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What Academic Grades Mean to Seventh Grade Students

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WHAT ACADEMIC GRADES MEAN TO SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS

A Dissertation Presented

by

MARGO J. MOORE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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June 2015

Leadership in Urban Schools Program

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ABSTRACT

WHAT ACADEMIC GRADES MEAN TO SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS

June 2015

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Directed by Dr. Joseph W. Check

This study explores how seventh grade students in an urban school district make meaning for their teacher-assigned report card grades. A great deal of research has been done on report card grades from the perspective of teachers and administrators, but few studies have examined what teacher-assigned grades mean to middle school students. This qualitative study attempts to develop an understanding of the meanings attributed to teacher-assigned grades by 56 seventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) students in an urban middle school in Massachusetts.

Three major research questions were addressed: 1) How do 56 seventh-grade English Language Arts students in an urban middle school make meaning of their teacher-assigned grades? 2) What do 56 seventh grade ELA students in an

urban middle school believe about their *control* over teacher assigned grades? 3) What evidence, if any, can be found supporting a relationship between attribution for success or failure and the academic performance of these students?

A set of students was observed receiving third quarter report cards. Then 56 students responded to a prompt asking them what they thought their report card grade would be and why they thought that. Two focus groups of students were recruited from the 56 students and were asked to respond to vignettes describing various scenarios relating to hypothetical students and grades. Analysis of data revealed patterns of attributions. The most frequent attributions were to work completed or not completed, behavior, and compliance. Students did not attribute grades to mastery of skills and content.

Recommendations for future research include more investigation of this topic through the lens of critical social theory to determine the effects of systemic acculturation, power dynamics, effects of hidden curriculum, and individual teacher bias on how students understand or fail to understand the relationship between their mastery of skills and content and their teacher-assigned grades.

DEDICATION

For Roger and the crew – Kara, Julian, Ellie, and Lizzie

Without whose love and support the voyage would never have been completed

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Bad Grades

I got the bad grade blues
I got an F in English and Literacy
I tried my best but failed a lot of tests.

I got the bad grade blues
Now I'm trying to catch up
But I guess I'm gonna fail

I got the Bad grade blues
Now I'm in trouble and I'll
Never hear the end and that's
why I got the bad grade blues

7th grade student – 2004

Introduction

The student who wrote the above poem in my seventh grade English class

presented as intelligent but disengaged from education. When I initially read the poem in

2004, I was struck by the sense of powerlessness that infused the lines. I began to ask

myself what students like this one believed about grades. I began to wonder if seventh

grade students believed they had control over their grades or that grades were something

the teacher arbitrarily "gave" them. I started to remember some long-forgotten

experiences of my own in school and began to wonder what grades really mean to

seventh grade students and how grades influence a student's progress. I wondered what effect grades have on self-esteem and life choices.

This study grew out of these reflections and questions about how students make meaning of their grades. In it, I examine the written and verbal ideas of 56 seventh grade students in one urban school district in order to understand what a teacher-assigned grade in English Language Arts means to them. More generally, my study aims to improve our understanding of the impact a grade might have on individual student learning and achievement.

My interest in this topic has been strongly influenced by my own experiences with grades as a student, a teacher, and a parent. From an early age, my experiences with grades as a student were largely negative. It was clear to me even in first grade that my parents felt very strongly about this mysterious component of my education called "the report card." I knew it was important. I knew the expectation was that I would "do well," but I had no idea how to control the grade I received on the report card. I began to think of myself as unable to learn as well as my peers.

As a literacy teacher, I have observed the same uncertainty in my own students. Many of these young people have received Cs and Ds and even Fs in reading in prior years, and they arrive in my seventh grade literacy class declaring, "I hate reading," or "I'm no good at reading," or even, "I don't read." My student's poem serves as a poignant reminder to me of how easily seventh grade students give up if they regard failure as an inevitable part of their school experience. I also have many students who have always received A's and B's; however, they cannot tell me with any accuracy why

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they "always get A's." They just know that they do their work and they get an A. All of this has led me to want to have a better understanding of how students make meaning for grades so that I can be a more effective teacher.

As a parent, I know I have put much too much pressure on my children to "get good grades," even though I do not necessarily believe in the complete validity of the school district's grading system. Even so, there is too much at stake for my students for me to ignore their grades. Grades are seen as predictors of future success even though there can be wide differences between grades and test scores.

> When a cumulative grade record is used in reaching an important educational decision, it becomes, in effect, a high-stakes predictor or criterion. In this capacity grades take on a broader assessment function that is different from the teachers' original evaluations of their students' acquired proficiency in a particular subject in a given class (Willingham, Pollack, and Lewis, 2002, p. 1).

A teacher-assigned grade, either a letter or a number on a report card, is a high-stakes assessment in terms of a student's future. Grades are the gatekeepers and much depends on a good grade, including acceptance to the college of one's choice and the impact of college on future choices and opportunities, access to scholarships that make college affordable, and the self-esteem that fosters further learning.

A key question in relation to this study is whether or not seventh grade students believe that a letter or number grade on a report card is an objective and valid assessment of their learning, understanding, and preparation for the next academic step. Another key

question is how much control students believe they have over their grades. Do students

believe that teachers prejudge them based on race, economic status, gender, or behavior?

Finally, might students believe it possible to "become judges over their learning" (Miller,

2008, p. 169) in a system of assessment where teachers and students collaborate to assess

an individual student's mastery of skills, concepts, ideas, and ability to solve problems?

Much depends on grades and assessments and yet, as the literature makes clear,

grading practices and policies vary widely (Brookhart, 2011; Guskey & Jung, 2012;

Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). What does this variation mean to students, particularly

seventh grade students who are at different points in their development where they are

struggling with physical, intellectual, and emotional growth (Dorn & Brio, 2011; Kuhn &

Franklin, 2008; Lipsitz, 1980). These questions are among those I considered while

analyzing the problem, reading the literature and developing a methodology.

Statement of Problem

The importance of grades and grading is widely recognized (Bowers, 2011;

Guskey, 2011; Marzano, 2006). To date, there has been a great deal of research on the

topic, but most of it has been from the perspectives of teachers, school systems, and

parents (Brookhart, 2011; Marzano, 2006; Smith, 2012). Very little research has been

done on the meaning report card grades have for students. This dissertation attempts, in a

small way, to address this gap in our knowledge.

Grades impact student motivation, and therefore student learning. When students

are unclear about what a grade means, they cannot use the information the grade provides

to improve their performance. This can lead to student misconceptions about what constitutes quality work and about what they need to do to close learning gaps.

Assessment practices as they relate to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law as well as to Race to the Top are of great concern to urban districts, which need to provide timely diagnostic information about student progress in order to help teachers in the dual obligation of preparing students for state-mandated tests while maintaining a balanced curriculum (Yeh, 2006).

In addition to assessment issues, concerns about the dropout rate in Massachusetts' schools continue to be raised as evidenced by data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE). The Department's 2014 Early *Warning Implementation Guide: Using the Massachusetts Early Warning Indicator System and Local Data to Identify, Diagnose, Support, and Monitor Students in Grades 1-12* states that academic failure is one of the top reasons students make the decision to drop out. "Research has found that readily available student data sources such as attendance, behavioral records, and course failures, can be used as early warning indicators to identify students who are at academic risk" (p. 11). Earlier reports from 2006 cite the same indicators for at-risk students.

Disengagement from academic endeavors increases students' odds of becoming dropouts. The impetus for students to drop out, particularly in urban areas, begins before students reach high school. The disengagement process in urban schools may begin as early as the start of middle school (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Finnan & Chasin, 2007). These researchers suggest course failures in sixth grade are predictive indicators

of later high school dropouts. Bowers (2010) finds the dropout risk begins in seventh grade and indicates that the time of greatest danger for at-risk students is in Grade 8 and Grade 11. Teacher-assigned grades, according to Bowers, are strong predictors of a student's dropout risk.

In order to understand "the role of classroom assessment and grading practices in student achievement motivation and classroom management" (Brookhart, 1994, p. 279) extensive research has been focused on grading theory and teachers' grading practices. Much of the most recent research and debate that touches on the grading issue is found in reports relating to high stakes testing as the cornerstone of state and federal accountability programs (Brennan, Kim, Wenz-Gross, & Siperstein, 2001; Guskey, 2001; Hess, 2006; Valenzuela, 2005). The current research on grading and grading practices is part of the national dialogue on assessment and policy. Clearly, teachers need to rethink grading practices.

Statement of Purpose

This qualitative study attempts to develop an understanding of the meanings that 56 seventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) students in an urban middle school in Massachusetts attributed to their teacher-assigned grades. The study tries to determine: 1) Whether seventh-grade students viewed the report card as an accurate report of progress toward mastery of a standard, as an incentive, or as a report of behavioral progress; 2) Whether or not they regarded the grade as a tool for meta-cognition, or if they thought of their grade as simply another element of the school experience arbitrarily controlled by teachers.

The larger purpose of this research was to add to our growing understanding of the relationship between students' interpretations of their grades and their academic and behavioral performance. Furthermore, an in-depth understanding of how students construct meaning for a grade in a given content area may help teachers use grades as tools for learning. It may also help school leaders and teachers in urban districts develop teacher-assigned grading practices that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.

Contexts

Two contexts are highly important for this study: the historical context of current grading practices (time) and the urban context for education (place).

Historical context.

Knowing the historical background of teacher-assigned grades helps us to understand where we are now in terms of gaining insight into what grades mean to seventh grade students. Documented ranking of students has existed since colonial times (Brookhart 2009, Marzano, 2000, Smallwood 1935). The first evidence of ranking students occurred at the college level in 1785 (Smallwood, 1935). During the common school era, from 1820 to 1860, when schools and class sizes were growing, teachers needed to develop a shorthand method of informing parents how their children were doing (Laska & Juarez, 1992). Teacher reports and articles on how to report student progress in the *Common School Journal* published in this era appear to be the first evidence of report cards. Since then grading has become firmly entrenched in the American school tradition, becoming even more important after recommendations made

in 1892 by the Committee of Ten (Jacobs, 2010). Today, there is a push for standards-aligned report cards (Guskey, 2011) that many reformers believe are more meaningful than the traditional report card that simply reports an average of scores on unaligned activities.

Both the history of grades in America and the current literature on the subject are part of the context of this study. Both of these topics are examined more closely in chapter two.

Urban context.

The data for this study were gathered in an urban district, one where there is high poverty in the community as evidenced by the fact that more than 75 percent of students in the school where the study was conducted are on the free and reduced lunch program. In the urban context the relationship between state assessments and academic grades has become increasingly important as urban districts struggle with the challenges presented first by NCLB and now by Race to the Top initiatives. This context is further explored in chapter two.

Conceptual Framework

I began building a conceptual framework for this study by considering what lenses could best be used to view the forces in a student's life and/or experience that shape the way the student assigns meaning to grades. These lenses, which consist of attribution theory and adolescent development theory, shaped "what is looked at and the questions asked" (Cresswell, 2003, p.119) as this study developed.

Weiner (1985) suggests that attribution theory may help educators and researchers understand certain classroom experiences. Attribution theory provides the foundation for the methodology of this study. Questions and vignettes were composed with various attributions for success or failure in mind, including internal and external, as well as controllable and uncontrollable attributions. Attribution theory also provided one lens through which to view and analyze the data in order to explore the meaning students create for the classroom experience of teacher-assigned grades and to address the question: who has power over the grade?

Another lens used in construction of the vignettes as well as in the data analysis is adolescent development theory. Adolescence is "a manifestation of an ongoing reorganization of the human system" (Jaffe, 2000). It is a time when all human systems including physiological, psychological, cognitive, and emotional are in a state of flux (Caskey & Anfara, 2007, Damon & Learner, 2008; Jaffe, 2000; Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae, 2012). The middle school student is moving from being a concrete operational thinker to being a formal operational thinker (Kuhn & Franklin, 2008) in addition to undergoing change in almost all aspects of his life. Early adolescence is generally considered to be ages 12 to 14 (Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae, 2011) when physical, cognitive, and social development must be considered when thinking about how these students make meaning of the educational phenomena that they encounter each day in school. Cognitive developmental theory was useful in the development of the methodology as well as in the analysis of student responses.

