to standards or competency-based grading in order to resolve grade variance and inaccuracy.

Standards-Based Grading

A growing movement among grading experts and educational leaders is the belief that

grades should only measure student academic achievement and not the extraneous, non-academic

factors that teachers have been shown to value in an omnibus grade (Bonner & Chen, 2020;

Buckmiller et al., 2020). These scholars promote a trend toward Standards-Based Grading (SBG)

or Mastery grading. Proponents of this change in grading practices have advocated for the

separation on the report card of academic achievement and employability skills like participation

and turning work in on time (Guskey, 2020; Knight & Cooper, 2019). Teachers are encouraged

to provide meaningful feedback on formative assessments which are not graded, and only

summative assessments should be included in a student's academic grade, usually in narrative

form, explaining how proficient a student was on any given standard being measured (Guskey,

2020). Teachers are also expected to provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate

mastery of content standards through retakes on assessments until mastery is achieved, and the

grade book should only include summative assessments on academic achievement (Townsley,

2019). Using a mastery grading policy, extra-credit is discouraged, and homework is considered

practice and not allowed in the grade book (Guskey, 2020; Townsley, 2019).

One aspect of SBG is the inclusion of non-cognitive factors as a separate, but equally

important grade. Guskey (2020) labels these factors as 'process criteria.' Process criteria may

include the timeliness and effort on work completion, the extent to which a student collaborates

with peers, or student participation in whole class discussions. According to SBG advocates,

work habits like effort, punctuality, and homework, need not be completely removed from the

grade equation, but should be reported in a separate grade (Guskey, 2020; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). In this way, such non-cognitive factors are still honored, valued, and necessary for student progress, but do not add to the invalidity or unreliability of the academic achievement grade (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2020; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). With this, Standards-Based or Mastery Grading is purported to be a more effective grading policy regarding validity, reliability, accuracy and defensibility.

However, a vocal body of critics of SBG practices are also found in the literature. These scholars assert shifting to SBG increases teacher workload (Schwab et al., 2018), suffers from unclear outcomes, does not always correlate well with standardized test scores (Welsh et al., 2013), and results in an intrusion on the sanctity of the classroom by bureaucratic educational institutions (Baines & Stanley, 2006). To these scholars, teacher grading autonomy is sacrosanct and the professionalism of the teacher is paramount in determining a student's grade. Of note, the vast majority of the literature utilized quantitative methods, such as correlation, descriptive statistics, and structural equation modeling that looked at the relationships between cognitive and non-cognitive factors included in a teacher's grade, for analyzing the effectiveness of mastery learning and grading within and across classrooms (Brookhart et al., 2016, Buckmiller et al., 2020; Guskey, 2020; Knight & Cooper, 2019). Moreover, scholarship in this area has been accused of attempting to determine what 'ought' to be implemented concerning grading practices, instead of what 'could' be or is observed to be (Baines & Stanley, 2006; Schwab et al., 2018). The movement toward mastery grading in practice and policy is important because it has attempted to provide valid, reliable, and accurate grades. Further, its advocates place considerable attention and import on teacher feedback as a valuable means to increase student learning, self-efficacy, and achievement.

Going Grade-less

Another movement has made a case to end grading altogether on assignments, assessments, and end-of-term marks. Kohn (2011) has advocated for the termination of points and letter grades and asserted grades diminish the quality of students' thinking, cause students to pursue tasks with the least amount of rigor and reduce the interest in whatever they are learning. More recently, Gorichanaz (2022) posited grades undermine student collaboration efforts by increasing competition, develop a transactional relationship between student and teacher, contribute to the crisis of mental health which is ongoing among secondary and collegiate students, and decrease intrinsic motivation for learning while only acting as an extrinsic motivator at best. When the argument that grades in the United States are not going anywhere any time soon is raised, several scholars have fervently disagreed (Anderson, 2018; Guskey, 2020; Hall & Meinking, 2022; Kohn, 2011; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020). These 'un-grading' experts promote narrative feedback for secondary students, similar to their primary grade counterparts, both on individual assignments and assessments (Blum, 2020; Hall & Meinking, 2022; Kohn, 2011). When required by their school districts to provide a letter grade for the end of a term, semester, or school year, un-grading advocates call for student conferencing (Kohn, 2011), negotiating the final grade with the student (Hall & Meinking, 2022), and even allowing students to grade themselves through self-reflection practices (Blum, 2020).

Importantly, where un-grading practices have been employed, the results have been mixed. The reported benefits have suggested an increase in student and teacher positive attitudes toward learning (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020), more academic risk-taking and less stress for students and teachers (Hall & Meinking, 2022), and smoother transitions from secondary school to university where both programs used un-grading (Blum, 2020; McMorran & Ragupathi,

2020). However, in the same research conducted by McMorran and Ragupathi (2020), one drawback included a lack of motivation for rigorous study habits. Paradoxically, while attitudes toward learning increased in positivity, student participants reported lower levels of motivation for studying since a grade was not attached to their assignments. Moreover, faculty participants reported an increase in absenteeism, tardiness, poor work quality, and other negative issues while experimenting with un-grading (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020). Despite these findings, un-grading policies are consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2020) self-determination theory, in that as students build autonomy, relatedness, and competence, learning motivations become less focused on extrinsic factors and more focused on intrinsic (Hall & Meinking, 2022). Further, regardless of whether grades are here to stay or not, un-grading advocates echo their grading counterparts in emphasizing teacher feedback as paramount to increasing student achievement, self-efficacy, and learning.

Teacher Feedback

Establishing a clearer understanding of what teachers include in their grading practices and policies and what motivates those practices necessitates additional research on feedback from teachers to students. Self-determination theory posits that grades, by themselves, provide little to no motivation, either intrinsically or extrinsically for student learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Recent meta-analyses by Koenka et al. (2021) have found meaningful teacher feedback, specific to the task, and not just a grade, was reported by student participants to increase internal or intrinsic motivation for learning and lower external or extrinsic motivation. Of course, this data is nuanced, as grade level, course type, comment type, and whether or not a quantitative grade was attached to the feedback, all elicited varying results. However, recommendations from Koenka et al. (2021) for educators demonstrate the importance of studying teacher feedback in

more detail. Such recommendations include not grading formative assessments but providing specific feedback on the formative task or assessment; if a grade is required on the assessment, providing feedback to students first and giving them an opportunity to implement the feedback before grading the final product; and being mindful when using grades with secondary students of the demotivating effect grades can have on them (Koenka et al., 2021). Ensuring teacher feedback is effective should be a priority prior to implementation.

Perhaps not all teacher feedback is created equal. In fact, feedback on formative or summative assessments that are not in congruence with the task, or given a ubiquitous 'good job,' have been found in the literature to be ineffective in increasing student self-efficacy, motivation, or academic achievement (Gan et al., 2021; Klapp, 2015). Scholars have coined the idea of 'teacher feedback literacy' as an area of study so teachers can implement feedback that encourages students to improve and master the material being learned (Boud & Dawson, 2021; Henderson et al., 2019). According to Boud and Dawson (2021), elements of teacher feedback literacy include inputs crafted to motivate, affirm, correct, and calibrate students' comprehension of what quality work looks like at the micro level. Moreover, the authors asserted grading and feedback actually serve different purposes and it is the teacher's responsibility to distinguish between information used to justify a grade given and information provided for the purpose of feedback (Boud & Dawson, 2021).

Types of Effective Feedback

The different types of feedback are also many and varied. For example, Gan et al., (2021) described three types of teacher feedback practices: *verification feedback, facilitative feedback, and praise.* Verification feedback is a form of outcome feedback which articulates to a student whether the results of their assignment or learning activity were correct or not. No further

information about the task, other than level of achievement, is included (Butler & Winne, 1995; Gan et al., 2021). Facilitative feedback, on the other hand, provides suggestions and comments to aid students in their own conceptualization and revision of their work (Shute, 2008). The third type of feedback is praise. Some scholars define praise as positive feedback given by one person on another's attributes, performances or products (Kanouse, et al., 1981), while others describe praise as interpersonal feedback of a positive nature (Baumeister, et al., 1990). Consequently, scholars advocate for the use of facilitative feedback, coupled with praise appropriate to the context, for regular use in the secondary classroom, whether orally or in writing (Butler & Winne, 1995; Gan et al., 2021; Heron et al., 2021).

Oral Feedback. Oral feedback given by teachers to students on an ongoing basis in everyday interactions is a notable type of feedback. Arguably, this type of casual or formative feedback is the most commonly used each day in the secondary classroom (Heron et al., 2021; Lipnevich et al., 2016; Van Der Kleij & Adie, 2020). Of note, depending on how a student interprets the feedback provided by the teacher, that information or feedback can have different meanings (Van Der Kleij & Adie, 2020). For example, a teacher might perceive questioning about content or expanding on a student's response in a whole class discussion as useful or effective formative feedback, while a student may not perceive the information as helpful or even as feedback at all (Heron et al., 2021; Van Der Kleij & Adie, 2020). Moreover, the accuracy and construction of the feedback, in addition to how the message is received or delivered, will indicate the value ascribed to the feedback (Lipnevich et al., 2016). In other words, if students do not see the response or feedback by their teacher as authentic or correct, or the message is delivered in a manner perceived as inappropriate, students may place little value in the feedback provided and consequently, not use or internalize it. When this occurs, student

motivation and self-efficacy for given contexts and learning activities can be affected (Lipnevich et al., 2016).

Interestingly, different forms of oral feedback are more informative or effective than others. Of note, verification feedback and praise appear to be the most common forms of oral feedback in the secondary classroom setting (Gan et al., 2021; Heron et al., 2021; Lipnevich et al., 2016; Schute, 2008). Gan et al. (2021) report that educators use verification feedback in a binary relationship, where one-on-one or whole class discussion around an assignment focuses on whether or not students got the answer correct. If students do get correct answers, verbal praise often follows. However, Heron et al. (2021) advocate for a more effective concept they describe as 'feedback talk,' where students and teachers participate in a form of dialogic feedback that co-constructs meaning during the learning process, not just on the product produced. Moreover, feedback talk is perceived by teachers to help avoid misunderstandings, ask students for justification and elaboration, and clarify meaning in the moment (Heron et al., 2021). In this way, student-teacher relationships are simultaneously supported, affirmed, and strengthened, allowing the oral feedback to be not only received, but internalized and used by students (Heron et al., 2021).

Written Feedback. For complex writing assignments, one effective method of teacher feedback is accomplished simultaneously, both orally and in writing, via writing conferences (Henry et al., 2020; Hu, 2019; Walker et al., 2020). After a mini-lesson, the secondary teacher spends the remainder of the class period doing one-on-one writing conferences with students where written feedback on writing drafts is verbally explained to the student (Hu, 2019). Henry et al. (2020) found teachers and students expressed advantages and disadvantages to this feedback approach. Advantages for both groups included the use of positive feedback, a two-way

conversation consisting of a back and forth with student and teacher, and the ability for students and teachers to ask each other questions. Disadvantages included time constraints, the lower quality of feedback in the short amount of time allowed, and classroom distractions the teacher needed to resolve (Henry et al., 2020).

Additional types of writing feedback include direct and indirect feedback. Hu (2019) defines direct feedback as teachers providing guidance explicitly to aid in correction, after identifying errors in the writing. This direct feedback can be given in writing or orally and students have reported appreciating the precision, focus, and rapidity of the advice (Hu, 2019; Walker et al., 2020). On the other hand, indirect feedback allows teachers to identify errors in student writing but provide no explicit guidance on how to correct it (Hu, 2019). Indirect feedback is said to prompt deeper learning and language processing and should be used for students with higher levels of confidence and ability (Henry et al., 2020; Hu, 2019). Moreover, scholars have also articulated the importance of incorporating both direct and indirect feedback simultaneously, depending on learner competency, the type of errors made, or both (Hu, 2019; Walker et al., 2020).

When writing conferences and oral and written feedback are provided directly or indirectly by teachers, student reactions have been mixed. Walker et al. (2020) reported students expressed deeper understanding, better relationships with their teachers, and higher levels of intrinsic motivation for writing. Conversely, student reactions were also frustrated, humiliated, or angry if the feedback was negative or publicly reported in front of the class. As long as the feedback is perceived as fair, even if it is negative, students have reported benefiting from it (Walker et al., 2020). If the feedback was alleged as mean, harsh, or a reprimand, it was reported as having a direct impact on student learning, engagement, and motivation (Henry et al., 2020;

Hu, 2019; Walker et al., 2020). The responsibility of providing effective feedback for writing is increasingly critical and pertinent.

Teacher-Student Feedback Literacy. However, providing detailed feedback can be daunting and tiresome. The number of students on each secondary teacher's roster and the concomitant workload this entails has inspired research into positioning secondary students as active participants in the feedback process (Carless, 2022; Carless & Winstone, 2020). Carless and Winstone (2020) have advocated for the concept of students and teachers entering a partnership which reframes the general idea of teacher feedback literacy into one of co-construction and increased student feedback literacy. For example, students could be trained to solicit feedback requests from their teachers on specific issues concerning their work they regard as valuable. Provided they do not increase teacher workload, students could even suggest their preferred timing, mode, and type of feedback (Carless & Winstone, 2020). To simplify teacher workload and empower students further, instruction on the use of internal feedback practices could also be implemented. For instance, the teacher could model appropriate and effective feedback practices using anchor or exemplar texts, and students could use these skills to generate internal feedback on their own work (Carless, 2022). In order for students to master student feedback literacy, they must be able to make evaluative judgments about the work quality of others and themselves (Carless, 2022). Thus, ample opportunities for peer-editing, evaluation, and feedback could be built into the class procedures.

Additionally, teacher feedback is considered effective if built into the framework of the course and the assigned learning activities. For example, more complex assignments could have opportunities built into their construction for formative feedback that students could include later in their final product (Gan et al., 2021). Different methods could also be used to provide

feedback, whether written, spoken, or video recorded (Boud & Dawson, 2021). The key to determining effective feedback across these different methods is the reported increase in levels of student self-efficacy on the learning tasks and reported levels of motivation to continue persevering through complex learning material (Henderson et al., 2019). A focus on feedback will increase student intrinsic motivation for learning, sans a grade attached (Boud & Dawson, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020) Theoretically, when students are provided meaningful, effective feedback at appropriate intervals over time, their motivation and self-efficacy will increase. This process can be made smoother and more structured with the use of rubrics.

Using Rubrics for Feedback

When crafted and implemented appropriately, a grading rubric can not only provide helpful feedback to students on formative and summative assessments, but it can articulate the highest level of performance for students to aim in their learning (Ragupathi & Lee, 2020). An effective rubric communicates expectations for the assessments or assignments in which students engage by listing descriptions for performance levels and the work criteria of a given task (Brookhart, 2018). Among researchers and grading experts, rubrics are helpful for students because they explicitly report what learning looks like and identify the expectations for student work both generally and specifically (Brookhart, 2018; Chowdhury, 2019; Gallardo, 2020; Panadero & Jonsson, 2020). Brookhart (2018) has further explained the importance of writing general rubrics with descriptive language, as opposed to evaluative (e.g. good, poor, excellent) since descriptive allows students to see where they are currently in their learning and where they need to go moving forward. However, task-specific rubrics should include specific, evaluative language so teachers can deliver constructive feedback to help their students improve and reach

their learning goals or targets (Brookhart, 2018; Chowdhury, 2019). Additionally, grade

reliability is also connected to the use of rubrics.

Studies of rubrics used across the core content areas have demonstrated mixed results

with regard to generating more reliable, accurate grades on assessments. Some of these suggest

rubrics increase transparency, objectivity, and reliability (Chowdhury, 2019; Jonnson & Svingby,

2007; Ragupathi & Lee, 2020), while others have found rubrics to be reductive (Kohn, 2006) or

used to justify assessment bias in teachers who are not properly trained in their use (Rezvaei &

Lovorn, 2010). Findings also imply many teachers embrace the use of rubrics for competency

and performance-based assessments as remarkable tools for grading the written work of students

and communicating clear expectations (Brookhart, 2018; Chowdhury, 2019). Conversely, others

complain rubrics are too rigid, do not adequately provide flexibility for student choice in writing,

and can result in students writing with less depth of thought, rather than more (Kohn, 2006;

Panadero & Jonnson, 2020). In any case, the vast majority of educators appear to agree: the use

of rubrics makes the assessment of student work more transparent, objective, consistent, and

efficient (Chowdhury, 2019; Gallardo, 2020). Further, the effective use of rubrics allows teachers

to provide more constructive feedback, decrease grading time, and improve student learning.

Just the same, not all rubrics are created equally. In their literature review on the creation

and role of rubrics in authentic assessment, Nkhoma et al. (2020) summarized design elements of

an effective rubric. Some of these elements included quality definitions, complexity, varying

levels, evaluative criteria, specificity of assessment, exemplars, with whom and when the rubric

is shared, and procedures to arrive at grades and marks. In direct contravention to traditional

rubrics, Fluckiger (2010) has introduced the single-point rubric, which articulates a single set of

criteria for the quality of work at the proficient level. Thus, the single-point rubric only has a

single set of criteria. The lowest level of achievement on the task or assessment is not included as students should not be encouraged to attain low levels of achievement, and the highest level of achievement is also excluded as students' creativity may be limited to the level specified (Estell et al., 2016: Fluckiger, 2010; Wilson, 2018). The benefit of using single-point rubrics is especially evident when students co-construct the criteria on the rubrics and use them for self-assessment and peer review (Fluckiger, 2010). Leaving space for students to take risks and for teachers to provide meaningful, task-specific feedback, as opposed to circling prescribed, pre-determined levels of achievement, makes single-point rubrics an appealing alternative to traditional rubrics (Wilson, 2018). Effective feedback via appropriately constructed rubrics can potentially increase student and teacher levels of motivation and self-efficacy.

Teacher-Student Self-Efficacy

In the end, the relationship between students and teachers in the classroom is significant, especially with regard to motivation and achievement. Self-efficacy beliefs for students and teachers are considered domain specific and actualize themselves based on the situation or activity (Bandura, 2001; Buric & Kim, 2020). In the context of this review, teacher self-efficacy can be defined as "teachers' beliefs in their capabilities to teach their subject matter and to accomplish desired outcomes of student engagement and learning even when teaching challenging students" (Buric & Kim, 2020, p. 2). Further, the literature has shown when teachers believe their instruction and feedback can influence student outcomes and performance, they are more energized and enthusiastic in their teaching, which may have a positive effect on the overall performance of their students (Kim & Seo, 2018). It should be noted; however, the feedback teachers provide students is interpreted and understood based on the positionality of the student. For instance, Torres et al. (2020) found that feedback which builds student self-efficacy

and self-perception encouraged reflection instead of correction, was situated in and focused on the content, and was personalized to the individual student.

Moreover, different types of teacher feedback have demonstrated different levels of self-efficacy in students. As previously mentioned, Gan et al., (2021) defined verification feedback, facilitative feedback, and praise as the most common types of teacher feedback practices. The least likely to increase student self-efficacy or guide a student in the use of self-regulating strategies is verification feedback (Butler & Winne, 1995). Perhaps this is because students who only receive correct or incorrect results on an assignment are not provided the supports needed to build their own intrinsic motivation for the learning task. In other words, not enough information in the form of feedback is given in order to support the student in a way that improves their performance on the learning task. However, with various forms of scaffolding, accompanied with facilitative feedback, teachers can support students' attempts at more advanced problem solving and thinking than they could without the supports provided by the teacher, thus increasing self-efficacy for the task (Shute, 2008).

Of the three forms of feedback in the literature, praise has been found to be used most often by teachers, followed closely by verification feedback (Lipnevitch & Smith, 2009). Many have assumed feedback which uses praise should lead to an increase in student performance, motivation, and self-efficacy (Gan et al., 2021). However, studies suggest if praise is not specific to the task or indiscriminately given, then it is generally unhelpful and does not demonstrate any significant increase in student self-efficacy (Gan et al., 2021; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In contrast, teachers who include praise that recognizes student process, effort, learning strategies, perseverance, and engagement, have shown increased levels of teacher-student self-efficacy and higher levels of motivation (Gan et al., 2021). When teachers use their

feedback to build student efficacy and intrinsic motivation, a love of life-long learning is sure to be cultivated, even if and especially when a final grade is eventually attached.

Summary

Grades have been a part of academia for generations. Over the last century and beyond, the question of how reliable and valid grades have been at the primary and secondary levels have been questioned and studied (Brookhart et al., 2016). Getting grades right has practical, academic, and social implications, as grades tend to determine entry into advanced placement courses, college admissions, graduate school eligibility, and more (Feldman, 2019). Of concern has been the subjectivity and variability of grading practices and policies from school to school and teacher to teacher that call into question what grades actually measure (Anderson, 2018; Griffin & Townsley, 2021). Researchers have demonstrated that teacher beliefs about what a grade means and should measure are affected by internal and external motivators (Kunnath 2017; McMillan, 2019). According to self-determination theory, teachers provide feedback and either automatically or consciously structure grading practices based on attitudes, beliefs, and programs (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Suitable grading practices necessitate constructive teacher feedback, which potentially will increase teacher and student efficacy, and student intrinsic motivation for learning in a reciprocal relationship (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). A paucity of qualitative studies presents a theoretical gap in the literature on self-determination theory when it comes to motives, practices, and experiences that translate into research for everyday use.

Most of the research on teacher grading beliefs, their subsequent grading practices, policies, type and quality of feedback to students, and self-efficacy have been quantitative in design (Boud & Dawson, 2021; Brookhart et al., 2016; Chen & Bonner, 2017; Gan et al., 2021). To date, there are few qualitative studies in these areas (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Kunnath, 2017). If

grades are not going away any time soon, examining teacher perspectives and beliefs and ensuring their accuracy in determining what students know and are able to do, is a worthwhile endeavor. As there is a gap in the literature, the purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of secondary English and history/social studies teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of secondary English and history/social studies teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices. Focus was placed on teacher grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices that determine the grades they assign to their students. Chapter Three describes the proposed study's design, setting and participants, researcher positionality, and the researcher's role. Further, a detailed account of the procedures is articulated, which include data collection and analysis methods. In short, this study used individual interviews, focus groups, and letter writing. Chapter Three concludes with a discussion of the approaches used to ensure trustworthiness and all ethical considerations.

Research Design

Creswell and Poth (2018) define qualitative research as the construction of explanations for human or social phenomena. In order to better understand and explore the lived experiences of secondary teachers who grade student work, I have chosen a qualitative study design. Further, the purpose of qualitative research is to better understand this world we live in and examine why various things or phenomena occur. The observer or researcher of qualitative research is situated in the world they inhabit, and they attempt to make the invisible world, visible. This can be done through distinct characteristics such as the use of what, why, and how questions, data collection methods such as observations, focus groups, interviews, journaling, memos, conversations, and the researchers themselves acting as an instrument for the collection of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research design for this qualitative study was hermeneutic phenomenology. In general, a phenomenological qualitative approach to research describes a phenomenon or lived event (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moreover, a qualitative researcher uses phenomenological methodology to explain and understand lived experiences from the viewpoints of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology as a qualitative approach finds its beginnings in the early 1900s with the German mathematician-turned-philosopher, Edmund Husserl (Laverty, 2003). Husserl believed in a philosophy of "subjective openness" and was concerned with discovering the essences and meanings in knowledge (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25). In other words, Husserl's development of phenomenology became the study of the life world or lived experience, as opposed to objective reality that existed outside of the individual, which had been the accepted philosophy of his day (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1997).

Students of Husserl, such as Heidegger and Gadamer, deviated from his philosophy and developed hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutics requires the researcher or observer to have close ties or experiential knowledge of the phenomena being studied. A researcher in hermeneutics cannot fully bracket themselves out of the experience but instead should embrace and include the complexities of their own knowledge and biases within the study (van Manen, 1997). The essence of the approach is that an individual's experience and consciousness are intertwined and cannot occur separately (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). Thus, in order to understand teachers' grading beliefs, decisions, and practices, the selection of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach for this study was appropriate, as grading practices are notoriously subjective and variable amongst teachers, and I am a teacher who possesses my own experiential knowledge of grading. My lived experiences were made manifest in this study as my co-researchers (participants) and I made meaning of our interpretative interactions and overtly

named, embedded, and essentialized our assumptions and biases during the interpretive process (Laverty, 2003). Consequently, the hermeneutic phenomenological design was well suited for this study because it assembled the lived experiences of secondary teachers who grade student work and allowed my own similar experiences to be encapsulated within interpretations and reflections.

A key part of the hermeneutic phenomenological design is the use of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is an interpretive process which shifts from an experience's parts, to the experience's whole, and back again, repeating this process over and over (Laverty, 2003, van Manen, 1997). The hermeneutic circle process is used to engage deeply with and better understand the experiential text (Laverty, 2003). Moreover, the continuous spiraling of the hermeneutic circle generally ends when a place of reasonable meaning, devoid of inner contradictions, has been reached, and even then, only for a moment (Laverty, 2003). Thus, I utilized a reflective journal to engage the hermeneutic circle, moving back and forth between the whole of the experience and the experience's parts in my interpretation (Laverty, 2003). According to van Manen (1997), by writing in this manner, I was forced into a reflective attitude where I wrote myself and my participants into the research in a profoundly collective way.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this study:

Central Research Question

What are secondary teachers' lived experiences with grading student work?

Sub-Question One

What are the beliefs of secondary teachers about what should be represented in a student's grade?

Sub-Question Two

How do secondary teachers make decisions when grading student work?

Sub-Question Three

What feedback practices do secondary teachers employ when grading student work?

<p style="text-align:center">**Setting and Participants**</p>

This section of Chapter Three will discuss the setting and participants of this qualitative study. A brief description of the school district and school sites where participants were chosen is provided in order to help the reader visualize where the study took place. Further, this section will include the rationale behind why this location was chosen, the leadership structure, the school system, and descriptions of its geographical location (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the profile of the participants chosen for this study will be explained and the criteria for purposive sampling to participate in this study will be articulated.

Setting

The setting for this hermeneutic phenomenological study was a local school district in the San Diego area of the state of California. Discovery Hills Unified School District (pseudonym) is the only public-school district in this area of San Diego and serves all 21,000 students from the surrounding community. The school district serves 10 elementary schools, two K-8 schools, three middle schools, two comprehensive high schools, and two alternative high schools. The alternative high schools serve students who committed severe behavioral infractions or who were not meeting credit completion requirements at the comprehensive high schools. The K-8 schools are a newer addition to the growing community and were created to relieve impaction at the existing middle schools. Of note, the "middle" grades of these K-8s, consisting of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, are managed and run in the same fashion as their other middle school counterparts in the

district and are classified as secondary teachers within the district system. The data collection for this study occurred among the comprehensive middle and high schools.

Discovery Hills Unified is overseen by a five-member governing board who each serve four-year terms and are elected from five geographic districts within the community. The district is led by a superintendent who is hired by and reports to the governing board. The organizational structure of the district continues with three assistant superintendents, one over student services, one over human resource, and one over business services, who all sit on the superintendent's cabinet. Each assistant superintendent oversees various directors and administrative support staff and these directors in turn, oversee administrators for the individual school sites. As the participants for this study are secondary teachers who grade student work, the specific school sites from which these participants were drawn were from two of the three middle schools, the middle school grades from one of the two K-8s, and the two high schools. Each of these secondary schools is led by a principal and usually anywhere from two assistant principals at the middle level to four to five assistant principals at the high schools. Moreover, each academic department is headed by a department chair who serves on the secondary school's leadership team of each site. These department chairs are responsible for instructional and curricular leadership within their departments and overseeing grade level Professional Learning Communities (PLC), which meet monthly at all secondary schools. The primary reason for using Discovery Hills Unified for this study was because I am a teacher at one of its middle schools, so this district is a convenience setting. Consequently, some teacher participants were drawn from the middle school where I teach.