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How students create meaning for educational experiences and phenomena cannot be viewed in isolation. The above theories provide a perspective, a framework for consideration of the topic of teacher-assigned grades and what they may mean to individual students. Figure 1.1 provides a visual of the theoretical framework for this study. The outer triangle represents the interpretive framework for analyzing the data collected from the seventh grade participants in this study. The areas of data are described in the inner triangle. The literature supporting this framework will be examined in the next chapter.

Figure 1.1. Theoretical Framework
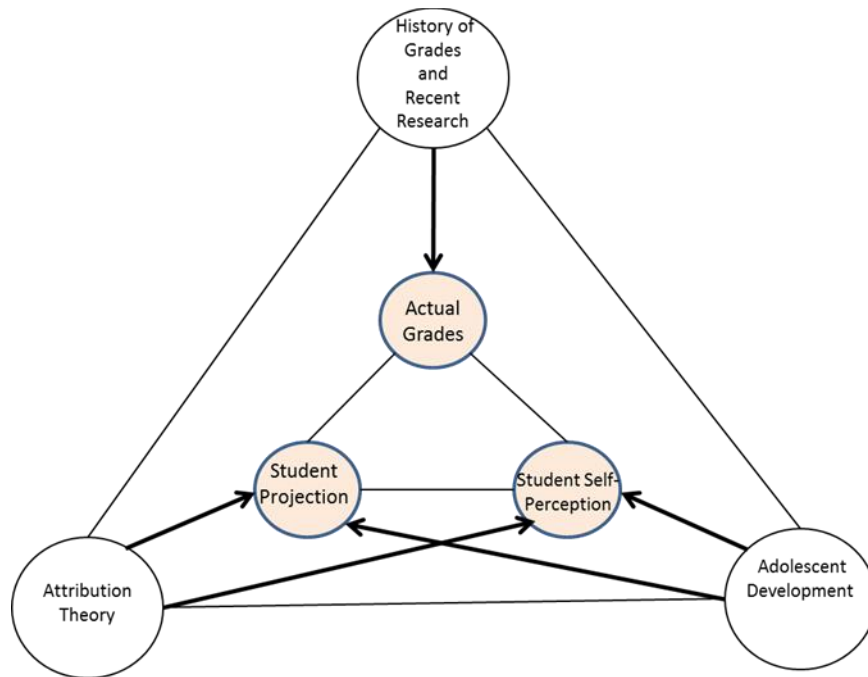
Research Questions

Personal experience, the conceptual framework, and a review of the literature have all contributed to development of the central research questions that guide this study. These questions are:

1. How do 56 seventh-grade English Language Arts students in an urban middle school make *meaning* of their teacher-assigned grades?

2. What do 56 seventh-grade ELA students in an urban middle school believe about their *control* over the teacher-assigned grade?

3. What evidence, if any, can be found supporting a relationship between attribution for success or failure and the academic performance of these students?

Definition of Terms

Before addressing the literature relating to the topic and the methodology for data collection and analysis of what grades mean to students, it is worthwhile to consider the vocabulary of the subject. In order to unpack the term "grade" so that it makes sense in context of this study, it is necessary to consider the common vocabulary used in discussions of assessment and grading. One of the difficulties in defining the term "grade" lies in the fact that some researchers have suggested that grading is a "hodgepodge" activity (Cross & Fray, 1999, Brookhart, 1994) with endless variations from one school to the next, from teacher to teacher, and between urban and suburban school districts (Brookhart, 1994). There appears to be no universal American grading system, and it is questionable whether or not it is either possible or desirable to develop

one. This variation in grading systems adds to the complexity of any study of teacher-assigned grades.

Discussions of classroom grading practices and grading theory use a large vocabulary of terms, all of which may be associated with several meanings. This vocabulary found in the literature and used by educators, policy-makers, and researchers includes but is not limited to the following words: assessment, alternative assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment, classroom assessment, authentic assessment, performance-based assessment, authentic performance-based assessment, portfolio assessment, authentic portfolio assessment, norm-referenced grading, criterion-referenced grading, narrative reports, teacher assigned grades, and high-stakes assessment.

All of these terms occur frequently in the literature and can be used to search databases for research literature. Furthermore, the connotations of the terms appear to vary from author to author and study to study. Frey and Schmitt (2007) note that it is difficult to "systematically explore the nature of teachers' modern classroom assessment practices" because "researchers, advocates, and practitioners have not arrived at a consistent definition of what these terms mean or what these practices look like" (p. 402). They point out that knowledge of "what words mean is critical for researchers, practitioners, and trainers to understand each other" (p. 414). Marzano (2000) also notes the importance of a "common vocabulary" when discussing "grades, marks, and assessments." He believes that "using the terminology of grading more precisely will

increase our understanding of it" (p. 12). However, one might ask whose understanding will we use?

For the purposes of this paper I am using the term "teacher-assigned grade" to mean a letter or number a teacher assigns to a student's body of work at the end of a grading period. Grading periods may be a quarter of the school year, approximately 10 weeks, or half a year, or a semester, which is 90 days in Massachusetts, where a school year is 180 days. In the district where the data was collected, report cards are issued every quarter or four times in the school year. On occasion in this paper, I use the terms "grade," "teacher-assigned grade," and "academic grade" synonymously.

Methodology

In order to try to understand how seventh grade students construct meaning for their grades, it will be necessary to utilize a strategy of inquiry that allows data collection from young adolescent individuals in a non-intrusive, non-threatening manner that has research validity. The data collection methodology developed from consideration of three areas of student experience that help to illuminate how students make meaning for teacher-assigned grades are: 1) the concrete reality (i.e., actual grade), 2) how the student makes meaning his own teacher-assigned grade, and 3) the way the student projects his/her experience with grades onto others (may indicate meanings of which the student is not immediately conscious). To address the first area of experience, the researcher asked Ms. Read, an English Language Arts teacher at Cormorant Middle School in Bayside City, to provide the actual grade that each student in the study received in that quarter. Ms. Read agreed to this, and the principal of Cormorant Middle School gave

written permission to conduct this research at the school. To address the second area of experience, the researcher a) asked students to write narrative responses to a writing prompt and b) engaged in participant observation while students received report cards at the end of the quarter. Finally, to address the third area, the researcher conducted focus groups in which vignettes were used as the focus of the group discussion. These methods yielded field notes, student written narratives, and transcripts of focus groups. Each data collection strategy is discussed in detail in chapter three.

Overview of Data Analysis

Data, including field notes of observations on the third quarter report card day, elicited student texts from 56 seventh graders asking students what they thought their grade was, actual teacher-assigned grades, and transcripts of two focus groups of five students and seven students were collected and analyzed.

Analysis was conducted through coding of words, phrases, and sentences, which were then analyzed for word frequency and for patterns. Chapter four is an explication of the analysis, and chapter five is the exploration of what grades mean to this group of 56 seventh grade students.

 Conclusion

Some districts are beginning to ask what the relationship between report cards and test scores should be. Educational leaders in urban schools are considering how best to report student learning in relationship to standards and state assessments (Guskey, 2001; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; Willingham, Pollack, & Lewis, 2002). A decade ago the National Middle School Association in its on-line executive summary of its position

paper *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003) stated that "Grades alone are inadequate expressions for assessing the many goals of middle level education" (¶ 14).

Despite repeated calls for reevaluation of how learning is reported, there are still teachers who appear to regard the grade as the final judgment not only of academic ability but also of a student's character. During a graduate summer seminar on leadership at the University of Massachusetts Boston a teacher who was one of the participants asked a question in response to a presentation about the initial proposal for this study. The question was, "Who cares about student grades? Smart kids get As." He then went on to say that "not so smart students get lower grades. So what?" The implication was that is the way of the world. One response is that educators who have such a blasé attitude toward grades and report cards are cheating students of the right to be assessed as individuals engaged in a life-long journey of learning. This research is important because school leaders and teachers need to understand the meaning students give to their grades in order to design effective methods of reporting student progress as well as encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning and believe in themselves.

It is especially important for teachers and school leaders to know if current practices contain bias or prejudice and if doing "business as usual" is in students' best interests. Those interests will not be well served if students and their understandings are not part of school reform. Simply changing the look of report cards to align them with state standards will serve no purpose if education leaders do not have a clear understanding of what grades mean to students. Teacher-assigned grades are a

fundamental given of the school experience for the majority of American public school students (Marzano, 2000). Thus, it is important to engage in research that will focus attention on what academic grades mean to seventh grade students and also to encourage practitioners to be reflective about grading practices.

School leaders need to be concerned with teacher-assigned grades, policies associated with grades, the meaning that teacher-assigned grades have for students, sorting students by grades, and the effects grades have on student learning, retentions, and drop out rates (Willingham, Pollack, & Lewis, 2002; Brookhart, 1994). The hope is that this study will help urban school leaders and classroom teachers better understand how to achieve a balance between working with students to develop an honest academic appraisal of where they are in relation to mastery of skills and concepts in academic areas, and building students' self-confidence and self-esteem so they will want to continue to learn and take responsibility for their own learning. A better understanding of what grades mean to students may help districts formulate policy for grading and assessment that will encourage students to believe that they can be successful and therefore encourage them to stay in school.

CHAPTER 2

GRADING: THE SHAPE OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This study grows out of my lifelong experience with teacher-assigned grades as a student, a parent, and a teacher. As a classroom teacher in an inner-city middle school, I often ask myself: *What do the grades I assign mean to my students?*

Specifically, I explore how one group of 56 seventh grade students makes meaning of their teacher-assigned grades in English Language Arts (ELA). To contextualize my investigation, this literature review examines the view of grades both past and present and explores how two theories--attribution theory and adolescent development theory --shed light on ways this group of seventh grade students construct meaning for their ELA grades. Both theoretical perspectives shaped the research questions, informed the methodology, and framed the data analysis.

Highlights of the more recent research on grading include literature that examines current grading practices in relation to standards-based report cards, research on ways by which teachers calculate grades, and advocacy by researchers and educational writers for creating a grading system that will indicate student mastery of state-mandated curriculum frameworks (Brookhart, 2009; Guskey, 2011; Guskey & Jung, 2012; Marzano, 2000).

Importantly, much of the literature concerning teacher-assigned grades approaches the subject from the teacher's point of view (Brookhart, 1994; Cross & Frary, 1999; Georgiou et al, 2002; Kain, 1996; McMillan, 2001; Zoeckler, 2007). There is, however, also evidence in the literature that researchers globally are beginning to examine student views of effective teaching, assessments, and grades (Cook-Sather, 2002; Cooper, 2000; Davis, 2006; Mee, 1997; Soo Hoo, 1993; Steinberg & McCray, 2012; Stiggins, 2007) and to consider student self-efficacy as a necessary component when constructing assessment systems (Koul & Fisher, 2006, McClure et. al. 2011).

Further, there appears to be an increasing awareness in the literature that if educators are going to help all students succeed rather than just sorting children by academic rank, then there needs to be a research-based understanding of institutional practices, particularly of ways to create assessments that tap "the wellspring of confidence, motivation, and learning potential that resides within every student" (Stiggins, 2007, p. 22).

Many variables influence why teachers give grades, how teachers grade, and how seventh grade students make meaning of the grades. Because this is a very small qualitative study, I have chosen to highlight the literature and the theories that I feel are most relevant. In this study, student motivation and its relationship to the meaning the student gives to a teacher-assigned grade are examined using the three previously named theoretical lenses. Together, the historical background, current research on grading practices, and examination of adolescent development theory and attribution theory

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provide an appropriate theoretical framework to support my research design, data analysis, and discussion of the findings.