Participants

This study used participants who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored,

namely giving grades and feedback to students, as this is central to a phenomenological approach to research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). This included middle and high school teachers from the content areas of English and history, as all of these teachers have experienced the phenomenon of grading student work. The purposive approach sought to include teachers with a range of experience, male and female, and from two levels of secondary education, namely middle and high school. Criteria for participation also included teachers who have at least five years of teaching experience and have taught at multiple secondary sites as these educators have had more rich and vast insights and occurrences with grading practices to share, due to their professional and lived experiences. This study used 12 teacher participants, thus combining a small number of participants with purposive sampling in order to gather more in-depth, detailed, and rich data concerning teacher grading beliefs, decisions, and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher Positionality

All researchers are positioned or situated within qualitative research as human instruments, and this study is no exception. As a secondary teacher who grades student work, I have a vested interest in the shared lived experiences of my colleagues, teacher participants, or co-researchers who have also experienced the phenomenon of constructing grades for their students. I am a strong advocate for fair, equitable, reliable, and valid grading practices and believe all students can learn if given the proper supports (Feldman, 2019). Further, I have seen students demotivated by lower grades and unhelpful or ineffective feedback, who otherwise might have put more effort into their learning and school experience (Ryan & Deci, 2020). My positionality as the primary researcher of this study is articulated in this section through my interpretive framework, my philosophical assumptions, and my role as the researcher (Creswell

& Poth, 2018).

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive paradigm through which my research was conducted was social constructivism. As a middle school history teacher for over 15 years in Southern California, I have witnessed how subjective and socialized our lived experiences are as educators (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For instance, I have taught 6th grade Ancient World History and English/language arts, 7th grade Modern World History, and for the majority of my teaching career thus far, I have taught 8th grade United States History. At all of these grade levels and courses and over the years, my view of grading practices and policies has evolved based on how I have been socialized into my school and department. Unfortunately, in my teacher preparation and master's programs, there was no direct instruction on how or what to grade in the social sciences. My first experiences with grading were guided by my mentor teachers during my student teaching. My understanding of grading practices increased through discussions with more experienced colleagues, all of whom had their own philosophies on what a grade should mean, so I recognize my own biases with regard to the construction of my classroom grading practices. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the social constructivist researcher must depend on the subjective views and meaning-making of their participants. In my own context, a reliance on secondary teacher voice about their beliefs on grading was essential, while also recognizing my own background and experiences have played a role in my interpretations of the findings.

Philosophical Assumptions

All qualitative researchers approach their research with philosophical assumptions that guide or influence their work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, it becomes necessary for each assumption to be defined and discussed as to how it will be used or associated with the research

being conducted. The following three philosophical assumptions are addressed in this section: ontological, epistemological, and axiological. Each assumption is defined and its purpose is articulated to help the reader better understand my beliefs and the direction of the research outcomes and goals (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption relates to the nature and characteristics of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a qualitative researcher, I embrace the concept of multiple realities as experienced through the subjective lens of each individual (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). For instance, while I believe an objective reality exists, I also understand every individual experiences reality differently from their own perspective. I have reported the findings of this study demonstrating the different experiences my teacher participants have had with the phenomenon of providing grades and feedback. However, as a Christian scholar and educator, I also hold firm to the one reality of my savior, Jesus Christ and the truths he has espoused through the written word of God. This belief does not obviate my ability to recognize the subjectivity and multiple realities of individuals and how they perceive phenomenon they experience throughout their lives. Thus, both views can be compatible and operate independently or in combination, as this study shows.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption addresses what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and, more specifically, what is the relationship between what is being researched and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the primary researcher, I attempted to get as close to my teacher participants as possible and gather their subjective experiences as evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a social constructivist, who believes knowledge is

constructed via interacting with others, I recognize this is how knowledge becomes known: through the experiences of people and their subjective perceptions. I came to know what my teacher participants know by spending time with them and getting comfortable having hermeneutic conversations with them about their lived experiences with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1997). As a fellow teacher who grades student work, my own lived experiences with this phenomenon helped in determining what counts as knowledge in this study.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption describes the extent to which researcher values are known and brought into a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study is value-laden in that I am situated and positioned in the same context as my participants, so while their values and beliefs about best grading practices and feedback became evident in the research process, mine did as well. The participants and I are all secondary teachers who have established our own grading practices according to our beliefs and decision-making processes. As I have taught middle school History for over 15 years and have changed my grading practices and philosophy over time and with experience, I approached this study with the values of accuracy, reliability, validity, and building intrinsic motivation for learning in my grading practices and feedback. In part, these values include separating my students' grades into one that measures academic achievement only, with a separate grade for non-cognitive factors. Moreover, fully disclosing these values influenced my interpretation of the stories and lived experiences of the teacher participants and, per van Manen (1997), my own experiences were not bracketed as this is a hermeneutic phenomenological study. Consequently, I used the hermeneutic circle to reflect upon and interpret mine and my teacher participants' lived experiences with giving grades and feedback because this led to

deeper understanding and meaning of the phenomenon. Further, I looked at individuals' experiences to explore the phenomenon of grades and feedback and the experience of that phenomenon to bring meaning to individuals' experiences.

Researcher's Role

In this qualitative study, I am the human instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a secondary teacher who grades student work, my lived experiences have a direct influence on how I view the phenomena of grading. Each of the participants are colleagues of mine within my school district, though some of them I do not know personally or have worked with them in the past. I have no authority over any of the teacher participants as they either teach in different secondary schools or those who teach at my middle school are peers, not subordinates. As the design of this study is hermeneutic phenomenology, the teacher participants and I co-constructed the meaning of our shared lived experiences together as co-researchers (van Manen, 1997). My grading biases are revealed in the study, such as my shift to standards-based grading and only including academic achievement as part of my student's overall grade, reporting non-cognitive factors in a separate, more detailed citizenship grade, using robust rubrics in all summative assessments, believing that all students can learn, and eliminating the 100-point scale (Feldman, 2019). These and other experiences are incorporated into the lived experiences reported by the teacher participants, using the hermeneutic circle regularly to achieve a deeper understanding and meaning-making of our experiences.

Procedures

In order to make future research replicable from this study, this section will outline how this study was conducted. Site permissions, information about securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, soliciting participants, the data collection and analysis plans by data

source, and an explanation of how the study achieves triangulation are all included in this section

of Chapter Three. The IRB is a committee within an organization or university which monitors

and reviews potential research that involves human subjects, and its purpose is to provide

oversight to ensure the safety and well-being of all research participants (Grady, 2015). Since

this study deeply involved human participants, IRB approval was necessary.

Permissions

As an employee of Discovery Hills Unified School district, I began by having

conversations with the gatekeepers of the sites I was planning to recruit from (Creswell & Poth,

2018). These gatekeepers were the principals at the middle, K-8, and high schools, and the

superintendent and deputy superintendent. Once district approval was sought via email to the

deputy superintendent and provided in writing (Appendix A), I completed and submitted my IRB

application for approval. Once IRB approval was obtained, documentation was included in the

appendices and in the emails sent to the secondary teacher recruits (Appendix B).

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool from which to draw my secondary teachers included all the 6th-12th

grade teachers of the subject areas of history/social studies and English. This number was

roughly 175 teachers at Discovery Hills Unified. The sample size was targeted between 10 and

15 teacher participants with the exact number following an iterative approach to saturation.

Saturation for this study was operationalized during the interview phase of data collection, as no

new patterns, opinions, ideas, or themes were discovered at 10 participants (Hennink et al.,

2017). However, as this was largely a homogenous sample and to ensure saturation was met, two

more participants were interviewed, bringing the total participants to 12 (Hennink et al., 2017).

The type of sampling was a mix of purposive and snowball (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this

study the sample was purposive because the participants had to have experienced grading at the secondary level in either English or history/social studies. However, I understood with such a large sample pool that contacting all possible participants could become cumbersome and time consuming so having willing participants suggest or recruit a colleague from a different department or grade level through snowball sampling helped alleviate this burden. Further, snowball sampling also increased my chances of recruiting participants who were willing to see the study through (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All 12 teacher participants were provided the proper consent forms and purpose of the study (Appendix C) so they were fully informed as to what data collection activities they would be expected to participate in, why, and their role as co-researchers with me.

All district protocols at the research sites were followed in the recruitment process. To recruit participants, I first emailed the middle and high school principals the purpose of the study and asked for recommendations of English and history/social studies teachers who met the qualifications of the study and who they believed would be willing to participate. Second, I emailed the consent form and purpose of the study to the recommended teachers with the return of the consent forms via intra-district mail scheduled for the end of the following week. A pre-addressed envelope was provided for each participant to make it as easy as possible for them to return the forms. Two days prior to the return deadline, I followed up with an email and phone call reminder. Eight willing participants responded almost immediately, and I did have to reach out to personal contacts at each site for their assistance with recruiting additional colleagues. Next, once the consent form was signed by the participants, I reached out to participants via email to schedule their individual interviews. After each individual interview, I provided options for potential focus group dates and had each participant choose which date they wanted to join.

At the conclusion of each focus group, I emailed participants the letter-writing directions/prompts while the participants were present with a deadline set for two weeks after the focus group. Thus, the deadlines for completing the advice letters were successfully met. Of note, in order to secure advice letter responses in a timely manner, I did have to contact six teacher participants via email to remind them of their deadline about three days prior to the due date.

Data Collection Plan

Qualitative research requires several methods of data collection and thoroughness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), a phenomenological study should use semi-structured interviews, whether in-person, over the phone, or virtual, at a minimum. However, the use of multiple data sources is necessary to help the researcher co-construct and describe meanings of essential themes in the participants life world and lived experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In this study, I used individual interviews, focus groups, and letter writing. By using multiple sources of data, I adhered to the principles of triangulation and developed a thorough and robust understanding of the phenomena being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Individual Interviews

In order to gather detailed information on the lived experiences of secondary teachers who grade student work, I conducted a semi-structured interview with the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Moreover, in a hermeneutic phenomenological interview, the purpose is to create a conversation that obtains and explores narrative data about the lived experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1997). My interviewees were secondary middle and high school English and history/social studies teachers who had first-person experience with constructing

grades for their students, both on student work and generating overall summative grades. I ensured teachers were comfortable with sharing their experiences by meeting with them at their convenience and maintaining a conversational, though professional tone. All interviews occurred virtually via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams, with a backup recording on my phone.

Individual Interview Questions

    1. Why did you become a (middle/high school) (content area) teacher? CRQ

    2. How would you describe your teaching experience thus far? CRQ

    3. What does grading student work typically look like for you? Walk me through your thought processes as you were grading. CRQ

    4. What are your beliefs or philosophy concerning grades or grading? SQ1

    5. How have your beliefs or philosophy changed throughout your teaching experience? SQ1

    6. How do your own beliefs, values, and/or knowledge (personal or professional) influence the decisions you make while grading student work? SQ1

    7. What do you believe a student's grade should represent? SQ1

    8. How do you decide what factors should be included in a student's overall grade? SQ2

    9. How do external factors (i.e., state testing, district policy, parents, administrators) influence the decisions you make while grading student work or creating report card grades? SQ2

    10. What prior training, if any, have you received on best grading practices and how has that training or experience influenced your own grading practices? SQ2

    11. When grading student work, what feedback practices do you employ? SQ3

12. Would you describe an experience where your feedback, either written or verbal, was effective for a student? What kind of feedback did you give, and what did the student do with it? SQ3

13. Do you use rubrics and if so, how do you use them? SQ3

14. Is there anything else concerning your experience grading student work or your beliefs, decisions, or practices with grading you would like to share? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3

According to van Manen (1997), researchers who conduct a hermeneutic phenomenological study should keep their conversational interviews fixed on the lived experience of the participants. In order to stay focused on participant lived experience, concrete, specific questions that ask individuals to recall a situation, event, person, occasion, or experience are necessary (van Manen, 1997). Each of these questions were used in this study (Appendix D). Questions one and two were employed as grand tour questions to get the teacher participants comfortable with talking to the researcher and to build rapport (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Patton, 2015). Question three is directly tied to the central research question and elicited the lived experiences of the participants with the phenomenon of grading student work. Questions four through 13 were asked to focus participants on their lived experiences with and factors that influenced their beliefs, decisions, and practices concerning grading student work, according to the study's research questions. Question 14 concluded the interview and allowed the teacher participants a final opportunity to provide insight on the phenomenon of grading student work (Patton, 2015).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Once the semi-structured interview data was collected, I used Microsoft Teams to transcribe each interview and utilized micro coding to generate short phrases from the transcriptions (Miles et al., 2018; Saldaña, 2014). Second, I read and reread the transcripts and initial codes, labeled them using pseudonyms, memoed and jotted down notes in order to develop categories from chunking the information in the transcripts (Miles et al., 2018). From these categories, I next focused on interpreting and identifying themes discovered in the data and listed these themes for the phenomena as textual representations (Miles et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). Finally, to provide member checks on the data and allow the participants to co-construct interpretation of the phenomena of grading, I emailed my results to each of the participants for feedback on whether they agreed or disagreed with the transcripts. All participants felt the transcriptions captioned the essence of their lived experiences. In order to come to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of teacher grading, triangulation of multiple sources was necessary, so focus groups and letter writing data were also analyzed in conjunction with the themes generated by the semi-structured interviews.

Focus Groups

After the initial interviews, I conducted focus groups with the same teacher participants who were interviewed. Of note, focus groups can enhance and improve the findings in patterns and themes of the primary, original data (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In part, the goal of this focus group was to discover commonalities and differences between the participants' lived experience with grading and expand upon and affirm the teacher participants' initial responses (Patton, 2015). One of the primary purposes of conducting a focus group is to stimulate meaningful conversation among the participants in the study concerning their shared lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since there were 12 participants, two focus groups of six

were conducted and discussion was based on the themes or patterns generated from the

individual interviews. The focus groups were held via Microsoft Teams, as this was the easiest

and most convenient method for the participants. Participants were emailed a Google Form to

determine their preference for type and time of meeting place. Additionally, questions were

based on commonalities or differences between the grade levels and subject matter teachers'

grading decisions, practices, and beliefs. Consequently, the questions asked of the focus group

were minimally revised from the individual interviews in the hope that teacher participants

would be more likely to share additional details about their lived experiences with grading in a

small group, as opposed to one-on-one discussions (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

The following were the focus group questions based on the responses from the initial

individual interviews (Appendix E). As the facilitator of the discussion, part of my role was to

keep the conversation on topic and ensure participants avoided general comments by asking for

concrete examples (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Focus Group Questions

1. In general, what is it like to grade student work in your classrooms? CRQ

2. What do you believe a grade should measure? SQ1

3. What factors (effort, academic achievement, behavior, ability, etc.) go into your grades
and why? SQ1, SQ2

4. What are some of your feedback practices? What are some of the ways you give
feedback? SQ3

5. What stands out to you among the similarities and differences in your grading
practices, beliefs, and decisions? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, Q3

Question one was used to get the group talking and focus on the central research

question. Questions two through four promoted discussions on teacher beliefs about grading, what factors teachers decided a grade should include, and the practices teachers utilized in their grading and feedback. Question five gave participants the opportunity to recognize and develop patterns, themes, or categories they noticed among their peers concerning shared or dissimilar grading and feedback practices. Staying close and focused on topic is paramount in hermeneutic phenomenology, so follow-up and redirecting questions were incorporated to keep teacher participants on track as they built off of each other's' responses (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The use of focus groups allows participants to deepen their understandings and insights on their shared lived experiences with grading student work (van Manen, 1997). Similar to the semi-structured interviews, the results of the group discussion were recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams, and micro coded into short phrases (Miles et al., 2018; Saldaña, 2014). A second cycle of pattern coding was used to condense the short phrases into themes (Saldaña, 2014). As co-researchers in the hermeneutic process, the participants were provided with the subsequent categories and themes generated from the focus group transcribed data in order to determine agreement or disagreement. By utilizing our shared personal experiences as graders (van Manen, 1997), and the literature as beginning points for coding and thematic generation, the participant responses and my own lived experiences produced thicker, more rigorous rationales for the linguistic transformation we shaped to describe the phenomena of grading (Saldaña, 2014; van Manen, 1997). Per van Manen (1997), the generation of themes gives the shapeless, shape, and this shape comes from reflection on themes, writing about them, reflecting on my own experiences, and rewriting. Consequently, letter writing provided a third form of thematic

analysis to explain the phenomena of grading in greater depth.

Letter-Writing

Finally, I had my teacher participants write a letter of advice to their younger selves as a new teacher. According to van Manen (1997), an advice letter is a form of written communication that allows reflection on past experiences and is a valid method of generating original data. To provide structure for their responses, I had participants articulate what advice on grading best practices they have experienced over the years to their past self as a new teacher. Additional guiding questions were also provided to help elicit rich, deep text from the participating teachers. At the conclusion of the focus group, the directions and prompt were emailed to participating teachers with a deadline to return the letter within two weeks (Appendix F). Letters were written and sent in Word, Google Docs, in the body of emails, and PDF. The following guiding questions were considered by participating teachers when writing their advice letter drafts:

1. In one or more paragraphs, describe your current grading practices to your younger self. What gets graded now vs. then? What does not? Why? CRQ, SQ1

2. In one or more paragraphs, what factors do you include in a student's grade now vs. then (e.g. academic achievement, effort, participation, work completion, etc.)? Why do you include the factors you do? SQ1, SQ2

3. In one or more paragraphs, what does a typical unit of instruction look like in your gradebook? How would you know if the grade from that unit is reliable or valid? SQ2

4. In one or more paragraphs, what might the feedback that accompanies this gradebook look like? SQ3

5. In one or more paragraphs, what are some ways you have learned over the years to

provide feedback that would increase student motivation and self-efficacy for learning?

SQ3

Question one prompted the participants to get at the heart of their lived experiences of

grading student work and required them to provide concrete examples (van Manen, 1997).

Questions two and three allowed the participants to articulate their grading beliefs, their

decision-making processes, and encouraged them to reflect on why they believe what they do

about the grading phenomenon in their own classroom and context. Finally, questions four and

five required the participants to explore their feedback practices and how effective they

perceived their own feedback practices were with regard to increasing levels of student self-

efficacy and intrinsic motivation for learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Letter-Writing Data Analysis Plan

When analyzing the documentation produced by the participants' letters, assigning

clusters of meaning and self-reflection was necessary (Saldaña, 2014; van Manen, 1997). The

process of in vivo coding was conducted on each line of the written letters where a phrase or

word taken directly from the letter was assigned a category or label (Miles et al., 2018; Saldaña,

2014). From these categories, rereading, chunking, and memoing of the letters generated themes

that resulted in similar thematic patterns connected to the semi-structured interviews and focus

groups (Miles et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). This form of inductive coding was used to

triangulate the patterns and connections, or lack thereof, among the various forms of data

collection in this study (Miles et al., 2018).

Data Synthesis

Analysis of qualitative data requires less of a systematic, step-by-step, structured

approach and more of an organic development (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutic

phenomenology attempts to attribute interpretation of phenomena or events through co-

construction with the researcher and the participants (van Manen, 1997). Moreover, hermeneutic

phenomenology requires the capturing or generation of themes, discovering and exploring

thematic aspects, discerning and pinpointing thematic aspects, and producing linguistic

transformation (van Manen, 1997). Thematic analysis within and between the semi-structured

interviews, focus group data, and letter writing, provided rich textual representations of the

phenomena via triangulation. After reviewing, implementing, verifying narratives, and assigning

meaning of the three data sources, I continued to classify categories of meaning based on

divergent or recurrent themes between them (van Manen, 1997). By triangulating multiple

sources of data, I was able to verify, for example, what themes emerged from the teacher

participant interviews against or with what themes were discovered in their letter writing and

focus groups (Saldaña, 2014). Moreover, composite textural descriptions that capture the

meanings and themes of the co-researchers as a whole were included, in addition to the

composite structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The composite structural descriptions

helped us understand how the group of co-researchers experienced what they experienced

(Moustakas, 1994). Due to the small sample of participants and the data they provided, no

Qualitative Data Analysis Software was used in this study. However, the objective was to ensure

a reduction of inaccuracies, biases, and contradictions to the greatest extent possible and

ultimately provide a thick, rich, textual representation of the grading phenomenon as participants

provided data of their understanding of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research specifies the means for explaining the worth of a study and examines how credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were managed in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to establish trustworthiness in their studies, qualitative researchers should implement a series of strategies as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Moreover, creating a plan for the use of these trustworthiness strategies prior to their implementation and documenting their use when applicable throughout the study is essential (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that documenting, incorporating, and planning these strategies aid in establishing the trustworthiness, rigor, and worth of the study. This study used the suggested strategies of Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a guide and framework for addressing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability in establishing trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility refers to believability and confidence in the truth and accuracy of the findings being reported (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In order to establish credibility in this study, the triangulation of data from multiple sources was collected and corroborated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collection techniques used in this study were individual interviews, focus groups, and participant letter writing to maintain rigor and accomplish triangulation. Exploring the participants' experiences through these different methods of data collection allowed me to enhance the study's validity by identifying and establishing themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, credibility was confirmed by member-checking, which provided participants with the opportunity to proofread their interview and focus group transcripts to ensure accuracy (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Transferability

Transferability establishes the possibility that findings from one study may be applied to additional contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), one method of establishing transferability is the use of thick description. Examples of thick description include detailed, rich information on people, settings, situations, and times. Further, the richness of the various types of coding to generate themes across the three data collection methods will aid in transferability via thick description. I made every effort to include thick description throughout the findings and created conditions conducive to transferability, however it will be up to the reader to determine if transferability has been successfully achieved or established.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the replicability of the study and that the findings of the study are consistent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I demonstrated dependability through an effectual, detailed description of the study's procedures. Moreover, the procedures for this phenomenological study have been laid out, step-by-step, so others may replicate it. An inquiry audit was also undertaken through a careful review of the products and processes of the study by the Qualitative Research Director and the dissertation committee at Liberty University.

Confirmability

Confirmability explores the extent to which the study findings are shaped and represented by the participants and not research bias or the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One technique used in this study was a striving for reflexivity. The pursuit of confirmability via reflexivity is evident in the openness and disclosure of my own work experience in conjunction with the phenomenon and how those past experiences have influenced my own opinions and views (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1997). All biases, experiences, and values I bring to

the study have been disclosed in the spirit of transparency and to follow the suggestions of Creswell and Poth (2018) for maintaining reflexivity.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, integrity was ensured by following all policies, procedures, and protocols of the Institutional Review Board. Prior to any data collection, site approval was obtained from the middle and high schools where interviews and focus groups were conducted, in addition to district approval by the deputy superintendent. All teacher participants were fully briefed on the purpose and methods of the study and informed consent forms were completed and received (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moreover, the teacher participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point during the research process. All middle and high school sites and teacher participants were assured of the confidentiality of this research and all people and places included in this study have pseudonyms when mentioned (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, all hard copy data has been kept in a locked file at the researcher's home and all electronic data is password protected in digital files on the researcher's computer. After three years, all data will be erased or destroyed. As a benefit to the teacher participants, all results of this study were shared with them, and time was allotted for discussion and any questions they had about the study's data and conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were not compensated monetarily for participating in this study.

Summary

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of secondary teachers who grade student work. Three sources of data were collected in the following order: individual interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing. Data from these sources was used for purposes of triangulation to capture teacher participants' lived experiences. Sampling was

purposive as only middle and high school teachers who have experience with grading student work from the subjects of English and history/social studies were contacted and included. Snowballing was also utilized to reach a minimum of 12 teacher participants. Data triangulation, ethical considerations, and audit trails were addressed consistently as the same inquiry strategies were applied to all participants. Data analysis of the interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing occurred in accordance with the suggestions and recommendations of van Manen's (1997) counsel for hermeneutic phenomenology. Moreover, data was protected following the appropriate procedures, and participant identities were safeguarded via pseudonyms. All teacher participants were given the opportunity to verify and co-construct data accuracy prior to any publication or additions to this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of secondary English and history/social studies teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices. This chapter presents the study's findings, including a description and list of the 12 participants, the themes generated from analyzing the data, and their connected subthemes. Chapter Four also includes detailed responses to the central research question and the three sub-questions.

Participants

Twelve secondary teachers participated in this study: seven English teachers, four history teachers, and one who teaches both. Participants were invited to participate via email after being recommended by their principals and colleagues. A purposive sample was collected of secondary teachers with five or more years of teaching experience since veteran teachers have more experiences with grading to draw on than novice teachers. Additionally, eight of the participants have taught at multiple school sites within the district or different districts altogether, thus providing deeper insights and lived experiences with giving grades and feedback in numerous contexts. Half of the participants were middle school teachers and the other half taught high school. Below, descriptions of the participants are presented in tabular form (See Table 1).

Table 1

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Secondary School	Content Area	Grade Level
Ellie	12	Middle	English Language Arts	8th
Jessica	7	Middle	English Language Arts	6th
Zane	12	High	English Language Arts/AP Capstone	10th
Roger	20	Middle	History	7th & 8th
Hailey	19	High	English Language Arts	11th
Denise	30	Middle	History	7th
Allison	17	High	English Language Arts	11th & 12th
Dawn	9	Middle	History/English Language Arts	8th
Diana	9	High	English Language Arts	12th
Ashley	19	High	English Language Arts	10th
Jennie	20	Middle	History	8th
Bryan	10	High	History/AP Capstone	11th

Ellie

Ellie is in her 13th year of teaching eighth grade English, though she originally started her teaching career at a high school in a neighboring, more affluent district. She always thought she wanted to teach high school English at the lower grades, preferably 9th and 10th, because when she started her career, she thought the 11th and 12th grade students would think she was too young and would not respect her. However, during the recession of 2008, she lost her position at

her high school and after a few years between teaching jobs, ended up at her current middle school. She fell in love with middle school, claiming it chose her, but realized her new clientele of lower-socioeconomic English-learners would require her to change her teaching and grading styles. Consequently, Ellie's perceptions of teaching have changed over the course of her career into a desire to break down barriers between cultures through her love of English, literature, and writing.

Jessica

Jessica began teaching 15 years after she graduated as an English major, reluctant to ever enter the field. She was passionate about reading and writing and analyzing literature, so she felt teaching students who were not as passionate about these subjects would be the educational equivalent of "casting pearls before swine." However, when her own children were middle school and high school age, she started substitute teaching and discovered she loved the middle school age group. She appreciates students on the cusp of entering young adulthood who require the guidance of their teachers to help them navigate the troubled waters of adolescence. She has been teaching sixth grade English for seven years and plans to continue for many more years to come.

Zane

Zane grew up with both parents as teachers, so he has been familiar with the profession most of his life. He always enjoyed English class and working with kids. Moreover, he always wanted a career with some social value that helped people. With such narrow parameters, it was inevitable he would enter the teaching profession. High school became more appealing to him since he enjoyed discussing literature and writing so after completing his student teaching at a small high school, he was hired at Discovery Hills Unified School District's largest high school.

Over his 12-year career, he has taught 9th and 10th English, both Honors and Core, and 10th Grade Advanced Placement Capstone research and writing course.

Roger

Roger has been teaching 7th and 8th grade history for 20 years, all of them at one of the lower-socioeconomic middle schools in the district. He got into teaching because he was always good with kids, had a lot of nephews, and loved history. Thus, the combination of talking about history and young people seemed like a good fit for a career. All his schooling, teacher preparation, and student teaching were completed in New York, where he grew up on Long Island. So, moving across the country to San Diego, California, and teaching in a California school was a bit of a struggle in the beginning. He has spent his long career always striving to improve his teaching and grading practices as he does not want to become stagnant or bored. He feels he has successfully navigated the many policy pendulum swings of public education, describing this constant change as "frustrating, but also enlightening."

Hailey

Hailey has been teaching high school English for 19 years because she is "terrible at math." She values English as a subject matter mostly because students can find their voice in writing and speaking. She has taught in Denver and California. According to Hailey, learning is not about being a good speaker or writer, but about constantly improving. So, high school English was a good fit for her since students had already experienced schooling and decided where they were in relation to education. Knowing this information about her students' experiences, she uses her class to motivate and push students to help them understand their voices matter. After struggling early in her career with feelings of isolation and stress, she has learned over the years that collaboration with colleagues is the key to be the best educator one

can be and that teaching is not only about the content, but helping students becoming competent, functioning human beings.

Denise

Denise claims teaching 7th grade World History is the best job on the planet. She has been teaching history at the same middle school for 30 years, after coming to California on a leave of absence from her high school AP European teaching position in Hawaii. Additionally, she has been teaching a World History course at one of the local community colleges in the area for several years. Even after so many years, she continues to be passionate about her craft and loves connecting with middle school students. She admits that the cyclical nature of education policies over the years can become frustrating since she believes we keep trying the same things repeatedly, not always doing what is best for students. Despite the frustration, she claims there is "never a dull moment. It's always interesting. It's always an opportunity for growth."