Historical Development of Grades in America

In order to understand how today's students make sense of teacher-assigned grades, it is important to understand our collective view of grades over time. From colonial times on, grades were a shorthand method of keeping parents informed about student progress. When larger schools and classes became the norm during the common school era of the 1820s and 1830's (Urban & Wagoner, 2004) this trend continued and grades became a tool for sorting students in order to manage the increasing number of children in classrooms.

The two practical reasons for grading—informing parents of progress and sorting—are not mirrored in the theoretical literature. Despite the enormous impact report cards and grades have on students' psyches, there is "little or no research to support its continuation" (Marzano, 2000, p. 13). Sager (1995) alleges that there is a dearth of material on grading as it relates to educational theory. "Anyone who is casually aware of the great literature on educational theory is struck by the absence of the issue [grading]. From Socrates to Plato to John Locke and to John Dewey, the question of grading down the ages never seems to have been a serious matter" (p.1). Even so, the literature demonstrates that as early as 1840 educators were grappling with the problem of how to keep parents informed about their children's progress in school. In the end, whether or not educational historians and/or theorists consider teacher-assigned grades and report cards worthy of investigation is less important than the weight that students at all grade

levels give to teacher-assigned grades (Kirschenbaum, Napier, & Simon, 1971; Kohn, 1999, 2004) and whether or not grades affect their self-efficacy as learners.

Colonial period.

The earliest academic grades in the United States were recorded in colleges and universities: "the first place at which there is evidence of a real marking system is at Yale" (Smallwood, 1935, p. 42). In 1785, Ezra Stiles, President of Yale, made a note in his diary about the results of examinations using Latin terms to describe a grading scale for students. Stiles "states that there were fifty-eight students present at an examination and that there were 'Twenty Optimi, sixteen second Optimi, 12 Inferiores (Boni), ten Pejores'" (In Smallwood, 1935, p. 42).[1] According to Smallwood the 4-point scale first appeared at Harvard in 1830. By 1837 Harvard was using a 100-point scale to evaluate students. Other colleges and universities followed suit, and during the 19th century continued to develop numerical evaluation systems for students. As Smallwood states, "the philosophy of evaluation appears in the belief that it is possible to measure accurately a minimum of information and ability" (p. 114). However, she suggests that these institutions of higher learning had difficulty deciding on a satisfactory system because "there is no common method for testing quality; for in the end it is a matter of individual judgment—the judgment of experts, to be sure, but always of experts in a very narrow field" (115).

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[1] According to the on-line dictionary from the Perseus Project (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/) *optimi* translates as the best, *inferiores* as lower, and *pejores* as worst.

As noted above, the first evidence of competitive grading appears in colleges and universities in the late 1700s (Smallwood, 1935). However, it appears that prior to the early 1800s grades and report cards were not yet part of the American elementary and post-elementary experience (Guskey, 1994; Kirschenbaum, Napier, & Simon, 1971). According to Marzano (2000), before "the late 1700s, students were not given grades *per se*. Rather, teachers gave students feedback on their performance through narrative comments" (p. 11).

Common school era.

Evidence shows that during the common school era in the 1840s, students were bringing home some type of weekly report based on comparative evaluation. The comparative system of grading is one that "provides two or more hierarchical categories for the formal evaluation of students" (Laska & Juarez, 1992 p. 4). The categories may be denoted by words such as "excellent," "poor," etc., numbers such as 0-100, or letters as in A, B, C. Two other criteria for comparative grading are "a fixed time period for the determination of a student's grade, and…an expectation that not all students will earn the highest grade" (p. 5).

The pedagogical literature of the 19th century refers to the system of grading as a "mastery grading system." This is a system with "only one meaningful grading category—a category that indicates the student has been a successful learner. The student who has not yet demonstrated his or her success is not formally labeled as a failure, since it is always possible that he or she will eventually become a successful learner" (Laska & Juarez, 1992, p. 5). Additionally, a mastery system eliminates the fixed time period as

part of the grade determination because the student is continually working toward mastery. Evidence from the 19th century suggests that once schools began sending regular reports home, the comparative system became entrenched in educational practice mainly because it made it easy to evaluate and sort students.

A theme that appears in the early literature on grading is the need to keep parents informed about a child's academic progress. An article in *The Common School Journal* in 1840 discusses the benefits of sending weekly reports home to parents. The author of the article, identified only as S.G.B., advises using this system as "a mode of exercising moral influence in schools, which, as it appears to me, might be much more extensively and usefully employed, than it is at present" (in Laska & Juarez, 1992, p. 12). The writer goes on to say that it is important to have "an understanding between the parent and the teacher" and that the best way to achieve this is through "sending more or less frequently, reports of the progress of the children and their deportment" (p. 12). The author, S.G.B., makes note of the fact that in "some schools, the practice has been adopted of using printed forms, containing blanks, in which, by some system of figures or letters, the advancement and behavior of the pupil are to be expressed by the teacher" (p. 12). Arguing that this is too complicated, S.G.B. suggests that the teachers use a system of colored cards with terms such as "Entire Approbation" or "Indifferent" on them in order to let parents know how their child has been doing in school. S.G.B. concludes that the prime use of these reports is to ensure that "moral influence may be exerted in schools" (p. 14). From this discussion of the printed forms used in some schools, one can infer that by 1840 some type of report card and/or grading system was already appearing in

schools. However, as Laska and Juarez (1992) note, it is probable that the system probably was still sporadic and highly individualized by school and perhaps even by teacher.

It seems likely that as the common school movement spread, and more graded schools appeared in large urban areas, it became necessary to develop some type of competitive grading system in order to sort students and facilitate promotion decisions. The evidence shows that by 1874 averages were utilized to evaluate students. An item published in the *Massachusetts Teacher* in June, 1874 informs readers that:

> Mr. J.D. Bartley, Principal of the Concord High School, has lately issued a simple, convenient, and cheap system of school records, suited to schools of all grades. It is in three parts, No. 1 being a pocket record book for marking daily attendance, conduct, and recitation; No. 2, a permanent record of monthly averages; and No. 3, a monthly report card for the inspection of parents. A new and ingenious device saves much time and labor in making out records.

One can only assume that Mr. J.D. Bartley insisted that his teachers use his "simple, convenient, and cheap system" to keep track of student progress. This item is an indication that the growth of school populations created the need to rank and sort students.

19th to 20th centuries.

Artifacts such as report cards suggest that as the 19th century progressed, comparative grading was becoming the rule. An example of this is Wilbur Wright's 1892

report card in the collection of the Wright State University Library in Dayton, Ohio. Wright's scholarship is reported numerically on a 1-100 scale. The majority of his grades are in the 90s. His lowest grades were for his algebra examinations, where he earned 72 and 76 percent. What is important about this artifact is not the grades Wright earned, but the evidence they provide that report cards were already a fact of life in American schools by the end of the 19th century.

Sager (1995) suggests that by 1900 grading was the norm because "as more and more students began to attend high school, graduate, and go on to college, grades were introduced to help high school teachers sort the faster from the slower learners and to help colleges sort out applicants" (p. 1). As noted earlier, report cards served to keep parents informed about their children's progress in school; in addition, they provided clues for principals and supervisors about what happened in classrooms "once the classroom door closed" (Cuban, 1993, p. 58).

The roots of our current system of education, especially high school education, go back to 1892, when the National Education Association appointed The Committee of Ten who recommended in their final report that all students be taught the same curriculum over a time span of 12 years, eight in elementary school and four in high school. This model of education along with the recommended curriculum continues into the present time (Jacobs, 2010).

Current literature suggests that this system, which is more than 100 years old, is still largely in place today (Jacobs, 2010). A study in 1989 showed that about 80 percent of the more than 1,700 schools surveyed used letter grades starting by 4th grade. The next

most frequent type of reporting came in the form of percentage scores. In 1998 The

College Board surveyed 3,113 high schools and found that 91 percent used the A-F letter

system on their report cards (Marzano, 2000, pp. 12-13).

This brief review of the historical context places teacher-assigned grades in time.

The next context to consider is place.

Urban Context

One view of the American city is that it is less a geographic place linked to a

physical location than a state of mind where perceptions are guided by social and cultural

norms and beliefs (Noguera 2003).   The term "urban," according to Noguera, has

"specific socioeconomic and racial connotations" (p. 23) used as a "social or cultural

construct used to describe certain people and places" (p. 23). This provides a starting

point for "unpacking" the meaning of "urban" as a context for discussion of school

phenomena. Of the numerous connotations of the word "urban," many are distinctly

negative. "Inner city" is sometimes substituted for "urban" and there are a host of other

words with negative connotations such as "ghetto," "slum," "barrio," and "hood." As

Noguera points out, the term "urban" has powerful connotations that are tied to both

"ideological and political trends" as well as "demographic and economic

transformations" that have occurred over the past half-century.

According to Noguera (2003), the majority of American cities have been in

decline since World War II. His view is that negative connotations of the word "urban"

result from the decline of U.S. cities as hubs of "importance as economic, political, and

commercial centers" (p.23). Noguera attributes the decline of U.S. cities to such socio-

economic forces as the migration of industries from the Northeastern and Midwestern cities to the South and ultimately out of the country; highway construction that made it possible for the middle class to move from urban areas to suburbs where they could achieve the American Dream of owning a single-family home; and the development of "shopping malls and Levittown-style tract housing," which meant that even the working class could afford a home in the suburbs.

Noguera (2003) alleges that the final blows to urban centers came in the form of federal interventions to enforce desegregation, including "court-ordered busing." The character of cities continued to change as these forces precipitated "White flight" and the "darkening" of city neighborhoods. Additionally, Noguera suggests that there has been a decline in the political power of American cities.

Noguera's analysis is only one lens through which to view American cities. Some cities could be depicted as vibrant, politically powerful, and influential. Even so, his implication that the current dominant connotation of the term "urban" is poor, disenfranchised, or immigrant is particularly applicable to some of the old New England industrial cities where real estate values have remained low and influxes of immigration have been high. In the state in which this study was conducted, these cities are currently referred to as "Gateway Cities" because of the large number of new immigrants that make up the populations of these urban centers.

In terms of social justice and equity, urban schools do not seem to have moved far enough and fast enough since Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities* first made the American public aware of the enormous inequities in public education, particularly in

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urban schools where data demonstrates that all grades are not equal; an A student in an urban school often scores on a par with a C or D student from a suburban school on standardized tests (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). The implication to be drawn from this data is that teachers in poor urban schools may have lower expectations of students than do teachers in wealthier districts.

The district where data for this study were collected is in one of the old mill cities of southeastern Massachusetts. In many ways it aligns with Noguera's definition of "urban" as a state of mind. Nevertheless, this district has a varied student population (racially, culturally, and economically) in the middle schools. This made it an excellent district in which to collect data about student meaning-making for an educational phenomenon. The district and the school are discussed at length in chapter three.

Recent Research on Grades

The literature demonstrates that there is an interest in academic grades on the part of researchers, educators, and advocates. This interest connects to the current attention focused on assessment in general as it relates to NCLB. Both the December/January 2008 and the November 2012 issues of *Educational Leadership* are devoted to assessments—formative, summative, alternative, and high-stakes. This is a sign of the importance this topic has for all involved in education, from those on the front lines—the students as well as the teachers—to administrators, researchers and policy makers. One of the recurring themes found in the articles in both the 2008 and the 2011 issues of *Educational Leadership* is the difficulty of accurately, fairly, objectively and meaningfully assessing students. Questions of grading practice also seem inexorably tied

to the issues surrounding grading. In this section I will summarize the contemporary

discussion regarding trends and issues related to teacher-assigned grades.

Issues in grading.

A number of issues have been raised in recent years in relationship to teacher-

assigned grades. Educators themselves do not agree on the reasons for grading. Some

would like to get rid of grades altogether. The arguments for and against grading are

often linked to the enormous variability in grading practices. In this section, I examine

the literature related to these issues.

Why grade – reward or punishment?

Decades ago, educators were writing about the student belief that a grade is either

a reward or punishment the teacher gives the student that defines the student's personal

and academic worth and is detrimental to true learning (Holt, 1970; Kirschenbaum,

Napier, & Simon, 1971; Kohn, 2004). The discussion about grades continues today. As

noted above, within the last six years, *Educational Leadership* has devoted two issues

(December 2008, November 2012) to the subject of assessment and grading in American

schools. Some of the same educational experts have articles in both issues, and, in both

issues these writers call for an end to the A, B, C, D, F or 1-100 report cards and advocate

instead for a system of standards-based reporting of academic progress.

In the November 2011 issue of *Educational Leadership,* Brookhart urged

teachers to "tackle the question of what a grade means in the first place (p.12)" before

getting into issues of grade reform or change, but it would appear that teacher-assigned

grades are firmly entrenched in American education (Marzano, 2000).

The sorting function of grades, which grew more prominent as schools grew larger, has become even more important in this era of educational accountability. The sorting of large groups of students through grades is built on the notion of a bell curve or predictable distribution in human intelligence, a major theoretical development of the early 20th century.

Winfield Scott Hall (1906) discussed this theory in an article in *School Science and Mathematics.* He cited several reasons for grading, saying "it seems necessary to make periodic estimates of the pupil's progress in the lower schools and to report these to the parent, to the end that in case the pupil is doing unsatisfactory work the parent may cooperate with the teacher in seeking the cause and removing it, thus bringing the pupil up to the standard" (in Laska & Juarez, p.15). Hall's words provide further evidence that grades developed partly as a way to communicate student progress to parents. His call for keeping parents informed about their children's academic work echoes the sentiments quoted above of the anonymous author of the article in *The Common School Journal* in 1840. Hall called for a practical system that "shall require the least possible time on the part of the teacher and at the same time serves as an equitable estimate of the pupil's development"(15). Science, he contends, offers the solution because "all anthropometric data obey the law of distribution of biologic data" (16). Citing the work of Francis Galton, Hall explains his view of the law of distribution of data theory thus: "Any structural dimension or functional property of any species of living thing tends to approximate a fixed standard or middle value while the other values will progressively shade down to a maximum in one direction and to a minimum in the other. This may be

called the law of distribution of biologic data" (p. 17). From here, Hall makes the connection with grading students by saying: "All numerical data from the observation of either functional or structural characters or features of the human subject obey the law of distribution of biologic data. The rating of students is a measurement of psychic function and yields numerical data. These data must therefore obey the law of distribution of biologic data" (p. 17)

What is important here is not the equations that Hall gives later in his article but the fact that he is applying the work of Galton to the classroom. This is evidence of the adaptation of the theories on normal distribution of intelligence to classroom use. This "norm-referenced" system of grading continues to have a profound effect on grading systems. Even today, many teachers expect to find their grades falling on a curve and will scale a group of students' grades to make sure they do fall into a normal distribution or bell-curve (Guskey, 2001, Marzano, 2000).

Norm-referenced grading became more and more popular in schools throughout the 20th century. It has its roots in the work of the Frenchman Alfred Binet, who developed early intelligence tests for individuals. During World War I "the army accepted the offer of the American Psychological Association to develop group intelligence tests" (Urban & Wagoner, 2004, p. 233). These "Alpha" and "Beta" tests were used to screen candidates for officers' school as well as to screen new recruits. After the war, these testing efforts were applied in the public schools as a way to help test, screen, and sort the growing student population because "between 1920 and 1930 total

enrollments increased 22 percent, from 23.3 million to 28.3 million students" (Chapman, 1988, p. 85).

Chapman (1988) explains that Lewis M. Terman, a pioneer in intelligence testing, viewed the public schools as having three problems: "mental ages in school grades varied widely; ability varied considerably within classes; and teachers' estimates of ability were unreliable" (p. 86) These problems led to inefficiency, frustration, and, he believed, social unrest. His solution was to institute "a systematic program of intelligence testing and classification." The belief that classification based on testing is the best way to sort children continues to influence education today. Testing combined with "norm-referenced" grading systems "has had a profound effect on educational practices" (Marzano, 2000, p. 17). Its primary effect was to provide school administrations with an easy way to "sort" students.

The sorting process, according to Marzano (2000), is one of five reasons for grading. These include administrative reasons, feedback for students, guidance for students in their future course choices, guidance for teachers in planning instruction, and motivating students. It is worth noting that while Marzano acknowledges that feedback about student achievement is an obvious reason for grades, he does not explicitly state whether the feedback is for parents, students, or administrators.

Sager (1995) believes that administrative use of grades, as a tool for sorting students, is one of the most important reasons for grading. Grades "were instituted not for the purpose of helping students learn or improve their education, but as an administrative convenience" (p. 1). Teachers and administrators needed to find ways to process and sort

hundreds of students in the new comprehensive high schools. Oakes (2000) notes that "it was seductive, as schools became large, to think of them as factories that could use efficient and scientific methods to turn the raw materials—children—into finished products—educated adults" (p. 29). The new "efficient and scientific methods" (p. 30), according to Oakes, included sorting according to the principles of Social Darwinism. Competitive grading systems along with educational testing helped "track" children in the new, large, public schools.

To grade or not to grade.

A number of educational theorists and writers advocate getting rid of grades altogether. Grades should go, according to Kohn (2004), because they "aren't valid, reliable, or objective" (p. 77). He cites research that has found that "any given assignment may well be given two different grades by two equally qualified teachers" (p. 78). His argument is that grades do not encourage excellence. On the contrary, grades "tend to reduce students' interest in the learning itself…tend to reduce students' preference for challenging tasks…[and] tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking" (p. 75-76). The most destructive grading, Kohn argues, is grading on the curve "such that the top grade is artificially limited" (p. 79). Kohn also views grades as turning schooling into competition. This "turns schooling into a quest for triumph and ruptures relationships among students…Some students might be motivated to improve their class rank, but that is completely different from being motivated to understand ideas" (p. 79). Kohn anticipates and acknowledges the counter-arguments. He admits that there are difficulties in eliminating letter grades but says that the question should be are the difficulties

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"problems to be solved or…excuses for perpetuating the status quo" (p 80). Getting rid of grades does not, according to Kohn, mean "eliminating the process of gathering information about student performance—and communicating that information to students and parents. Rather, abolishing grades opens up possibilities that are far more meaningful and constructive" (83). His suggestions include narrative comments, portfolios, student-led parent-teacher conferences, and other similar types of student-centered feedback.

Marzano (2000) is on the side of keeping a grading system but revamping it to better reflect today's educational practices. He advocates use of a four point system to give feedback on "student achievement within specific courses" in the relevant topics that are standards-based. In the four point systems the student received a score of one, two, three, or four based on a rubric. Each assignment is matched with a particular standard. According to Marzano, it makes little sense to put everything into one grade. Additionally, he advocates separating academic and non-academic factors. Most important of all, "the most powerful single innovation that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest prescription for improving education must be 'dollops of feedback'" (Marzano, p.23). He argues that the best way to achieve this is with a well-designed report card. By this he means a report card that is aligned with current state standards and which reports students' progress toward mastery of these standards.

Educators are struggling with a variety of "authentic assessments" and "alternative assessments." Rubrics are the current magic bullet as teachers attempt to make assessments as objective as possible. Whether talking about Math or the Arts, teachers are attempting "to develop a number of different alternative evaluation

instruments and strategies that provide hard data but are not in form of the standard paper and pencil multiple-choice test now being used in most testing programs" (Madeja, Dorn, & Sabol, 2004, p. 3).

Literature on both sides of the argument—to grade or not to grade—fills current education journals. Many of the suggestions for changing current practice such as creation of standards-based report cards (Guskey, 2001) are not an elimination of grades but rather grades by different names. Comparative adjectives are just another way of saying A, B, C or 100, 80, 75.

Variability in grading.

A major theme in the current literature is the variability in assessments and reporting of assessments. It appears that there are as many ways to arrive at a grade for a student as there are teachers to give grades. Great discrepancies in grading practices exist among teachers and in reporting methods used by districts. Between 1987 and 1988 D. Keith Osborn and Janie D. Osborn (1989) studied 264 K-6 report cards from both public and private schools from around the country. They published a book reproducing 70 of these cards, and no two are alike. Some schools use letter grades, some use evaluative concept grades, and some use a combination of both. Some grade for effort; some do not. The Osborn study of elementary and Kindergarten report cards reflects the great discrepancy in grading practices in general.

The style of reporting as evidenced by the different look of report cards from district to district (Osborn & Osborn, 1989) is not the only variant in grading. The literature suggests there is enormous variety in how teachers arrive at a grade (Brookhart,

1994). There are teachers who grade on a curve, those who average all grades, and those who attempt to tie grades to the standards. In addition to achievement factors, many teachers include non-achievement factors in their grading. Among the non-achievement variables are effort, behavior, cooperation, and attendance (Marzano, 2000). Marzano suggests that different teachers give different weight to assignments so that even "when two teachers base grades on exactly the same information, they frequently assign different grades to students simply because they consider different homework assignments, quizzes, and tests as important" (p.6).

Two studies in the 1900s documented a wide score range when teachers were asked to grade a paper. More than 100 English teachers graded the same examination paper. There was a 47-point difference between the lowest and the highest rating. Next, math teachers graded a geometry paper, and the spread was even greater—a 67-point difference (Sager, 1995, p.2). This fact in itself makes one question the validity of any competitive grading system. Is it possible to achieve a system that is fair and equitable for all students?

The central theme in much of the literature that considers classroom assessments is the "hodgepodge" (Cross & Fray, 1999) of grading factors teachers use in order to arrive at a final end of grading period grade (Brookhart, 1994; Cross & Fray, 1999; McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002). In a review of the literature on grading practice and theory, Brookhart (1994) found a gap between measurement theory and teacher practices. One problem Brookhart finds is a "disconnect" between recommendations for grading and "the teacher's need to manage classrooms and motivate students." She finds

a "blurring" of validity due to the fact that teachers often see grades as an end point to a grading period and feel pressure to arrive at a final, irrevocable judgment. This leads to grades that are made up of "composite scores of questionable reliability and validity and thus uncertain meaning" (p. 299).

McMillan (2001) examined actual classroom assessment and grading practices of secondary teachers in an effort to find out if meaningful relationships exist between practice, grade level, subject matter, and ability levels of students. McMillan found that despite recommendations that non-academic measures, such as effort, not be included in grading, many teachers still use effort as a component of a grade. Teachers may use district criterion referenced grading rubrics but still include norm-referenced factors in their grades.

McMillan (2001) found the "variation concerning the extent to which teachers emphasize different factors in grading students suggests that some teachers differ considerably in how they weigh factors in determining grades" (p. 30). McMillan identifies a need for further research into how teachers make decisions about grading. Of significance for this study is the question he raises, asking, "to what extent are grading practices based on instructional goals, such as motivating and engaging students?" (p. 30). McMillan views this question in terms of implications for teacher training. However, it could also have implications for the messages, both explicit and implicit, that teachers give students, which affect how students construct meaning for grades.

McMillan, Myran, and Workman (2002) investigated the grading practices of more than 900 elementary teachers (grades 3-5). Their purpose was to describe classroom

assessment and grading practices to determine the factors used in grading and to ascertain whether there were meaningful relationships between independent variables of grade level and subject and dependent variables of assessment and grading practices. Their findings showed that "most elementary teachers use a multitude of factors in grading students" (p. 211). Among the "hodgepodge of factors" the authors identified was academic performance, which is "clearly the most important factor in grading students" (p. 211). However, the findings also show that "non test performance and behavior such as effort, participation, and extra credit work, also are very important for many teachers" (p. 211).

These are not the only studies relating to grading policy and practice; however, the findings these researchers report appear to be consistent with investigations into grading in the previous decade. This body of literature has implications for consideration of what might be important to students when they decide on the meaning of a grade. It is important to understand the grading practices, policies, and theories that underlie teacher-assigned grades in order to help understand how students create meaning about this "hodgepodge" of grades. One needs to keep in mind also that middle school is typically when students transition from a self-contained classroom with one teacher doing all grading to a series of classrooms with four, five, or even six different academic teachers, each with his or her own grading methodology.