Allison

Allison has been teaching 11th and 12th grade English for over 17 years at the same high school. She was driven to become an English teacher when one of her high school English teachers asked her if she had ever considered taking an honors class. This simple query inspired Allison to pursue honors courses and to improve her writing ability. While she has taught at the same school and in the same department all her years of teaching, she has held several different roles. She started teaching 9th and 10th grade English and did not enjoy it. When 11th and 12th grade positions came open, she took them and found she loved teaching AP English and Capstone, research and writing course. She has also been the department chair for several years, only recently stepping down to focus on improving her pedagogy in the classroom. She loves to

incorporate what she enjoys about writing in her instruction and empowering students to do the same while they are in high school, and not having to wait until college.

Dawn

Dawn went into teaching because her friend asked her to enter the credential program with her. It was not until she entered middle school classrooms as a student teacher that she realized "oh yeah, these are my people!" Since then, she has taught 8th grade history and English for the last nine years at the same middle school. She stays because she loves the age group, the kids, and the subjects. She asserts that teaching English carries with it a significantly different workload than history, because it is more skills-based, with more essay-grading. During her first two years of teaching, she felt like she could have done much better, but hit her stride around year four or five. Then Covid happened. She believes Covid "humanized" all of us, and especially made her a more compassionate teacher as she was able to see her kids from a different perspective when teaching virtually. She witnessed more of their home life and that experience has carried over as education returned to normal and currently plays a role in her instructional and grading practices.

Diana

Diana initially wanted to be an art teacher. However, after college she chose a different path before returning to the teaching field. Upon entry into education, she became a Special Education Teacher for a neighboring district. She believes being a case manager in the Special Education world has deeply informed her teaching and grading practices now that she is a 12th grade high school English teacher. She has taught for nine years at both middle and high school in the past, including the lower high school grades as a general education teacher and a Special Education co-teacher. She admits she sometimes has imposter syndrome, as she has not spent as

much time in the English department as some of her colleagues, but she values her Special

Education background and the lens it allows her to view her own and other's pedagogy.

Ashley

Ashley has been teaching for almost 20 years at a few different locations and grade

levels. Prior to entering the education field, she worked in nonprofits as a consultant for

communication practices. After working with law enforcement in Los Angeles, she realized the

need for improving education for young people so they would not get into such bad situations

with the law when they were older. She went back to school for her masters and teaching

credentials in history and English. Ashley views her experiences teaching history and English at

a middle school in Los Angeles, a handful of neighboring districts, and at both high schools in

Discovery Hills Unified, as an asset to her overall career because she can compare and contrast

the different teaching and grading styles she has seen over the years and locations. She has also

earned her Education Doctorate and is involved with different instructional and grading

initiatives within the district.

Jennie

Jennie has been teaching for 20 years, though 13 of them were at the elementary level.

She transferred to middle school to teach history because that was her original passion and has

been there for over seven years. She values the middle years because her father died when she

was in middle school, and it was her teachers during that time in her life who provided the

guidance she needed to stay on the right path. Consequently, she enjoys providing similar

guidance and help to her middle school students in the hopes of making a difference in their

lives. She believes her teaching situation is unique because she works at one of our K-8 schools,

so she is the only eighth grade history teacher. Jennie sees this as an advantage over the other

middle schools because she and her colleagues all share the same students, since there is only one content area teacher for each grade level. Therefore, she and her colleagues can catch struggling students quickly and offer the needed support for them to succeed.

Bryan

Bryan has been teaching for 10 years. His first couple years were as a middle school history teacher in a neighboring district and when the opportunity arose, he moved to Discovery Hills Unified as a high school history teacher. He claims to have been a "terrible" student who did not value schooling. He knew he had a gift for public speaking and argumentation, but beyond that, he did not want to apply himself. It was not until he entered college and had to pay for his own schooling that he began to value education. Initially, he thought he wanted to be a history professor, but after learning he would need to do copious amounts of research and publishing, he decided to teach high school. While some years have been rough, he still enjoys seeing his students do well and learn the subject he enjoys so much.

<div align="center">

Results

</div>

After collecting data via individual interviews, focus groups, and letter writing, themes and sub-themes were generated using the qualitative data analysis approaches of Miles et al. (2018) and Saldaña (2014, 2021). The process of data collection was completed in roughly two months. After initial coding, pattern coding, memoing, and in vivo coding were complete and the ensuing codes were developed and synthesized, five themes materialized, each with corresponding sub-themes. Table 2 reveals the themes and sub-themes in tabular form. The themes presented in this section are (a) The *Complexity of Grading,* (b) *A Flawed System,* (c) *Fairness, Empathy, and Equity,* (d) *Meaningful, Timely Feedback,* and (e) *Student Motivation.*

Table 2

Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
The Complexity of Grading	Ideal vs. Reality
	High Stress
	Still have Value
A Flawed System	Lack of Training
	Subjectivity and Variability
Fairness, Empathy, and Equity	Outside Factors
	Late Work Policies
Meaningful, Timely Feedback	Oral Feedback
	Rubrics
	Workload
Student Motivation	Beyond Grading
	Gradeless Feedback

The Complexity of Grading

The first theme which developed was the complexity of grading. Every secondary teacher participant in this study found grading student work as their least favorite part of the teaching profession, due in part to the complex nature of grading itself. While most saw the value in and the importance of a valid, reliable grade that measures student academic achievement, all of the participants articulated a belief in how complex an overall grade for their English or history classes ended up being. Moreover, the practice of grading and what a grade entails was deeply personal, individualized, and convoluted. All the participants worried, to varying degrees, about what their grade measured and if their beliefs or grading decisions were accurate measurements of student ability. Hailey referred to grading at the secondary level as "muddled," stating, "We all are told to fit our grades into the A through F box. Part of me wishes it would be set up like elementary school where the grade is 'meets' or 'doesn't meet,' but I can't do that." When asked what his beliefs or philosophy were concerning grades or grading, Zane mused, "They (grades)

are such a terrible way to communicate to a student how they're doing…So, it gets a little muddy. I wish there was a better way to do it."

Ideal vs. Reality

The principal sub-theme of comparing their grading ideal to their lived reality was central to the complex nature of the grading phenomenon. According to 11 of the participants, grades should ideally measure academic achievement only, with a separate grade for citizenship or behavior. However, for 10 of the participants, the reality of the current system and their own practices combined non-cognitive factors, especially effort and participation, into their grades. This combination made for a messy reality in most of the participants' minds. Only Jennie fundamentally disagreed with this belief, suggesting she had no issue with non-cognitive factors like participation, effort, or timeliness, being a part of the academic overall grade. Consequently, the complexity of the grade became more evident in the dichotomy between teacher grading aspirations and their lived experiences. Hailey described her perception of the ideal when she stated "The grade should measure if you meet the standard." However, she explained her reality as the grade representing a "combination of the student's skill and effort." Roger articulated the same ideas almost verbatim in his interview, along with frustration over how "convoluted" the process of grading could be. Allison worried, "I don't think teachers have a meaningful way to assess and communicate students' soft skills and those are very much a part of what schools are meant to teach and assess." Ellie opined, "I don't feel like grading is ever going to be objective. I don't even know if what I'm doing works."

High Stress

The sub-theme of high stress was another common experience related to grade complexity. The teacher participants agreed that grading student work and providing overall

grades was equal parts overwhelming, intimidating, and stressful. The English teachers, especially, described the myriad and complex pressures of evaluating several different skills at the same time, students wanting to get a good grade, and the importance of the outcome of the overall grade on a student's report card. Ashley described grading as "intimidating and overwhelming." Roger concurred and added "it's stressful because you want to make sure, when you're grading, that it's authentic. Kids are worried about their grade so they will ask questions and you need a good reason for the grade they got." Participants also felt the grades their students earned were a direct reflection of the teacher's ability to teach, which added exorbitant amounts of stress and pressure. Allison described a certain level of anxiety when she was grading because she thought "this is an indication of how my students are going to do in the future. If you are not doing well right now, I haven't prepared you well enough…It's like I'm internalizing my teaching abilities when I'm scoring their work."

Still Have Value

The last sub-theme under the theme of grading complexity was that despite teachers' animus toward grades and the grading process itself, most still believed grades have value. Participants decried the time and effort required to grade student work, including the time away from their families when taking essays home to grade, however, they also saw grading as just one part of the job. Interestingly, those participants who still found value in giving grades, like Roger, Ellie, and Jessica, were also willing to, as Jessica said, "regrade something six times, all the way up to the end of the semester, if it will help the grade reflect the students' mastery." She and Ellie both recognized how much work it was to change a student's grade several times throughout the semester, but they saw value in the final grade being a direct reflection of the students' learning and mastery. Roger captured the essence of most the teacher participants'

thoughts when he alleged, "Grading is the least fun thing to do as a teacher, but it's a good metric for what the student learned…I would hope in the future that we don't get rid of grading."

A Flawed System

The second theme which surfaced was a flawed system. Teachers saw the necessity to teach and assess what researchers call soft or non-cognitive skills, like effort, participation, and timeliness (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Link, 2019; Kunnath, 2017; Lipnevich et al., 2020). However, participants recognized the current system used in their district does not provide adequate space for such measurements outside of the academic grade on the report card. Every teacher but two, who determined this school year to implement a strictly standards-based grading system, admitted they include meeting deadlines, work ethic, and engagement or participation in their overall grades. Moreover, their gradebooks followed the traditional method of weighted categories and the 100-point scale, despite each of them affirming awareness of the variability and unreliability of the traditional grading system. Interestingly, every teacher who included such factors and traditional procedures expressed their concern that this system or method of grading was not in line with what they believed a grade should measure; namely, academic achievement only. Dawn made the salient point, "…it's like taking a round peg and trying to fit it into a square hole. This whole system of percentages doesn't translate to standards-based grading. We are finagling, trying to make things make sense in the gradebook, but the system is flawed."

Lack of Training

The most prevalent sub-theme which occurred in support of the flaws in the system theme was a lack of training on best grading practices. All 12 teachers were in strong agreement that there was no training on grading practices in their teacher preservice programs. However, all participants did recall the district having a one-time workshop on standards-based grading and

eliminating the zero from their gradebook by grading expert and reformer, Tom Schimmer. Most of them could not remember his name and only two of them, Hailey and Dawn, practiced the No-Zero policy he prescribed (Schimmer, 2016). Prior to this one-time training, Hailey asserted, "There was zero training on grading. Like absolutely nothing. It was like, it's your gradebook, you may do whatever you want."

In the absence of formal training, participants described their experiences of trying to create their own grading systems. Most teachers remembered first experiencing setting up a gradebook or developing their grading practices from their mentor teachers during their experience's student teaching. This, along with casual conversations with colleagues about their grading practices and seeking out literature or workshops on grading independently, were their primary shared experiences with training on the phenomenon. Zane described the direction from the district as grading being something teachers needed to figure out on their own. He explained, "It's kind of just, shoot from the hip, and use whatever you liked or didn't like when you were in high school." Allison attempted to provide reasoning for the lack of training when she said, "I just feel like it's this really emotionally loaded part of teaching. Maybe it's easier to avoid it than to address it."

Subjectivity and Variability

The subjectivity of what goes in a gradebook and the variance in grading practices from classroom to classroom were brought up regularly. In this sub-theme, each teacher had their own unique beliefs and made corresponding decisions on what should and would be included in their gradebooks, and what could be left out. The only agreement appeared to be on teacher workload, with all participants describing a change in their grading practices over time, to grading less assignments as their career progressed and including less scores in the gradebook. Jessica and

Ashley were adamant about only including scores on summative assessments in the gradebook that demonstrated mastery of the standards. Jessica wrote:

> After all the practice, assess them (students). That's what goes in the gradebook. Behavior, while an important skill, is NOT a standard. Getting work done on time is an important life skill to have, but it isn't a standard. If a student turns in an assessment two weeks late and it shows mastery, shouldn't their grade reflect that? Penalizing a student for behavior leads to an inaccurate gradebook.

In contrast, Roger, Denise, Ellie, and Diana felt just as strongly that soft skills like effort and participation should be included in the gradebook and were equally as valued as academic achievement. However, since there was no place for meaningful measurement of those soft skills in the current grading system, these teachers felt they had to include them in their academic grade. Denise argued, "I think it helps to give a participation grade of 10% just for trying an activity, even though it hasn't been mastered." Moreover, Roger, Ellie, and Diana, not only included, but insisted, traditional weighted categories should be how a gradebook was structured. Ellie asserted, "You need weighted categories." Her rationale being that earlier in her career, she would just assign points to assignments, but her students figured out that some assignments were so low, they could skip the assignment and it would not do anything to their grade. Her solution was weighted categories because, "You want their grade to mean something." Roger concurred, writing, "I still use the same categories I always have for the most part when calculating the students' grades. What has changed has been what has the biggest weight in their grade, what has the most effect on it." The categories which were weighted the highest across participants who used weighted categories inevitably ended up being classwork and assessments, because, as Roger said, "I feel like I can't control what happens at home, so what you do here is most

important." Diana compared soft skills like task completion and effort to a student earning their paycheck, stating, "Good job for following the directions. I'm giving you credit. You earned your paycheck for doing that."

Fairness, Empathy, and Equity

The third theme that developed was a deep concern for fairness, empathy, and equity in grading policies and practices. Teachers struggled with wanting defensible, objective grades and feedback for their students' work, but also shared subjective experiences that have influenced their grading and feedback practices. These experiences developed their sense of empathy for different student populations, such as those with low socio-economic backgrounds, Special Education needs, and students with difficult home lives. Ellie, Roger, and Denise all expressed how different their own backgrounds and experiences were prior to teaching at one of the district's middle schools with a lower-socioeconomic student population. Denise explained that early in her career, she lacked experience with "kids of poverty or English Learners." Consequently, she reasoned she needed to "not be so strict about my grades." Further, she recalled, "probably half my students failed the first year" due to her severe homework and late-work policies. Both Denise and Ellie referred to the lack of work completed at home as "culture shock," since they came from what they perceived as privileged backgrounds where time and space was provided at home for completing homework assignments. Concerning many of her struggling students, Ellie acknowledged, "There are so many limitations placed on them. I can't be another one."

Outside Factors

The sub-theme of outside factors continued and amplified when teachers were asked to share how their personal beliefs and values influenced their grading practices. Several

participants mentioned that they considered what was going on in the student's home or other parts of their life outside of the classroom when grading. Accordingly, teachers cultivated empathy for their students' own lived experiences with mental, emotional, and physical trauma and readily admitted these factors influenced how they graded student work. For example, when a student performed poorly on an assessment or essay, Allison wondered "if they recently broke up with a partner, or if there's some kind of drama in their life causing them to feel unmotivated." Dawn elaborated further, stating:

> I believe that you must know every kid. We know what our kids are going through at home. We know that they just got done with the court trial for their abusive dad, or we know that they are sleeping on someone's couch, or whatever it is. So, knowing the kids informs our practices and the way I approach grading.

> Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic was described as an outside factor that influenced teacher grading practices. Jessica, Dawn, and Ashley all believed that Covid humanized everyone, and helped them to see their students differently, especially as they experienced a deeper look into students' home situations when participating in distance learning. The teachers began to understand school and its attending responsibilities were not the only worries these students were carrying. In fact, these teachers believed the unintended consequences of Covid changed some of their beliefs in ways they could not have predicted. Dawn argued, "Some teachers might say that we've lowered our expectations, but what we think happened is that we began to see students as people."

Late Work Policies

The sub-theme of late work policies also occurred frequently in support of the fairness, empathy, and equity theme. While a handful of teachers were concerned about getting

schoolwork turned in on time and issued point deductions on late work, the majority believed

this to be an inequitable practice. Those teachers who placed greater emphasis on academic

achievement saw timeliness as a behavior issue, separate from the academic grade. Of note, the

most experienced teachers, or those with the most years in the profession, often expressed a shift

during their career from strict, rigid policies, to more flexible, or as Bryan described, "liberal"

late work policies. Thus, if assignments were turned in late but achieved mastery, full credit was

still given. Further, since many students in the district had mitigating circumstances in their lives

which might preclude their completing assignments outside the classroom, all the participants

expected schoolwork to be done in school. Consequently, several teachers suspended homework,

or made it optional. Bryan captured the essence of these policies when he stated, "I try really

hard to think about fairness and equity when assessing or even accepting student work."

Meaningful, Timely Feedback

The fourth theme which emerged was meaningful, timely feedback. Every teacher

expressed how important they believed feedback on student work was, especially as it related to

increasing student intrinsic motivation for learning. While teachers appeared to vary slightly on

the methods and amounts of feedback given to their students, either individually or as a whole

class, they all were determined to provide feedback they believed was useful, connected to the

task, and given promptly. Interestingly, both the history and English teachers preferred

workshopping with their students, where feedback was given in real time, both written and oral,

during the process of writing, as opposed to providing written feedback when the writing task

was complete. Ashley said, "I want my students to feel like my class is a workshop rather than a

formal exam in which they must be perfect every day." Zane added, "The five minutes you spend

writing comments will be better served talking to the student for five minutes." For the high

school teachers, having students contact the teacher to make an appointment for one-on-one feedback was essential. Hailey asserted, "This is more effective than giving feedback after the task is completed since many students do not look over comments and apply them unless it is an instructed task/activity."

Oral Feedback

The primary sub-theme of oral feedback, given during the process of writing, emerged when teachers were asked what feedback practices they employ. Hailey, Zane, Ashley, Dawn, Allison, and Bryan all mentioned their use of whole class feedback after observing and conferencing with students while the students were writing. Most of the teachers would create a slide to project on the board with common issues they were seeing in their students' writing and provide real-time, verbal feedback to the whole class. In this way, students were able to make corrections immediately. All but one of the teachers shared that oral feedback and writing conferences with individual or small groups of students saved significant amounts of time on the back end when it came time to grade the students' final drafts. Allison defended her practice of whole class, oral feedback when she affirmed, "Whole class, in the moment feedback, is so much more valuable because it's in the moment of writing, and our classes are so large that to give timely, written feedback is just, really hard." Zane echoed Allison's assessment: "The more feedback during the process, the better the outcome is." The only dissenting voice concerning in the moment, oral feedback was Jennie, who was concerned that "If I'm giving them that feedback along the way, then I feel like I'm grading my own assignment and not theirs."

Rubrics

The second sub-theme which arose was the importance of using rubrics for feedback on summative writing assessments. Most teachers regarded giving students detailed rubrics prior to

beginning a writing assignment and explaining what the rubric meant, as pivotal for increasing student task-completion and success. Moreover, all teachers agreed that rubrics not only provided feedback to students, but helped with the grading process, as the grades given via the rubric were far easier to defend if students or parents took issue with a student's score. Conversely, Ellie and Roger shared that many of their middle school students did not use the rubrics provided and seemed to rely more on the teacher's oral feedback during the process of writing. Comparably, several teachers expressed what Dawn articulated as "heartbreak" when students would simply throw the rubrics in the trash after they saw their final grade. This action discouraged teachers and led to questions of how effective their feedback really was, or reinforced the idea that the best feedback was oral feedback prior to the summative assessment. Despite these setbacks, all teacher participants declared the importance of rubrics in the feedback and grading process, especially about having more objective, focused feedback. Jessica claimed, "I feel like if you don't use a rubric, you're just going off your gut feeling. You can't just go off that. You must go off the rubric."

Workload

The sub-theme of workload also surfaced when discussing teacher feedback practices. The English teachers described their experiences with providing feedback as time-consuming and daunting as they tried to give meaningful, timely feedback to all their students. Diana reflected, "It is difficult to give really good, authentic feedback in the time frame that we're presented with, especially as English teachers." Allison, Ashley, and Hailey agreed, sharing feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and worry about making sure they were giving feedback which would help their students improve their writing, in a sufficient amount of time. Allison

anguished, "I feel like, stress to do it fast enough or efficient enough for students to get results that are relevant."

Student Motivation

The final theme which developed was a shared perception that meaningful feedback was the best method for increasing intrinsic motivation of learning in students. While teachers recognized some students were motivated by the extrinsic reward of a good grade, the consensus among the participants was that meaningful feedback, relevant to the task, was the primary means to increase self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. Hailey conceded, "Once students start to see positive changes in their overall scores, they tend to be more motivated to take feedback into consideration." However, she followed this thought with a salient counterpoint:

Self-efficacy often comes when students tackle situations, fail, reflect, revise, and find success even if small; however, many students have learned task avoidance over the years which results in learned helplessness that prevents them from undergoing authentic ownership of one's learning.

Roger concurred, recognizing that a grade was not enough to motivate students to persevere and make necessary changes in their writing to become better. He said, "Students still want to see some positive feedback in your comments. So, I try to point out the positive aspects of their work while also giving them comments on what can be improved." Bryan also expressed the importance of having "students self-evaluate their essays," which "forces them to reflect on their writing and skills." He asserted that opportunities for "self-reflection" and "discussion with your kids," was an important method for "building student self-efficacy."

Beyond Grading

One sub-theme produced was student motivation for learning occurs beyond the grade or grading. Teachers recognized providing a simple letter grade or points on an assignment without any kind of feedback could be translated incorrectly by their students. For instance, according to Allison, a student could misinterpret a grade as "how much you like the student," or "how the student usually performs." Without feedback, students who only get a grade might also decide school is not for them since there is no way they can improve on what they have earned. For example, Hailey claimed, "Since the student relationship with grades is one of performance rather than mastery, it is difficult to get students to value the process of practice, revision, and eventual improvement." Ashley articulated that "students are not solely motivated by grades, nor should they be." In fact, by focusing on students meeting specific standards instead of completing assignments or chasing grades or points, Ashley was able to "have far more meaningful conversations with students about their current skill level as well as ways in which they can apply these skills to future endeavors." Jennie advised, "Teach students they can set goals and work toward achieving them. It is not only a grade that will matter when their education years have passed."

Gradeless Feedback

The sub-theme of gradeless feedback emerged when participants described some of the ways they had learned over the years to provide feedback that would increase student motivation and self-efficacy for learning. Teachers felt they had to explicitly teach students not to chase a grade, but to increase their abilities, skills, and learning. For example, Allison required her students to reflect on the feedback she would give them on written assignments and the students had to show her "proof of understanding of the feedback and how they're going to apply it to the next essay of the same kind." A grade was not applied to any writing assignment until multiple

revisions were undertaken. Ashley agreed, "I require my students to show proof they have implemented my feedback. They don't get a final grade until they do." General and specific feedback without a grade attached, during the process of writing, was a predominant factor articulated by teachers for increasing student intrinsic motivation for learning. Zane wrote:

> I think providing general feedback has helped students with self-efficacy. Instead of having me point out everything they need to improve, they must work to be able to identify areas of improvement in their own writing given general feedback. Additionally, they learn to advocate for themselves by asking to conference with me.

Outlier Data and Findings

In qualitative research, an outlier is an unexpected theme or finding that represents a variation in the participants or population being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018) In this study, the theme in dissonance from the others was *Standards-Based Grading*, as only two teacher participants claimed to implement SBG with fidelity. This theme emerged from the sub-themes of Ideal vs. Reality and a Flawed System.

Standards-Based Grading

The theme of standards-based grading materialized when the majority of participants articulated that a grade should ideally represent academic achievement, but in reality, all but two of the teachers included non-cognitive factors in their grades. The two participants who used SBG were Ashley and Jessica. Both decided at the beginning of this school year to implement SBG with fidelity for the first time. Ashley stated, "I've had an incredible experience with SBG. When I'm looking at student work, I'm comparing it to the standard itself." Both Jessica and Ashley expressed their frustration with non-cognitive factors being included in their colleagues' gradebooks, to include "bathroom passes," "participation," and not accepting "late work." Jessica and Ashley admitted they included "soft skills" in their students' overall academic grades

earlier in their careers, but after learning about SBG, they shifted their grading practices accordingly. Jessica expressed frustration with the current flawed system when she said, "One of the biggest struggles I have is that our gradebook is not set up to reflect mastery of standards. It's set up to average points on assignments."

Research Question Responses

This section answers the central research question to this study and the succeeding three sub-questions. The themes generated by this study inform the answers to the research questions. Quotes from the teacher participants were taken from their individual interviews, focus groups, and advice letters.

Central Research Question

What are secondary teachers' lived experiences with grading student work? The participants described similar experiences with grading student work and providing grades in general, but most of their individual experiences and beliefs led them to their specific practices, though many expressed a lack of confidence in what their students' grades represent. The most common themes to describe their experiences were the complexity of grading and the flawed system that they were required to operate within that includes non-cognitive factors in an academic grade. These themes and experiences revealed the cognitive load teachers carried in reconciling what should be included in their gradebooks and what factors should be included in their overall grades, versus what their reality was. Interestingly, every participant described the experience of grading student work as their least favorite aspect of the job and some of them expressed a desire for grades to no longer be a part of the education system. When asked about what grading student work in his classroom looked like, Bryan led with, "I'm kind of a hippie. I don't really like grades, and if it was up to me, we wouldn't give them." Several participants

echoed Bryan's feelings on the matter, though the majority still believed giving grades was an important part of education.

Moreover, the themes of grading complexity and systemic flaws were only intensified by the shared experiences of high stress levels, a perceived lack of training, and the problematic variability of grading practices used by different teachers. Participants all shared experiences of being overwhelmed with the workload of trying to grade student work, taking work home with them, especially at the beginning of their careers, and longing for hands-on, research-based training on what grading practices work best for all students. Ellie articulated, "I don't like being criticized for my grading. There are just critiques and I think if you want people to change what they're doing, then there needs to be proof of what actually works." Concerning the heavy workload of providing grades and feedback, Dawn explained:

> There are all these tropes, right? Like teachers do it for the outcome, not the income. Or like, you know, a teacher is a candle that burns so others can light a flame. And I'm like, it's like the Giving Tree. She ends up as a stump. I have no interest in becoming a stump.

In addition, especially at the high school level, teachers were concerned that the variability of grading practices used by teachers within and without their departments, would affect students' chances to get scholarships or admittance into top-tier universities. Jessica made the convincing argument in one of the focus groups:

> If I'm grading one way, say using standards-based grading because I'm trying to do this right and accurately, and a teacher down the hall is including effort in their grade or because they have a sweet kid or their student didn't use all their bathroom passes so the kid got extra credit, and that kid gets a scholarship to college and mine doesn't, that is a real fear. Until there is proper training that says: this system works better, and until we're

all on the same page, this will continue to be a problem.

In essence, the lived experiences of secondary teachers with grading student work were described as complex, challenging, and in need of a better system.

Sub Question One

What are the beliefs of secondary teachers about what should be represented in a student's grade? According to the teachers, they believed a student's grade should primarily measure their academic achievement or ability to master a specific content standard or skill. However, nearly all participants communicated that academic achievement being the *only* factor represented in a student's grade was the ideal, not the reality. The complexity of grading theme, combined with the theme of fairness, empathy, and equity, captured the participants' stated beliefs and experiences. Teachers like Jessica and Ashley fell squarely on the side of standards-based grading and the student's academic grade only representing achievement or mastery of the standards being assessed. Jessica and Ashley both felt this was the most fair and equitable way of grading. For example, when referring to what a student's grade should represent in her individual interview, Ashley asserted, "I don't think it should go in the gradebook unless its demonstrative of the student's understanding of the content, not whether or not they went to the bathroom."

While most teachers agreed with Ashley and Jessica's stance in theory, the reality of what their grades represented was a conglomeration of soft skills and academic achievement. For example, Diana articulated that she does not accept late work because she sees it as an "accountability measure." She explained further, "I don't accept or grade late work which goes against the standards-based grading movement, but these students need to learn responsibility." Most teachers did accept late work, citing empathy for struggling students, and readily admitted they considered factors other than academic achievement when they were grading. Roger plainly

stated, "I think the grade should represent two things: It should show the effort they put into the school year, and it should show their knowledge of the standards we've been teaching them." The experiences and grading policies of most of the participants demonstrated agreement with Roger's perspective.