Learning vs. credentials in education.

Labaree (1997) has advanced a political argument relating to the purpose of grades in education. In *How to succeed in school without really learning: The*

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credentials race in American education, he argues that "getting ahead" (p. 1) has become

the central purpose of education. He claims, "the social mobility goal effectively

undermines the intrinsic value of any learning acquired in school" (p. 44). School,

Labaree claims, is simply a means to an end and the end is the acquisition of credentials

for personal gain. He alleges that "the content of school learning is irrelevant" because in

the end all that matters to students is possession of a consumer good – proper credentials.

This race to acquire the credentials that promote social and financial mobility undermines

the earlier purpose of education, which was to learn and gain knowledge. The educational

system, Labaree argues, teaches students "to master the forms and not the content" (p.

45). This undermines the learning process by encouraging students to chase what he calls

"exchange values," which include good grades and negatively affect the motivation to

master knowledge and gain deep learning. Credentials, according to Labaree, have

become more important to students and their parents than knowledge.

This theory that the purpose of school is to gain credentials in order to be able to

achieve social mobility through access to better paying jobs is another lens through which

to view student meaning-making for grades. Credentialing, as Labaree (1997) calls it,

encourages students to view the grade as the final product of a quarter, a semester, or a

year of education. Labaree's argument is an example of why the pursuit of the grade as

an end goal is problematic. A student who is encouraged to go through school in the

belief that all she needs to do to achieve success is to be diligent in turning in work and

well-behaved in the classroom is being cheated of true education. This attitude

undermines student desire for mastery of knowledge. Labaree concludes that this system,

which encourages the consumer of educational services to believe that credentialing is the goal, "undercuts learning, overproduces credentials, and reinforces social advantage" (p. 262). The danger is that students will focus simply on completion of assignments and not understand the necessity of mastery of knowledge, standards, and skills.

Grading and the accountability movement.

During the past two decades, educational researchers and writers have been advocating for report cards that are directly linked to standards. The current testing and accountability movement means that many teachers are forced to teach to a test, reinforcing the idea that the standards are the most appropriate measure of a student's academic progress in school.   Researchers have also been examining what if any relationship exists between teacher-assigned grades and scores on high-stakes tests. The following section takes a closer look at these issues.

Standards-based report cards.

While teachers struggle to find reliable measures for student performance, administrators are beginning to look at restructuring report cards to align with state standards. Since the year 2000, many researchers and educational specialists have critiqued various aspects of current grading practice and suggested standards-linked alternatives (Guskey 2007; Guskey 2001; Guskey, Swan, & Jung, 2010; Marzano, 2006; Marzano 2000; Wiggins and McTighe 2005).

Marzano (2000) finds that there is little or no research to support continuation of a system that is more than 100 years old and uses letters or numbers to report student progress. In *Transforming Classroom Grading,* Marzano (2000) finds prior research

indicates that there are three major flaws in the current system. The first is that individual teachers may use "non-achievement" factors such as effort and behavior as part of their grading policy. He also finds that weighting of assessments differs from teacher to teacher, and lastly, he finds that teachers regularly mix assessments of a variety of knowledge and skills together to arrive at a final grade.

Marzano (2000) finds the purposes of grades as varied as the practices. One of the main reasons for grades, according to Marzano, is for administrative purposes. In other words, administrators need grades to help them sort students. Marzano believes that the "most important purpose for grades is to provide information or feedback to students and parents," and he couples this with the claim that the "best referencing system for grading is content-specific learning goals: a criterion-referenced approach" (p. 23). He advocates for a new system of report cards designed by teachers and administrators that includes student self-assessment as part of the system, but in the end his report card is as much a teacher-constructed collection of numbers as any other report card.

Guskey (2001) cites prior research to support development of complex standards-based report cards. The systems he advocates employ a type of "score card" for each area of the curriculum in order to track student progress in different strands of the standards. One of the challenges associated with new types of standard-based report cards lies in educating parents to be able to appreciate and value the "richness of the information" (p. 27) that is to be found in this type of reporting of student progress.

Wiggins (1994) is another educator who has been advocating for standards-based report cards since the early 1990s. In an article in *Educational Leadership* in 1994

Wiggins called for report card reform. Like Guskey (2001), Wiggins (1994) calls for criterion-referenced report cards with scoring based on an individual student's progress rather than on comparison to other students in the class.

In *Understanding by Design* (2005) Wiggins and McTighe advocate the use of a criterion-based rubric to make clear what the student needs to master. This understanding may be thought of as a continuum—from misconception to insight or from self-conscious awkwardness to understanding of what they need to master. Criterion-based rubrics in addition to multiple checks for understanding have implications for grading. If these are used as the basis of a grade, then the progress of a student from initial stages of learning to mastery will be better represented. Wiggins and McTighe critique current grading practices as follows:

> Many upper-level teachers have two long-standing habits that are counterproductive. They often give grades to each piece of work without making clear the criteria and the appropriate weighting of each criterion, and they typically average those grades over the course of time to come up with a final grade. This latter practice especially makes little sense when assessing against understanding goals and rubrics over time: Averaging a learner's initial versus final level of comprehension of a complex idea will not provide an accurate representation of her understanding. (p. 177)

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) are concerned with accurately assessing student learning over time. They view it as a process that calls for a very different type of holistic planning by the teacher; hence, their use of the term "backwards planning." The

implications for grading are that if teachers are going to implement a "backwards" design model of lesson planning where they know the goal ahead of time—that is, what they want the student to master, and exactly which skills they will be emphasizing—then teachers must realign their reporting of learning to accurately reflect mastery of knowledge and/or skills at the end of the unit. In light of this study, one needs to ask what kind of meaning would students give to this type of grading?

In 2011, Guskey again calls for grading reform in the November issue of *Educational Leadership* alleging that, despite two decades of efforts to articulate learning standards and find better ways to assess proficiency in the standards, grades and report cards remain unaligned with reforms and standards. In his article, Guskey discusses five reasons he believes we still use an antiquated report card system. The beliefs about learning and reporting that he cites and attacks include: 1) The belief that grades should differentiate students that is, that grades contribute to the sorting process; 2) Grades should resemble a normal bell curve, a system that many educators still use; 3) Students should be judged and graded against each other; 4) Poor grades encourage students to try harder; and 5) Students should receive one grade for each course or subject where all standards are lumped together. Guskey challenges these familiar grading beliefs and calls for "thoughtful, research-based alternatives" (p. 21) that measure proficiency in aligned standards.

High stakes testing and its relationship to grades.

With the testing mandates incorporated into federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top, it is not surprising to find researchers

examining relationships between high stakes testing and teacher grading practices. Dropout rates nationwide remain high (Casillas et al., 2012), which prompts researchers to examine evidence that will identify which practices and factors cause so many high school students to drop out.   Brennan, Kim, Wenz-Gross, and Siperstein (2001) investigate comparisons of "the *relative* equitability of high-stakes tests to the prevailing gold-standard measure of school achievement—teacher assigned grades" (p. 175). These researchers are not only concerned with variations between schools, but they also ask if "high-stakes testing programs worsen educational outcomes for racial/ethnic minorities and for girls of all races and ethnicities?" (p. 174). These researchers allege that there is ample evidence to suggest that girls and minorities are already at an academic disadvantage, and that the high-stakes tests such as the MCAS may increase the likelihood of academic failure for these groups. The findings of this study suggest that in "comparison to teacher-assigned grades, MCAS hurts the average competitive position of African American students in math and of girls in math and science" (p. 206). It is interesting to note that they find boys outperform girls on the MCAS standardized tests, while girls out-perform boys in the arena of teacher-assigned grades. The researchers also conclude that both methods of assessing students may not be valid and call for further research into this topic in other schools, "particularly urban and inner-city schools, where a disproportion of racial/ethnic minority students are educated" (p. 210).

McMillan, Myran, and Workman (1999) studied what effect the Virginia statewide Standards of Learning (SOL) testing had on classroom instruction and assessment. They found a significant decrease in the use of performance and authentic

assessments in classrooms as a result of the testing. They find this to be a negative outcome because performance and authentic assessments are "more consistent with current constructivist and cognitive learning theory than are objective tests" (p. 13).

Willingham, Pollack, and Lewis (2002) studied differences between grading and testing. These researchers examined the merits and drawbacks of both testing and grading as a prelude to their testing to account for the variability between the two. They used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study database in their study. The data account for differences in gender, ethnicity, and school program at the high school level. The focus of the study was on why students score differently on grades and tests. One of the findings of the study was that there appear to be "significant grading variations among schools." Willingham, Pollack, and Lewis allege that, "the test content is constant, but the substance of the grading standard necessarily varies from student to student" (p. 24). In addition "teachers' grades and external tests" focus on "different constructs." They also point out that the objective of high-stakes assessment "is to insure that all students are evaluated on the same scale," but that in classroom grades "the same scale usually means the local standard" (p. 24). The authors point out that a grade may "reflect a broader range of knowledge and skills than can be represented in a limited test with restricted modes of assessment." (p. 25). One of the more interesting points is the authors' statement that they "underestimated" the "total effect of grading variation" in the study. The variation in grading methodology, standards, and philosophies is a common theme in the literature and raises questions about the effect this grade variation may have on student meaning making for teacher-assigned grades.

Other studies have also identified a "local standard" differential in grading, including one published by the U.S. Department of Education (1994) that found:

> Students in high-poverty schools (schools where more than 75 percent of students received free or reduced-price lunches) who received mostly A's in English got about the same reading scores as the "C" and "D" students in the most affluent schools… [In math] The "A" students in the high-poverty schools most closely resembled the "D" students in the most affluent schools (¶ 10).

Clearly, the data indicate that an "A" may not represent the same thing from one school to the next. The same may hold true for a "C" or a "D." Thus, grading variations, both between teachers and between schools, continue to challenge researchers.

Guskey (2007) points out the importance of using multiple measures to assess schools, administrators, teachers, and students. The use of large-scale state assessments to measure proficiency in students raises reliability and validity issues. In this study, Guskey examines the perceptions of various stakeholders about different measurements of student performance; in particular he is looking for differences in the perceptions of administrators and teachers. The data implied that all levels of educators acknowledge the importance of multiple measures of student achievement. This is attributed to the fact that large-scale state assessments can only go so far "in tapping the complex thinking and problem-solving skills that students will need for future success" (p. 24). Multiple measures of learning may address the different learning styles of individual students; therefore, in order to maintain equity and fairness in educational measurement it is

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important to offer students multiple ways to show what they know and can do. In the end, Guskey found no clear consensus between administrators and teachers about the validity of various measurements. Administrators tend to put more trust in outside large-scale assessments, while teachers believe that more accurate measures of student achievement are found in classroom observations, portfolios, writing samples, and projects. Guskey concludes that it is vital that administrators and teachers close the gap in the values they assign to various sources of evidence. Despite the practical and economic difficulties in using multiple measures, Guskey calls for educators to find trusted ways to use a variety of measurements in order to garner richer evidence on student achievement.

Students and grading.

This is a study about what a grade might mean to a seventh grade student. Thus, it is important to examine the research on the meaning that students give to assessment, student motivation, and students as participants in the research process. Examination of student meaning-making for teacher-assigned grades is crucial for this study because this gives a basis for understanding what the data may show in terms of academic engagement or disengagement. It may also help explain student views of behavior and their beliefs about the relationship between behavior and grades, and student views of grades as negative or positive messages and what those messages lead students to believe about their own self-worth. In addition, understanding the way students make meaning for grades may help teachers do a better job of conveying to students exactly what the grade represents and what the student needs to do to control the grade.

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Student views of grades.

The issue of grading is especially important in urban schools, where it may well contribute to the dropout decision. Research shows that the disengagement process may begin for students at the start of middle school, which increases their odds of becoming dropouts (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007). According to Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver (2007), course failures in sixth grade are a predictive indicator of students who later make the decision to dropout of high school. Whole school reform, extra help, and behavioral programs are the most widely cited ways to keep these students on the path to graduation (Balfanz, 2011, Balfanz, Herzog & Iver 2007).

Writing in *Educational Leadership,* Stiggins (2007) suggests that educators need "to tune in to the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience from the point of view of students" (p. 22). He notes that historically the role of assessment (and grading) has been "to rank students according to their achievement" (p. 22). This means that students at all levels will be divided into winners and losers. While students who believe they are on a winning streak may build on this and learn more, students who believe they are losers may end up falling further and further behind. Stiggins analyzes the assessment experience from the point of view of students on "winning streaks" and those on "losing streaks," suggesting that for students on a "winning streak," assessment provides evidence of success, which makes the student feel positive and optimistic about education and leads to a positive sense of self-efficacy and a willingness to accept responsibility for learning.

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Conversely, students on a "losing streak" are likely to view assessment (and grading) as continuing evidence of failure. These students will feel hopeless and resigned to school failure. They are more likely to avoid hard work, give up easily when work is challenging, and resolve to escape from what may be perceived as a "dangerous" situation. Stiggins is advocating for assessments that lead to stronger student learning. "Assessment cannot be regarded as high quality if it causes a student to give up" (p. 26).

Crooks (1988) reviews literature from 14 fields of research investigating teacher evaluation of students in an effort to illuminate possible relationships between classroom evaluation and student outcomes. The aim of this review is to find areas that have implications for practice. Three major areas of research are examined: the nature, role, and impact of classroom evaluation; the impact of various classroom evaluation practices on student learning activities and achievement; and student motivation and the effects of different evaluation practices on motivation. Based on his examination of the literature, Crooks suggests that classroom evaluation may have a long-term effect and influence on students' self-efficacy and may impact how they go about studying in the future. He also finds that credit should be given for quality of work, not simply for completing the work and that feedback should focus on keeping students informed about their progress towards mastery of content rather than comparisons to other students. According to Crooks, an important influence on students' understanding of evaluation procedures depends on whether or not the students interpret evaluation as helpful feedback on their progress toward mastery, or if they view it as a way to control their behavior. Crooks concludes that the research "demonstrated that the responses of individual students to

educational experiences and tasks are complex functions of their abilities and

personalities, their past educational experiences, their current attitudes, self-perceptions

and motivational states, together with the nature of the current experiences and tasks" (p.

460).

Black and Wiliam (1998) examine the literature on formative assessment with the

focus on testing for the purpose of understanding the role and complexity of formative

assessment. Their findings lead them to several conclusions about assessment. To begin

with, they find that in order for an assessment to be formative, feedback information must

be given and also used. They conclude that the role of the student in assessment is

important but difficult to extricate from the literature because some reports take the

student's role for granted while others explicitly state what the student's role is.

Additionally, Black and Wiliam (1998) claim that the most important goal of

formative assessment is a two-step sequence of action. First, the learner must perceive

that there is a gap between the present knowledge and the goal, and second, the learner

must be able and willing to take steps to close the gap. Despite this demonstration of the

importance of the student role, the researchers found that focus on self-assessment by

students is not common even when teachers take assessment seriously. What they did

find is that in classroom practice "the grading function is over-emphasized and the

learning function under-emphasized" (p. 18). Finally, Black and Wiliam (1998) call for

further research to examine "the perceptions and beliefs held by the learners about

themselves as learners, [and] about their own learning work" (p. 59).

Schaffner, Burry-Stock, Cho, Boney, and Hamilton (2000) examine students' perceptions of assessment activities. In common with earlier researchers, they find little formal research concerning students' perceptions of teachers' assessment practices. These researchers focus on students' perspectives on assessment activities. According to the researchers, it is important for children to determine how each teacher will assess them because teachers all assess differently and teacher-assigned grades depend on the assessment process. Thus, it is vital that researchers and educators listen to students in order to learn how assessments motivate them, influence their learning, and affect their attitudes about school. Schaffner and his colleagues were seeking information about students' experiences with "classroom grades and assessment practices such as: fairness issues, curricular issues, and relevance issues" (p. 5). The researchers asked students questions such as "'What do you think about tests and why?'… [and] 'Why do you think that your teacher gives you grades?'" (p. 4). They also used a Likert-type scale including statements such as, "My teacher grades me fairly…My teacher grades me on many different things…My grades show what I have learned…I get bad grades because I misbehave in class" (p. 15). They found that perceptions of the assessment process differed between grade levels, with the greatest difference occurring between the intermediate grades (4 to 6) and the high school grades (9-11). The researchers attributed the change at the high school level to the fact that this is a time when the student's future career decisions will be impacted by a grade. The researchers claim "assessment practices are extremely important because they ultimately lead to evaluation of students' achievement and are reported to many audiences" (p. 11). They conclude that

understanding the process is important to teaching and learning, and that by including the student in the "teaching-testing-grading cycle" (p. 11) educators will have a better understanding of the assessment process and its validity.

Kelly (2008) used data from the Partnership for Literacy Study to examine what, if any, relationship existed between grades and student effort and achievement. Kelly concluded that teachers in middle school English Language Arts classrooms are most likely to reward students for behavior that promotes academic engagement. While Kelly found that "only substantive engagement leads to higher grades," he also suggested that teachers should be concerned "about the signal that is sent to students—that form is more important than substance" (p. 45). Kelly suggests that students with "antischool peer influences" (p. 46) may learn material but may also be less likely to be "highly cooperative" (p. 46). Thus, he argues that it is critical for teachers to be fair and impartial in classroom grading. Kelly found that teachers do use grades to reward students' participation and effort, but that they are also linked to "genuine engagement and interest" (p. 50). This, he concludes, is consistent with the developmental approach, where the prime challenge is to foster student engagement in academic endeavors.

It is interesting to note that the literature demonstrates a strong interest in grading issues at the level of higher education, too (Gravitz, & Liddle, Strobino, 2002). Gravitz, Liddle, and Strobino cite more than 22 studies on student perceptions of grades in higher education; yet, they find that "the overwhelming majority of this literature focuses on faculty perspectives of grading, especially grade inflation." The implication is that a comparatively small amount of research has been undertaken to address specific ways in

which undergraduate and graduate students perceive grades. Nevertheless, it is clear that researchers recognize the importance of the topic and the need for further research.

One final impact on students' meaning-making for grades that cannot be ignored is the growing number of programs that offer cash for performance (Henderson, 2009). Reviews of programs that pay students for performance are beginning to appear in leadership literature. In her article in *Education Update*, Henderson discusses programs in Dallas, Texas, New York City, Chicago, and Washington D.C. These programs give cash and other rewards including MP3 players to students who read a certain number of books or score a 3 or better on Advanced Placement tests. Proponents of the incentive programs allege that since these programs exist mostly in lower-income schools, they may help students who may need to work in order to help their families out. Some feel that it allows low-income students to receive incentives for good grades that students in upper middle class families often receive at home such as cash, trips, or other material rewards for A's. Finally, some proponents say that concrete rewards provide better motivation for low-income students than abstract academic ideas of school success.

Henderson (2009) also cites the views of opponents, many of whom are educators. A poll of 438 principals showed 82 percent opposing incentive programs because they not believe that cash incentives would help students develop inner motivation to be successful in school. Henderson notes that at this time there is little if any empirical data on these programs.

Brookhart (2009) suggests that the meaning students give to grades is important because "grades and other aspects of classroom assessment influence student motivation

to learn" and "provide students with information that they use in their learning" (p. 36).

Brookhart points out that, in addition to traditional understandings of the meaning of a

grade, including motivation and volition, today's researchers are also interested in

"students' perceptions of the reasons for their successes or failures" (p. 36). According to

Brookhart, educators need to consider what a task actually represents in terms of

learning, and what constitutes quality work. Teachers also need to consider student

interest in the topic under investigation, students' sense of self-efficacy or their belief in

their ability to be successful, and students' belief about the importance of the assignments

they are asked to do.

Student motivation and grades.

Cohen (2006) situates the topic of evaluation within the larger picture of social-

emotional competencies and ethical dispositions. According to Cohen, the paradox in

education lies in the dichotomy between what parents want for children – an "ability to

become lifelong learners who are able to love, work, and act as responsible members of

the community" (p. 201) – and the fact that "linguistic and mathematical literacy" (p.202)

increasingly dominate education, driven by state and federal mandates and high-stakes

testing programs. The success or failure of schools, teachers, and students generally

centers on evaluation of mathematical and linguistic performance. Cohen does not argue

with the need for evaluation, but he asks two questions – How do we use evaluations?

What do we evaluate? Cohen is most concerned with evaluations of social and emotional

competencies that are often "associated with and predictive of success" (p. 202). Cohen

points out that all too often evaluations in education are used to grade students

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comparatively rather than as an incentive for genuine learning. This, Cohen adds, can lead to resentment and to fear. The consensus may be that education must be evidence-based, data-driven, and assessed responsibly as a tool to increase learning, but he questions the data educators use, the role of data in evaluation of student progress, and whether or not cultural differences are being taken into account.

Zoeckler (2007), in his investigation of moral issues in grading practices, notes that one of the most difficult areas in which to arrive at an objective numerical grade is English. In math, for example, it is comparatively easy to grade based on "right" answers. In English class "student performance is not so easily converted into grades" (p. 83). Zoeckler finds that because students may view grades as "measures of merit," some students may feel marginalized by negative messages from failing grades. In addition, grades may be affected by "teacher expectations and perceptions of student attitudes" (p. 86). In his investigation of what English teachers intend to communicate to students through grades, Zoeckler found that all of the teachers in his study felt hampered by the school's report system, which limited means of expression of evaluation to a single numerical grade and no more than three pre-determined comments. Zoeckler found that "grading systems and practices are unique to each teacher." Additionally, he found that "shared understanding between students and their teachers about the meaning of grades is constantly sought by the teachers, who frequently explain their decision-making process both to their entire class and to individual students" (p. 97). One might ask if the meaning students give to grades in classes where teachers share their decision-making process is aligned with what the teachers think the meaning should be.

Students as partners in research.

Prior to making changes in reporting student progress in classrooms, it is important to learn what grades mean to middle school students and how this may influence students' views of themselves as learners. It is also important to hear from students how they construct meaning for grades. Students have valid understandings of their education and much to contribute to debates on what works in middle level education (Steinberg & McCray, 2012; Thomson & Gunter, 2006; Bishop & Pflaum, 2005). It is important to look at school reform from the point of view of students in order to ensure that any changes implemented are effective in challenging students to become more involved learners (Cooper, 2000).

A growing body of literature supports the philosophy that, in order for school restructuring to change students and their attitudes toward learning, students must be actively involved in the change (DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Bishop & Pflaum, 2005; Bechtel & Reed, 1998; Campbell, Edgar, & Halstead, 1994; Soo Hoo, 1993). Administrators, policy makers, and teachers generally drive school restructuring; however, if the desired outcome of the restructuring is student change, then the students themselves must be involved in the process of determining what changes are necessary. Davis (2006) and Nichols (2006) emphasize the importance of research into middle level education and understanding of the middle school experience from the students' point of view.

Two Theoretical Lenses For Examining How Students Make Meaning Of Teacher-Assigned Grades

This study of how a group of 56 seventh grade students make meaning of their teacher-assigned grades uses two theoretical lenses — adolescent development theory, and attribution theory — as analytical tools. This framework is used in the analysis of the data and in the final discussion of that analysis in order to gain insight into exactly what the grades mean to the students.

Adolescent development.

Adolescence is a period of enormous change in the human organism physically, cognitively, socially, and psychologically (Damon &Lerner, 2008; Jaffe, 2000; Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae, 2012; NMSA, 2007). The literature on the topic of adolescent development is deep and broad. Some of the most cutting edge research on this age group focuses on the area of brain development (Kelly, 2012; Mears, 2012). Since the start of the 21st century there has been an increasing amount of research exploring the nature of adolescence, textbooks have proliferated, and organizations devoted to this period of human development have flourished (Russell, Card, & Susman, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the review is confined to the literature that concerns early adolescence (ages 12 to 14). The review examines the biological, cognitive, and social development of early adolescents. This area of the literature will be used as a lens for data analysis and as an aid to understanding why students give particular responses.