Sub Question Two

How do secondary teachers make decisions about grading student work? The answer to this question materialized when teachers were asked how they decided what factors should be included in a student's overall grade and how external factors influenced the decisions they make while grading student work or giving overall grades. Once again, a combination of the theme's complexity of grading and fairness, empathy, and equity, described the participant's lived experiences with decision-making. The 10 secondary teachers who used weighted categories acknowledged they decided to place the most weight on assessments and classwork because they felt they only had control over what a student did in their classrooms. In the teachers' minds, it was not fair or equitable to highly weight homework or outside projects since students could potentially have such difficult home lives. Denise explained, "I'm much more understanding that this is the place where the learning has to happen and I don't expect them to do a lot on their own at home, and that's ok."

Collaborating with content and grade-level colleagues when setting up their gradebooks also helped some participants simplify what they graded. Bryan explained, "My colleagues and I talk about our grade book and the grading policy before the year starts. We usually decide summative assessments will outweigh formative assessments." Zane concurred, "We decided together to streamline and kind of take out anything unnecessary. We did this because sometimes smaller grades and assignments can pile up and put a student in a hole they can't dig out of."

Once again, empathy and fairness were significant factors in teachers' decision-making about grades.

When it came to external factors having an influence on their grading decision-making, most teachers admitted parent, administration, or state testing had little or no effect on their grading practices and policies. Some participants reasoned they did not pay much attention to these factors because they had been teaching for so long. Jennie explained, "In my first few years of teaching, maybe they played a role, but not now." However, the Advanced Placement English and history teachers recognized the central status of the College Board and AP exam on their grading decisions. Allison declared:

> The College Board runs my life. So, what they put on the exam is what I'm responsible
>
> for teaching. So, I feel like I'm at the mercy of the College Board. And I would hope that
>
> my students' grades reflect how they will do on the exam.

Sub Question Three

What feedback practices do secondary teachers employ when grading student work? The teachers shared varying feedback practices, including written and oral feedback both during the process and on the final product. All the high school English and history teachers provided whole-class feedback on common trends they would observe in their students' writing and create slide decks to show the whole class. Both middle and high school English and history teachers also presented and analyzed exceptional student work to their classes as models of mastery. Nearly all the participants agreed that written feedback on summative assessments was rarely utilized by their students, since the grade was all the students appeared to care about at that point, but they gave the feedback anyway. Ellie justified her written feedback on summative work, despite its apparent futility, when she explained, "Do you have to provide them with comments if

they're not going to do anything with it? But what if there's the off chance that they are going to

do something with it? So, I can't help myself but provide feedback."

Nearly all teachers agreed that in the moment, verbal feedback was the most effective

feedback practice to increase student motivation for improvement and learning. The themes

which best described these experiences were meaningful, timely feedback, coupled with student

motivation. Several participants shared the exhilaration of students asking for feedback and

immediately putting it to use. Jennie shared, "I love that about 75% of my students are

responsive and really do take the opportunity to show improvement or growth." Denise exhibited

even more enthusiasm when 80% of her students used her feedback to generate creative hooks or

grabbers in their writing, "I was like, doing a little jumping up and down in class, like they

actually came up with a creative hook that wasn't a question, on their own. Those little victories

are good."

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived

experiences of secondary English and history/social studies teachers who grade student work,

including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices. This chapter provided a list

and description of the teacher participants, including their years of service, schools, subject

areas, grade levels, and relevant background information. The study's results were also included,

complete with themes and sub-themes. The themes of (a) *The Complexity of Grading,* (b) *A

Flawed System,* (c) *Fairness, Empathy, and Equity,* (d) *Meaningful, Timely Feedback,* and (e)

Student Motivation described secondary English and history/social studies teachers' experiences

with grading student work. Moreover, the themes helped elucidate teacher beliefs about grades

and grading, the decisions teachers made about what factors a grade should include and

represent, and the feedback practices teachers employed. These feedback practices were connected to teacher perceptions of increasing students' intrinsic motivation for learning. Chapter Four concluded with detailed answers from the participants for the central research question and the three sub-research questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of secondary English and history/social studies teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices. This chapter will discuss the researcher's ideas, interpretations, and related information formulated from the literature review to refine and explain the findings of this study. This chapter will also articulate the implications for policy and practice, the theoretical and empirical implications, and the limitations and delimitations of this study. Chapter Five will close with recommendations for future research and a conclusion.

Discussion

This section summarizes and examines the findings of the study developed from the themes explored in Chapter Four. This section begins with a summary of the thematic findings, my interpretations of those findings and their link to existing research, and the implications for policy and practice. Subsequently, the theoretical and empirical implications for the study are discussed. To close, this section presents and explores the limitations and delimitations of the study and specifies recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

The data for this study was analyzed after being collected from the teacher participants via 12 individual interviews, two focus groups, and 12 advice letters written to the participants' younger selves as beginning teachers. Analysis included thematic generation via triangulation of the data, which produced five themes. This section summarizes and discusses the themes of this

study, my interpretations of the themes, and their connection to existing literature on the

phenomenon of secondary teachers' grading and feedback practices.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The themes that emerged from this study, (a) *The Complexity of Grading*, (b) *A Flawed*

System, (c) *Fairness, Empathy, and Equity,* (d) *Meaningful, Timely Feedback*, and the connection

between feedback and (e) *Student Motivation*, described secondary English and history/social

studies teachers' experiences with grading student work, inclusive of their beliefs, decisions, and

feedback practices. The participants shared their lived experiences with giving grades to students

as the least desirable part of their job and stated that their knowledge of best grading practices

did not match the reality of their gradebooks, presaging the *Complexity of Grading*. Moreover,

the participants described *A Flawed System* when they compared seemingly more accurate

grading systems like standards-based grading, with the subjectivity and variability of the 100-

point scale and weighted categories that might include non-cognitive factors. Interestingly,

teacher grading and feedback practices were viewed by the participants through a lens of

Fairness, Empathy, and Equity when teachers considered factors outside of the classroom and

created liberal late work polices. Finally, teachers communicated the most effective feedback

practices were verbal, during the process, with a simultaneous emphasis on rubric utilization, to

help alleviate teacher workload, increase *Student Motivation,* and provide *Meaningful, Timely*

Feedback. Given these findings, three interpretations are considered: teacher training

uncomplicates and homogenizes the grading system, an improved grading system generates

equitable results, and effective feedback impacts student and teacher motivation.

Teacher Training Uncomplicates and Homogenizes the Grading System. This study

found that training in research-based best practices for grading and feedback is necessary for

improving and standardizing grading systems. This corroborates and extends the research of Brookhart et al. (2016), Kunnath (2017), and Feldman (2019), which claimed the variability and unreliability of teacher grading practices would require professional development and consistency between content area teachers. While the literature suggests that grading practices are often deeply personal to individual teachers (Anderson, 2018; Tierney, 2015) and that teachers dislike having systems imposed upon them (Welsh et al., 2013; Wormeli, 2018), the issues of grade subjectivity, variability, and unreliability from teacher to teacher were prevalent in this study. Consequently, the participants expressed a desire for less complexity in the grading system and a correction of the flaws via teacher collaboration and professional development.

Several participants mentioned one prior training given by their district on eliminating the zero in their gradebooks and an overview of standards-based grading, but no follow up training was provided. One-time professional development opportunities on grading were described as nice, but not enough. Ashley shared an experience in one of her previous school districts where a common assessment was given to students and all the English teachers who gave it went to the district office to calibrate their grading using a common rubric. In response to this training, Ashley stated, "It was the best grading I've ever done because we spent so much time, ahead of time, talking about what we were looking for and what it meant, and ensuring that we all were making the same decisions." By calibrating and collaborating with colleagues, homogeneity may be achieved (Guskey, 2020). When homogeneity is achieved, a potential barrier to improved inter-rater reliability between teachers and grade objectivity is, arguably, removed. Additionally, any teacher training on effective grading and feedback practices ought to be sustained across multiple school years (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019; Guskey & Jung, 2012). Further,

systematizing grading practices and more specifically, gradebooks, has the potential to create more fair and equitable policies.

An Improved Grading System Generates Equitable Results. Grading experts agree that grading for mastery of standards and skills, or standards-based grading, provides the most accurate, equitable grading system (Brookhart, 1994, 1997, 2016; Guskey, 2008, 2012; McMillan, 2003, 2019; Townsley, 2014, 2019). The findings of this study support grading for mastery of standards and skills in that participants shared their beliefs that grades should ideally represent cognitive factors, or academic achievement, with a separate grade, score, or narrative for non-cognitive factors (Brookhart et al., 2016). Dawn summed it up for her focus group when she said, "The grade should measure proficiency according to the standards. The grade should not be a measure of behavior or habits. I think academic grades should be separate from those behavioral grades." It was only when participants admitted they decided to include non-cognitive factors like effort, participation, or timeliness in their academic grade that they saw complications with grade validity and reliability between teachers. For example, Hailey and Roger included what they referred to as the "cool kid bump" in their overall grades. This meant the students who were well behaved or were putting in extensive effort but still could not quite score well on their assignments or assessments, would have their overall grade "bumped" up, at the individual teacher's discretion. Other participants like Denise and Ellie also included 10% participation grades, ostensibly to be given at their pleasure, or to students who they knew had difficult home lives. Such grading practices are commonly found in the traditional 100-point grading scale and weighted categories (Feldman, 2019; Malouff & Thorsteinsson, 2016).

Notably, teachers who attempted to "help" their students with participation and effort points or grades, contributed to the current inequitable grading system. Despite a stated belief in

fairness, the unintended consequences of "bumping" a student's score inevitably led to grade inflation, and issues with inter-rater reliability. For instance, the participants who advocated for strictly standards-based grading saw their fears of a grade not having the same meaning from teacher to teacher within their shared content areas realized with these practices. By participating in focus groups, teachers recognized the value of unsiloing, or effectively opening their doors and minds to a grading system and practices, already used by some of their colleagues, which demonstrated more equitable results for all students. For example, in response to comments made by Jessica concerning her fidelity to SBG and the need for other teachers to do the same if students were to all have a fair shot, Dawn replied:

> I hadn't really considered the impact of scholarships down the road. But yeah, you're
> right. And I think what we're talking about is a cultural issue that we have in the United
> States, that somehow an A indicates that a kid is worthy of X, Y, or Z. But really, what
> does that grade represent?

Moreover, when equitable grading practices are achieved, the teacher's cognitive load can shift from grading to a focus on feedback practices that increase teacher and student intrinsic motivation.

Effective Feedback Impacts Student and Teacher Motivation. This study confirmed, at least from the teacher perspective, the assertions made by Ryan and Deci's (2020) self-determination theory that teacher feedback can have informational significance, where feedback perceived as informational, helpful, or revealing areas to improve will increase student intrinsic motivation. Participants described effective teacher feedback practices as providing and using rubrics before, during, and after the writing process and using whole-class and individual verbal feedback in the moment of writing. Hailey wrote, "Something that helps motivate some students

is the scheduled metacognitive practice of looking at where they started and how they improved along the way. Improvement may be small and slow, but some improvement shows growth." Like Hailey, Allison valued metacognition and provided reflection questions on each of her rubrics that students had to answer to show they engaged with her feedback. Allison explained, "I feel like more of them will revise because they know now what to revise for…it helps nudge them in the right direction rather than: here's your paper, you got a C." Interestingly, giving feedback during the process was prioritized because teachers experienced more student engagement with the feedback, and little or no implementation of their feedback by students if given once a grade was attached. Jessica stated, "I give most of my feedback prior to grading because once it's graded, a lot of students don't go back and change things." These findings substantiate the research of Henry et al. (2020) and Walker et al. (2020) who found that teachers who provide in the moment or verbal feedback on writing assignments had students who reported higher levels of intrinsic motivation for writing.

Moreover, in this study, when students used the immediate feedback provided by their teachers, whether during a scheduled writing conference, or in response to written feedback on a rubric, teachers also expressed increased levels of self-efficacy, resulting in motivation to continue pursuing their feedback efforts. Thus, these findings demonstrated an increase in motivation for both teachers and students, connoting a reciprocal relationship. Examples included teacher expressions of "happy hearts," "excitement," or spontaneously breaking into a "happy dance," when students used the teacher's feedback appropriately. Additionally, teachers shared experiences of students immediately implementing simple, verbal feedback by spending extended periods of time to rewrite and revise their work. For example, Ellie stated, "What works so much better is when feedback is given during the process of writing. I find that

feedback in writing and orally during the process is more helpful and students can grow in the moment." Ultimately, the participants' accounts of students being motivated to successfully complete complex writing assignments based on teacher feedback not only demonstrated the effectiveness of the feedback given, but the impact this feedback had on both the teacher and the students' intrinsic motivation for learning.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The interpretations of this study are used in this section to discuss the implications for policy and practice regarding teacher grading and feedback in secondary schools. This section discusses teacher training and professional development on effective grading systems and feedback practices. Further, policy and practice suggestions are included for state departments of education, school districts, administrators, teachers, and staff.

Implications for Policy

In most states, education code or state law gives classroom teachers the final say on how they set up their gradebooks and how they administer their overall grades (Feldman, 2019). This research found that systematizing grading practices to ensure fair, accurate, and equitable outcomes would help alleviate concerns about inter-rater reliability between teachers and improve the validity of grades. While state law prevents school districts from imposing grading policies on teachers, school boards could modify their board policies on grading to include suggestions for best practices, such as mastery grading or standards-based grading, that they encourage each of their secondary teachers use. Board policy recommendations can be shared with administrators and teachers, coupled with appropriate training to increase the use of these grading systems. The more teachers who utilize these recommendations, the more parents and

the public will be exposed to best practices in grading and expect those teachers who refuse to use the recommended policy to begin doing so.

Implications for Practice

The interpretations of the thematic findings for this study specify practical implications. Teachers in this study expressed feelings of stress and anxiety over getting grades and feedback right, and the complexity of a broken or flawed system was, in part, a cause of this stress. Consequently, regular, robust district professional development on grading and feedback practices and corresponding gradebook setup, was requested and believed to be beneficial to the participants in this study and their school district. Moreover, sharing research-based, best grading and feedback practices may also be practical and helpful for all secondary schools and school districts (Anderson, 2018; Brookhart et al., 2020; Kunnath, 2017; Torres et al., 2020). Interestingly, while participants in this context could generally articulate the expert's positions on standards-based grading and the benefits of these best practices, in the reality of their own classrooms, most of them still resorted to the complexity of what they were familiar with— namely traditional 100-point scales, accumulating points via assignments and assessments, non-cognitive factors like effort and participation, and weighted categories in their gradebooks. In all practicality, uncomplicating and systematizing grading practices may help alleviate some teacher stress (Blount, 2016; Riley & Ungerleider, 2019; Sonnleitner & Kovac, 2020). Further, providing training on effective feedback practices may increase student and teacher intrinsic motivation for learning.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Deci and Ryan's (1980) self-determination theory (SDT). The findings of this study supported the grading and motivation

tenants of SDT as it relates to praise (Kanouse et al., 1981), measurement (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985), feedback (Ryan & Deci, 2020), and evaluations (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Concerning praise and feedback, Roger stated, "I try to make sure to give positive feedback when it is warranted. As silly as it sounds, I use a lot of happy faces and exclamation points when commenting on a kid's work." With regard to measurement and evaluations, Allison justified including fewer assignments in her gradebook when she said, "the graded assignments are a reflection of their mastery of skills, rather than their ability to keep up along the way when they may have needed more time to learn a particular skill." This study also captured the voices of the teacher participants regarding their intrinsic motivators, such as teacher beliefs in fairness and equity about their grading practices. Moreover, theoretical extrinsic motivators, such as the influences on teacher decision-making, were found to be less dominant for the participants. Examples included either not feeling pressure, or dismissing pressure, from the district, administrators, or parents on teacher grading practices. These examples and findings also contradict the mixed-methods research done by Kunnath (2017) which found that teacher grading practices were deeply influenced by outside factors like parents and administrators. The only extrinsic motivators on teacher decision-making found in this study were those felt by high school Advanced Placement teachers having to teach to the AP examinations' specifications and worrying their grades reflected the same levels of achievement found on the exams.

This study also supported and extended SDTs assertions concerning motivational strategies of effective teacher feedback. SDT postulated that most current teacher grading and feedback practices act as demotivators for students to learn by curbing student autonomy and attempting to control (Ryan & Deci, 2019, 2020). This study supports the position of SDT that grades by themselves do not supply feedback that is relevant to competence or that motivates

student learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In fact, the findings of this study corroborate the idea that

effective feedback practices, including the use of robust rubrics and verbal feedback during the

writing process, and before a grade is attached, impact teacher and student intrinsic motivation

for learning. Further, in this study, the use of qualitative methodology to understand grading

practices using SDT, where previously only quantitative methods were used (Kapp, 2015;

Kriigsman et al., 2017; Nolan, 2020), has provided a more detailed picture of practices, motives,

and experiences of teachers who grade student work that translates into everyday use. For

example, the use of teacher-created slides projected on the board with common issues they were

seeing in their students' writing was almost ubiquitous in this study. Moreover, this practice

provided real-time, verbal and visual feedback to the whole class and allowed in-class time for

students to revise their work.

One qualitative method of data collection that is notable and unique to this study and may

warrant further research is the use of focus groups to discuss teacher grading and feedback

practices. Prior research, such as the work done by Brookhart et al. (2016), Feldman (2019), and

Link (2018), has indicated the personal and individualized nature of grading and feedback

practices employed by teachers. Furthermore, Feldman (2019) has asserted teachers' grades

demonstrate what the individual teacher values in his or her students, his or her own self-

concept, and what student success should look like. Thus, in order to de-personalize and shine

light onto teacher grading and feedback practices, this study held secondary teacher focus groups

which required teachers to get comfortable with being uncomfortable concerning grades. For

instance, some participants verbalized varying degrees of discomfort when discussing their own

grading practices in front of their peers, hoping colleagues would not judge them for their beliefs

and decisions and wondering aloud if they were "doing it wrong." Interestingly, those teachers

who had already adopted research-based practices, such as standards-based grading, appeared more confident in their own classroom practices. Further research could utilize focus groups to explore and better understand the connection between teacher grading practices and teachers' level of confidence in those grading practices.

Limitations and Delimitations

The vast number of secondary teachers who give grades and feedback in my school district made accessibility to participants almost limitless. However, participation was limited to between 10 and 15 participants, with purposive and snowball sampling required to gather a final sample size of 12. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a smaller sample size is preferable when conducting phenomenological research. Using a small sample size, I collected, interpreted, and examined details of the participants' shared lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). Further, my research was limited geographically to the school district within which I teach.

The scope of this study was managed with some delimitations. First, only secondary English and history teachers were recruited, in part, because prior quantitative research has suggested these subject area teachers are prone to incorporate non-cognitive factors in their academic grades and are required to make more subjective decisions in what and how they grade, compared to mathematics teachers (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Jonsson et al., 2021). Second, this study was delimited to teachers with at least five years of experience since phenomenological research requires experiential data and veteran teachers have more experiences to draw on than novice teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Third, a combination of self-determination theory and social cognitive theory were originally going to be used as this study's theoretical frameworks. However, the School of Education at Liberty University encouraged delimiting the theoretical

framework to one theory to avoid overcomplications. Social cognitive theory (SCT) was going to be incorporated due to its focus on self-efficacy and motivation; however, I chose to go with self-determination theory due to its expandable and expansive framework which ensured a unified perspective on myriad phenomena that transcended several theories on grading and motivation. As mentioned previously, some of these constructs included evaluations (Ryan & Deci, 2019), praise (Kanouse et al., 1981), measurement (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985), goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and feedback (Ryan & Deci, 2020). A different qualitative study that relied on SCT as its framework would have, of necessity, required a narrower scope, primarily focusing on student and teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986; 1997; 2001). Finally, this study was delimited to and guided by hermeneutic phenomenology. The hermeneutic phenomenological design was well suited for this study because it assembled the lived experiences of secondary teachers who grade student work and allowed my own similar experiences to be encapsulated within the interpretations and reflections (Lafferty, 2003; van Manen, 1997).

Recommendations for Future Research

As phenomena, grading and feedback practices continue to be an important topic in secondary and collegiate classrooms. Further research using qualitative methodologies are needed to better understand how best to help teachers and students navigate the complexities of grading. Due to the profusion of quantitative studies on grading and feedback practices, additional qualitative studies would be beneficial to capture more teacher voices and examine the systems within which they operate. The participants in this study were all middle and high school English and history teachers from one district in southern California. Future research that utilizes phenomenology should be conducted with secondary mathematics and/or science teachers to explore how they experience giving grades and feedback. The findings from such research could

potentially expand on this study's results to determine the efficacy of other grading systems and

feedback practices, such as standards-based grading, across all content areas. What is more,

different school districts and/or colleges should be used to collect data from disparate

populations of secondary teachers in varying geographical locations which might produce

different results. Moreover, phenomenological research focusing on the lived experiences of

secondary and collegiate students who earn or receive grades would also be instructive. This

phenomenological study was guided by self-determination theory (SDT). Future studies should

incorporate different types of qualitative research, such as case study and even grounded theory,

to examine grading in education. Case study could be utilized to examine, systemically, the

grading and feedback practices of a particular school or school district that have refined their

grading systems to adopt a more homogeneous approach, while grounded theory may produce a

more effective framework that encompasses the nuances of best grading and feedback practices.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived

experiences of secondary teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs,

decisions, and feedback practices. In order to understand these experiences, the following central

research question was posed: What are secondary teachers' lived experiences with grading

student work? Moreover, three sub-research questions were included to further understand the

phenomenon, including specifically examining teacher grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback

practices. A review of the literature was conducted which explored and examined a theoretical

framework of self-determination theory, factors included in a grade, grading practices and

policies, and teacher feedback. The design for this study used phenomenology research data

collection methods to guide the gathering of data from the lived experiences of secondary

teachers across the history/social studies and English content areas in three middle and two high schools. Data sources included individual interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing. The data were analyzed via triangulation and thematic saturation. Further analysis included micro coding, memoing, pattern coding, in vivo coding, and member checks. Themes were generated from the analysis of the data and their interpretations detailed. The results of this study revealed that teachers desire training on best grading and feedback practices that will uncomplicate and systematize grades. Further, more refined grading systems, such as standards-based grading, were perceived to result in more equitable grades. Moreover, effective feedback practices, during the process of learning, rather than after, were found to impact teacher and student motivation for learning in secondary English and history/social studies classes.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A- District/Site Approval

engaging students...inspiring futures

12/27/2022

Brandon Moore
Doctoral Candidate

Dear Brandon Moore:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled *The Lived Experiences of Secondary Teachers who give Grades and Feedback: A Phenomenological Study*, you have been granted permission to contact our faculty and invite them to participate in your study. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants may discontinue participation at any time.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:
- ☑ I grant permission for Brandon Moore to contact secondary (middle and high school) English and history/social studies teachers to invite them to voluntarily participate in his research study.
- ☑ We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

Deputy Superintendent, Educational Services

Appendix B- IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 27, 2023

Brandon Moore
Brian Jones

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-790 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SECONDARY TEACHERS WHO GIVE GRADES AND FEEDBACK: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Brandon Moore, Brian Jones,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix C – Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: The Lived Experiences of Secondary Teachers who Give Grades and Feedback: A Phenomenological Study.
Principal Investigator: Brandon Moore, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a middle or high school teacher at San Marcos Unified School District with a minimum of 5 years teaching experience in the following subject areas: History, English/Language Arts. Additionally, you must also be the teacher of record who issues grades and feedback to their students. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of secondary teachers who grade student work, including their grading beliefs, decisions, and feedback practices. The theory guiding this study is Deci and Ryan's (1980) Self-Determination Theory.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Complete an audio- and video-recorded interview of predetermined questions (45 minutes to 1 hour). Each participant will have the option to choose either a virtual or an in-person interview. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy.
2. Participate in only one of two audio- and video-recorded focus groups with one-half of the twelve (12) research study participants (60 minutes). Participants can choose to attend their focus group either virtually or in-person.
3. Write a letter of advice to your younger self as a new teacher, following provided prompts (two-week deadline).

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

However, a potential benefit participant may experience from taking part in this study is understanding how their grading and feedback practices may help increase student intrinsic motivation for learning. This may help them reflect on their current grading practices and seek ways to improve on what they are already doing in their classrooms.
Benefits to society include improved methods of articulating grades and facilitative feedback to students, parents, administrators and other stakeholders, and improving the accuracy, validity, and reliability of secondary teacher grades.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

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

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms.
- Interviews and focus groups will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and paper copies will be shredded.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Hard copies will be locked in a filing cabinet at the researcher's home. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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

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

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

The researcher conducting this study is Brandon Moore. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at bmoore193@liberty.edu. You can also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor Dr. Brian Jones at bkjones2@liberty.edu.

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

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is

Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

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

Your Consent

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

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

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix D – Individual Interview Questions

1. Why did you become a (middle/high school) (content area) teacher?

2. How would you describe your teaching experience thus far?

3. What does grading student work typically look like for you? Walk me through your thought processes as you were grading.

4. What are your beliefs or philosophy concerning grades or grading?

5. How have your beliefs or philosophy changed throughout your teaching experience?

6. How do your own beliefs, values, and/or knowledge (personal or professional) influence the decisions you make while grading student work?

7. What do you believe a student's grade should represent?

8. How do you decide what factors should be included in a student's overall grade?

9. How do external factors (i.e., state testing, district policy, parents, administrators) influence the decisions you make while grading student work or creating report card grades?

10. What prior training, if any, have you received on best grading practices and how has that training or experience influenced your own grading practices?

11. When grading student work, what feedback practices do you employ?

12. Would you describe an experience where your feedback, either written or verbal, was used by a student? What happened?

13. Do you use rubrics and if so, how do you use them?

14. Is there anything else concerning your experience grading student work or your beliefs, decisions, or practices with grading you would like to share?

Appendix E – Focus Group Questions

Focus Group: The Lived Experiences of Secondary Teachers who Give Grades and Feedback: A Phenomenological Study.

Time: _____

 Date: _____

Interviewer: _____

Attendees: _____

Guidelines:

1. There are no right or wrong answers. Rather, there are just different perspectives.
2. Actively listen.
3. Use first names.
4. One person talks at a time.
5. This interview will be recorded.
6. My role is to guide the conversation.

Questions:

1. In general, what is it like to grade student work in your classrooms?

2. What do you believe a grade should measure?

3. What factors (effort, academic achievement, behavior, ability, etc) go into your grades

and why?

4. What are some of your feedback practices? What are some of the ways you give

feedback?

5. What stands out to you among the similarities and differences in your grading

practices, beliefs, and decisions?

Redirection Questions for Generalized Explanations:

1. Can you provide an example of this experience?

2. What was this experience like?

3. What did this experience make you feel?

Appendix F – Advice Letter

Advice Letter: The Lived Experiences of Secondary Teachers who Give Grades and Feedback: A Phenomenological Study.

Email:

Hello, [Participant's Name]!

Now that you have completed the conversational interview and focus group, it is time for the last step: to write a letter of advice to your younger self as a new teacher. The purpose of your letter will be to provide advice on the best grading practices you have discovered and used throughout your teaching career.

Directions

Think of a specific situation that you encountered when grading student work or constructing a student's overall grade. What was this experience like? How did this experience make you feel? What advice did you need to provide accurate, valid, and reliable feedback? Drawing on your personal experiences with grading student work, write a letter of advice to your younger self as a new teacher just entering the profession. To help you get started, view the following list of prompts:

- In one or more paragraphs, describe your current grading practices to your younger self. What gets graded now vs. then? What does not? Why?
- In one or more paragraphs, what factors do you include in a student's grade now vs. then (e.g. academic achievement, effort, participation, work completion, etc.)? Why do you include the factors you do?
- In one or more paragraphs, what does a typical unit of instruction look like in your gradebook? How would you know if the grade from that unit is reliable or valid?
- In one or more paragraphs, what might the feedback that accompanies this gradebook look like?
- In one or more paragraphs, what are some ways you have learned over the years to provide feedback that would increase student motivation and self-efficacy for learning?

To compose your advice letter, you may use Microsoft Word or simply write an email. After completion, please email your letter to bmoore193@liberty.edu. Please submit your letter by [Enter Date].

Thank you for your time and continued effort in this study.

Sincerely,
Brandon Moore