Adolescence has gone from an almost deficit view in terms of psychology (Jaffe 2000) to an asset view (Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae 2012; Russell, Card, & Susman,

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2011) that recognizes cutting edge research aimed at improving the lives of adolescents. As they mature, adolescents are at a turning point developmentally (Damon & Lerner, 2008; Lipsitz, 1984) not only cognitively, but also sexually (Dorn & Biro, 2011).

Between the ages of approximately 9 and 19 (Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae 2012) young humans are beginning to adjust their worldview as they move from being concrete thinkers to the stage of formal operations (Piaget, 1929). Concrete thinking involves the child's ability to use "logical operations such as reversibility, classification, and serialization" (Jarvis, Holford & Griffin, 2003, p. 33). Formal operation refers to the stage when adolescents move toward "abstract conceptualization" (p. 33) and begin to develop the ability to think about their thinking (Kuhn & Franklin 2008). Piaget's stage theory, while often criticized for its structuralist approach (Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin, 2003), marks the beginning of research interest in the unique characteristics of adolescent cognitive development (Kuhn & Franklin, 2008). The middle school years are typically when young adolescents begin to develop metacognitive abilities and a capacity to think abstractly (NMSA, 2007). This is significant for this study as students are being asked to answer certain questions about their own learning, which assumes they are capable of metacognitive thought.

Timing.

The timing of adolescent development is estimated to be from age 9 to age 19, and during this time development has biological, cognitive, and social outcomes (Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae, 2011). Anyone who spends time with middle school students can attest to the fact that one day they may behave more like first graders than

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12 year-olds and the next day (or even next minute) a seventh grader may say or do something that appears profoundly adult and mature. Most professionals who work with this age group would agree "roughly in the second decade of life, people transform from a state in which they mostly behave and think like children to a state in which they mostly do not" (Jaffe, 2000, 40). Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae (2011) identify four distinct periods of adolescent development – *young* between 9 and 11 years old; *early* between 12 and 14 years old; *middle* from 15 to 17 years old; and finally *late* adolescence from 18 to 19 years old.

The timing of different phases as well as the outcomes of these stages are generally accepted in the literature (Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae 2011, Damon & Lerner 2008, Jaffe, 2000) but may vary from individual to individual and according to time, place, and ethnicity (Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae 2011, Parke & Buriel 2008). The most useful overview of the literature that relates to this study is to examine the generally accepted parameters of early adolescence (12 to 14 years) within the context of biological, cognitive, and social development.

Biological development.

From the biological point of view, adolescence encompasses the time between the beginning of puberty and the time when bone growth is complete. This is the time when enough sex hormones are secreted to cause accelerated growth and when secondary sex characteristics also appear (Lipsitz, 1984). By early adolescence, a growth spurt has usually begun, with changes in weight, height, hormones, sleeping patterns, activity levels, and moodiness (Meschke, Peter & Bartholomae 2012). The timing of puberty

varies greatly from individual to individual. In the United States it may begin as early as age 6 in girls, and age 7 in boys (Dorn & Biro 2011).

Cognitive development.

Along with physical development come changes in intellectual development. While "not as visible as physical development…it is just as intense" (NMSA, 2007, ¶p.9). Young adolescents are learning to think independently; they are "highly curious," and often show interest in a wide array of topics. They show an eagerness to learn about what interests them and prefer to interact with peers rather than adults during learning activities (¶ 9). The middle school years are typically when young adolescents begin to develop metacognitive abilities as well as "the capacity for abstract thought processes" (¶ 10).

Understanding of cognitive development in this period has changed in the first decade of this century because more sophisticated research has provided in-depth understanding of brain development (Kelly 2012; Mears, 2012). Historically, adolescence has been viewed psychologically as a time of "identity crisis" when individuals seek to resolve conflicts between self and the outside world in order to develop a sense of self (Harter, 2008, Lipsitz, 1984).

As noted above, middle school students are at a point in their development when most of them are beginning to develop the ability to think metacognitively. Vygotsky (1978), another cognitive theorist, developed the theory that there exists a zone of proximal development, which is the difference between the actual level of development and potential development.   Research and theory suggest that children and young

adolescents construct their own learning using prior understandings as their base for constructing new knowledge. Another inference from the research is that knowledge acquisition and learning occur over time, with each understanding built upon earlier ones. Thus, it could be argued that averaging a series of numbers from disconnected assignments throughout a grading period to arrive at a number or letter grade is not a true representation of a student's academic growth and achievement. A student who does not perform well early in the year due to lack of knowledge and understanding may well grow and develop to the point that she will achieve proficiency in a topic by the end of the year. An average of the year's work will not reflect that growth.

Social development.

Adolescence is a time for exploration. Lipsitz also stresses that this is "a time of delay granted by society to people at the end of childhood who are not ready to accept the obligations of adulthood" (p.4). What young adolescents have to say about their schooling and the meaning they create for educational phenomena should be viewed through the lens of adolescent development theory.

Caskey and Anfara (2007) assert that early adolescence "is a distinct period of human growth and development situated between childhood and adolescence" it is at this time that "young adolescents (10-15-year-olds) experience rapid and significant developmental change" (¶ 1). The developmental characteristics that define this stage "include physical, intellectual, emotional/psychological, moral/ethical and social domains" (¶ 3). Both the body and the brain undergo "remarkable development" during young adolescence.   Early adolescents commonly display an obsession with physical

appearance; they often appear disturbed about physical development, and are full of energy that adults need to direct into purposeful activities. Young adolescents may be chafed by restrictions, long for independence, and be obsessed with personal autonomy, but adults know these young people have years of economic dependency ahead of them.

Attribution theory.

Attribution theory, first advanced by Weiner (1979, 1985), has been used extensively to examine explanations of student success or failure in school (De Haan & Wissink, 2013; Evans and Engelberg, 1988; McClure et al, 2011; Georgiou et al., 2002; Zhou & Urhahne, 2013). Researchers have used Weiner's theory as a lens for examination of both student and teacher attributions for academic success and/or failure.

Attribution theory is concerned with causality. It locates causality for events in three dimensions — locus, stability, and controllability — which are then associated with determinants that include effort, ability, luck, and task difficulty. These dimensions of attributions together with the determinants of those attributions are what individuals use to assign causality for events in their lives. In achievement settings such as school, the student is assigning causality for success or failure. The dimension plus the determinant to which the individual assigns causation of the current event may determine what an individual does in the future.

Studies of student attributions for success and failure in the classroom have used the work of Weiner (1979, 1985) as a lens for examination of student meaning-making for performance and assessment (de Haan & Wissink, 2013; Evans & Engelberg 1988; Georgiou et al. 2002; Zhou & Urhahne 2013). The literature relating to the topic holds

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that this theory concerns how people explain and evaluate their behavior (Miller, 1995).

Attribution theory examines perceived causes for events and suggests that the causal attributions people make for their successes or failures influence future behaviors (de Haan & Wissink 2013; Weiner 2010, 1985, 1979). This is especially pertinent to educational settings. Brookhart (2009) claims that the importance of linking attribution theory and grades is the fact that "the same grade can be perceived differently by different students, and used by that student as part of a complicated web of perceptions and reasoning to make sense of his or her world" (39). Weiner (1985) suggests that attribution theory may help educators and researchers better understand certain classroom experiences.

Weiner (1979, 1985) addresses the "constant pursuit of 'why'" (1985, p. 548) by humans when he lays out his theory of attributions. He implies there is a powerful desire to understand our environment, our surroundings, and ourselves. Therefore, it is "clearly functional to know why an event has occurred" (1985, p. 548) in order to manage our environment and ourselves. Attributions in that sense are prescriptive – assigning a cause or causes to an event leads to management of future actions.

Even though he also looks at other areas, including business and sports, much of Weiner's (1979, 1985) work is "centered upon achievement concerns" (1979, p. 3). His theory is especially pertinent to classroom assessment when students consider questions about success or failure in the academic arena. Weiner suggests that the search for answers to the "why" of success or failure is a basic, underlying foundation of

motivation. How a student makes causal attributions for events in his scholastic life may predict future success or failure and may contribute to motivation to try again.

Dimensions of attributions.

Weiner classifies three dimensions of attribution: locus, stability, and controllability. An individual uses these dimensions to explain her successes or failures. This explanation may then influence behavior and decisions the individual makes in the future. Weiner also contends that emotions may be linked to these attributions for success or failure.

"Locus" refers to where the causal attribution is perceived as being centered— internal or external. Weiner (1985) contends that this dimension should be labeled "locus of causality" and notes that a number of emotions are linked with this dimension, including pride and self-esteem. Examples of internal ascriptions for causality include ability and effort. The external locus of causality includes luck or chance, and negative or positive actions of others. Weiner notes that the literature supports a "hedonic bias" that is "a tendency for individuals to ascribe success to internal factors and failure to external factors" (p. 561). However, he also points out that internal attributions for failure may lead to depression and hopelessness.

Stability is the dimension that refers to whether or not the cause attributed to success or failure will change over time. This is an important component of "expectancy shifts" (Weiner, 2010) that are the individual's expectation of success or failure in a future similar situation or endeavor. According to Weiner, the "expectancy shift" may be downward or upward depending on where the locus of causality is perceived to be and

whether it is perceived to be subject to change over time. Thus, a poor grade that is attributed to lack of effort (internal), or simply bad luck (what one studied was not on the test) then the expectancy of doing better next time would not shift downward because the student could maintain hope that more effort or better luck will lead to a positive outcome the next time. However, if the student believes the cause of the F is stable or unchanging such as lack of ability (internal) or a difficult teacher (external), then the student would expect the same outcome on future tests and would begin to feel a sense of hopelessness. Weiner notes "causal stability, not "causal locus" is the foundation for "expectancy shifts." He states that "if the cause will prevail in the future then the prior effect will be anticipated to recur regardless of causal locus, whereas if the cause could change then so might the outcome" (Weiner, 2010, p. 31).

The third dimension of Weiner's taxonomy of attributions is controllability, which refers to whether or not the individual believes he has control over the cause of the event. Thus, personal effort as a cause of success or failure is viewed as something over which an individual has "volitional control," whereas aptitude is perceived as something a person does not control (Weiner, 1985). Therefore, if a student gets an F in math and attributes this to lack of effort, he may perceive himself as having control over the cause, whereas if he perceives himself has having no aptitude for math, he will not feel he has control over future outcomes.

Determinants for attributions.

Weiner (2010) identifies four major determinants for attributions – ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck or chance. Weiner states that ability, which he considers on a par

with aptitude, is internal, stable, and uncontrollable; effort, which is also internal, is unstable and controllable; objective task difficulty is controllable by the teachers but not by students and is external and stable; and luck (sometimes referred to as chance) is external, unstable, and uncontrollable.

Weiner (1985) also notes that there are linkages between attributions and "the emotions of pride, anger, pity, guilt, gratitude, shame, and hopelessness" (569). He claims that the causal dimensions are a key component in the process of eliciting certain emotions. Thus, he proposes a link between the emotions of pride and self-esteem and the causal locus. There is evidence to suggest that guilt is associated with controllability, especially with lack of effort. When an attribution for failure is attached to a stable cause, for example, lack of ability or skill that is not seen as changing over time, the dominant emotion will be hopelessness. The links between causal dimensions and emotions have implications for a study of student beliefs about success or failure in an academic achievement setting.

Brookhart (2009) gives a good example of how the three dimensions of attributions work in achievement settings. A student gets an F on a test. Does the student attribute this to stupidity—in which case the attribution would be stable, internal, and uncontrollable since the student might claim that aptitude is a genetic characteristic over which she has no control, or does the student believe the F is due to lack of study—then the attribution would be unstable (it would change when the student studied for the test), and internal, but controllable: when the student studies, she gets a better grade. Brookhart's example gives clarity to attribution theory but does not claim to test it;

however, attribution theory has been used in studies to test ways in which students find causality for success or failure in school.

Attributions across cultures.

Weiner (1979) notes that there may be cross-cultural differences in perceived causes of "achievement events." Despite the fact that he believes there is a small list of the main perceived reasons for success or failure, he finds evidence that suggests different cultures may emphasize the importance of different causations for success or failure. Examples Weiner cites include patience in Greece and Japan and tact in India.

Georgiou, Christou, Stavrinides, and Panaoura (2002) cite evidence that different cultures may use different parameters when assigning causality for events in an achievement setting. They indicate that there is evidence to suggest that in certain cultures on the continent of Asia, low achievement is attributed to lack of effort on the part of the student, while Western countries in parts of Europe and North America are more likely to attribute students' failure to a lack of ability.

In a study of how attributions are expressed during parent-teacher conferences in multi-ethnic schools, de Haan and Wissink (2013) cite evidence that indicates minority parents may have higher aspirations and expectations for their children than majority parents, but that teachers often appear to have lower expectations for the minority children. According to de Haan and Wissink, teachers attribute success to ability whereas the minority parents appear to attribute it to effort. In their study, de Haan and Wissink were trying to understand how expectations of school success were formed over time during discussions between teachers and parents. One of their conclusions is that to fully

understand attributions, researchers must take into account external social cognitions as well as the internal psychological ones. Attributions for school success, according to de Haan and Wissink "are not just fixed representations that people have in their minds but also are the result of multiple interactive enactments of these representations" (p. 311).

Attribution theory in the literature.

There is a significant body of literature using attribution theory in studies of student understanding of school success and failure. This literature includes studies of student perceptions of grading (Evans & Engelbert 1988), teacher behavior toward failing students (Georgiou et al. 2002), student explanations of success or failure in school (McClure et al 2011), student motivation (Zhou & Urhahne 2013), and student and parent attributions for success in multi-ethnic schools (De Haan & Wissink 2013). These studies all use attribution theory as part of a theoretical framework to support methodology and data analysis.

Evans and Engelberg (1988) used Weiner's attribution theory in their study of three areas relating to students' views on grades – attitudes about being graded, understanding of grading systems, and perceptions and attributions about why students get good grades. They used questionnaires across grade levels (fourth to eleventh grade) at different schools but noted these schools were predominantly white and middle class. Their findings suggested that what a teacher-assigned grade means to a student changes with students' ages. The older students believed grades were more important than younger students did, and the older the students, the more they expressed dissatisfaction with grades. Evans and Engelberg also found students with lower grades indicated they

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felt the cause was external and not controllable, whereas higher-achieving students appeared to believe that the cause was both internal and controllable. The researchers suggested the need for more evidence to support the finding that low-achieving students consistently attribute the cause for their performance to external and uncontrollable events. The researchers called for further study of "student perceptions of grades to understand better how grading practices may influence academic learning and personal-social development" (p. 52).

Georgiou, Christou, Stavrinides, and Panaoura (2002) examine relationships between teacher attributions for student failure and the behavior of the teacher toward the failing student. They found that the attributions teachers make for a student's failures affect their attitudes toward the child. When teachers attribute a student's lack of success to low ability, the teachers express pity for the child, but when the perceived attribution is for lack of effort, the teachers become angry with the student. One of the limitations of the study that the researchers note is that the participants were a group of Greek Cypriot teachers. The expectation was that they would behave in a similar manner to Western teachers; however, according to the researchers, some of the behaviors they reported, such as anger toward students and a tendency to give up quickly on failing students, may be culture-specific. As discussed earlier, culture-specific traits may affect attributions for success and failure.

As noted earlier in this review, De Haan and Wissink (2013) also concluded that attributions do not take place in a cultural vacuum. They used attribution theory to show how teachers, parents and students constructed explanations for school success in multi-

ethnic schools, and as discussed above, they point out the dangers of "only looking at attributions as beliefs or cognitions that different individuals or groups 'have'." (p. 309). These researches wanted to examine attributions in a naturalistic setting (parent-teacher conferences), and they stress the importance of taking the social and cultural context into consideration when using attribution theory to study reasons for success and failure.

Using attribution theory with an understanding that attributions may be affected by time, place, and culture has helped to formulate a methodology for attempting to identify how seventh grade students create meaning for their teacher-assigned grades.

Conclusion

The history, the research, and the studies cited in the first two sections of this chapter demonstrate that, despite the fact that leaders in the field are advocating for standards-based report cards, many districts, including the one where the data was gathered, are still using the A, B, C, D, F system of grading and arriving at those grades using averages.

Adolescents moving from a concrete view of the world into a more metacognitive perspective need to be able to use assessment to move forward intellectually. The traditional method of grading, which is what the 56 students in this study were experiencing, does not break down material into information on standards, nor does it give the student more than cursory feedback on where she stands in any given grading quarter. Thus, the attributions that the students make for their grades cannot be based on more than somewhat concrete and possibly erroneous information.

In the next chapter, the methodology used to collect and analyze data will be elucidated to demonstrate how the history, the research, and the theories discussed in this chapter influenced development of data collection tools.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The literature demonstrates both concerns about teacher-assigned grades and gaps
in the research regarding how students assign meaning to those grades. In order to
construct a methodology for working with young adolescents, the researcher must
consider what is developmentally appropriate. In this chapter, I will discuss my own
researcher bias and the data collection site. I will also describe the pool from which
participants were selected, and the methods used to collect and analyze the data.

The greatest challenge in a study such as this one where the goal is to learn about
seventh grade students' meaning-making for an educational phenomenon is the fact that
the researcher is an adult and that "[s]imply being the adult creates certain perceptions of
how children will interpret the questioning. Many will assume there is a positive valence
(the amount of power or authority exercised) to all questions" (Parkinson, 2001, p. 138).
The researcher-informant relationship needs to be carefully considered, both to protect
the young participants and to ensure that reliable data are collected.

The data collection methodology was developed from consideration of three areas
of student experience that help to illuminate how students make meaning of teacher-
assigned grades: 1) the actual grade, 2) the student's meaning for a grade in relationship

to self, and 3) the student's projection of his/her own experience with grades onto others (may indicate meanings of which the student is not immediately conscious).

To collect data on the first area—the actual grade—I asked Ms. Read, an ELA teacher at Cormorant Middle School in Bayside City, to provide the actual fourth quarter grade that each student in the study received. Ms. Read agreed to this, and the principal of Cormorant Middle School gave written permission to conduct this research at the school. To collect data on the second area of experience—the student's meaning for a teacher-assigned grade in relationship to self—I asked students to write narrative responses to a writing prompt, and then engaged in participant observation while students received report cards at the end of the third quarter. Finally, to collect data on the third area—the student's projection of his/her own experience with grades onto others—I conducted two focus groups in which vignettes were used as the focus of the group discussion. These methods yielded field notes, student-written narratives, and transcripts of focus groups. Each data collection strategy is discussed in detail below.

Researcher Bias Statement

My own experiences as a student being graded, as a parent examining my children's report cards, and as a teacher assigning grades to students means I not only have had a sustained and intensive experience with the topic of what grades mean to students, but I also have a strong positionality (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.30) in regard to the study. My interest in the topic of middle school grades goes back to my own experiences as a middle school student being graded in a rigid system based on moving averages.

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Reflection on my own experiences has led me to believe that I have an emotional reaction to grades and report cards. My memories of my own and my classmates' experiences in a strict, inflexible system, provide the basis for my deep interest in wanting to know what grades and report cards mean to seventh grade students. When I was in school I found that no matter how hard I tried, once I had received low grades early in the quarter I was "locked in." Grading by averaging a complete quarter of grades means the only way to make up for a low grade early in the quarter is to make sure that all the other grades are high, very high. Averaging all grades in a quarter may not give an accurate assessment of growth and mastery (Ritchey 2000).

My personal interest in the topic of scholastic or academic grades goes back to these early educational experiences. My elementary and secondary education was in New York City in an independent school with Catholic affiliations. This school had a form of quarterly torture know as "Notes." This was the day when the whole school would file into the auditorium and sit silently by classes before a semi-circle of teachers seated at the front of the room facing the student body. I can still smell the polish on the shiny parquet floor, see the wooden chairs with green seats and backs filled with uniformed girls all wearing white gloves—the whole scene illuminated by the thin winter sunlight falling through the French windows. Then, grade by grade, some years from first grade up, others from 8th grade down, each teacher would call the name of each student in her class. The student would stand up and the teacher would read the student's grades aloud. The girl would then bob a curtsey and say "Thank you, Miss Smith," or "Thank you, Sister Theresa." The girls with the smug expressions had straight As. Those with at least

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respectable grades looked relieved, and those, like me, who had given up on even getting straight Bs, often looked tearful, I usually felt ill knowing that I was in for a tough time when I got home. But the girl who probably suffered the most each "notes" day was Jillian. I remember one "notes" day when she had a straight F report card. The teacher, not content with just saying "F," read in a clipped, no-nonsense tone "English: Failure; Mathematics: Failure; Social Studies: Failure" and so on down the list. Jillian bobbed and whispered, "Thank you, Miss Smith," then sat down and burst into tears. Those quarterly public announcements of grades were among the worst experiences of my school years.

As a researcher it is important that I keep in mind my tendency to think negatively about grades. As a child I did not believe that I had any control over my grade. While I knew I was not the perfect straight A student, my grades were often an unpleasant surprise for me. I struggled for years to learn to be a student. I wanted to be a "good" student, and I wanted to learn, but gradually I became convinced that I could not do it. The adults around me pointed to my mediocre grades as evidence that I was incapable of comprehending math or science. I was a poor speller; therefore I got bad English grades. No one ever once asked what these letters and/or numbers really meant in terms of my learning. No teacher ever thought to investigate what was going on at home. Neither parent nor teacher ever thought to ask me what I thought my grades meant. I know Jillian (who probably had a specific learning disability) sincerely believed she was very stupid, so she gave up trying. I finally gave up in seventh grade, and in one quarter I deliberately failed everything. I remember consciously thinking, "I'll show them!" I suppose I wanted attention. Actually failing everything turned out to be as much effort as passing

everything would have been. This is the only time I can remember feeling I had any control over my grades.

It was not until my junior year of college that I finally began to believe that I was in control of my grades. I learned I had the capacity to be a "good" student. I learned this through a combination of studying subjects for which I had a passion and earning high grades in a statistics course by hard work, and asking for clarification when I needed it. All of my earliest experiences have led to a strong bias against grading systems. It is important that I remember that as a researcher I am looking for data, that I do not know what I will find when I begin working with students, and that it is critical for me to be open to all findings, whether or not they agree with my own personal experiences.

Memories of report cards arouse strong emotions in many people. When presenting my research in a graduate seminar one day, I was overwhelmed by the way others began to jump in with emotional responses to my proposed topic. Grades are an important part of school life; yet we rarely talk about them other than to boast about our own or our children's good grades and to keep silent about anything less than an "A." As a parent, I know I have put much too much pressure on my children to "get good grades." There is too much at stake—a place in a good college and all that means in terms of future opportunities—to expect grades to be abolished. This leads to the question of whether or not a letter on a report card that may or may not be objective and valid should have the power to shape a child's future.

Grading is a huge responsibility. As a teacher, four times a year I struggle with grading children in an urban school located in a community with a high rate of poverty.

Do I assess my students based on effort? Should I assess based on how they are likely to do on high-stakes state and district assessment tests? Do I grade them in comparison with their more affluent peers in suburban schools? What standards should I be using? What will be the psychological effect of the grade I give? It is a huge responsibility.

The literature shows that there are many disparities in teachers' grading practices even in the same school and on the same academic team, not to mention from school to school and city to suburbs (McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002; Marzano, 2000; Cross & Fray, 1999; Brookhart, 1994). Thus, one has to wonder how seventh grade students negotiate different grading practices as they encounter up to six academic teachers in a day.

Working in the public schools in an urban district, I face many grading dilemmas. I also have to interpret mixed messages from administration. The paper work that NCLB and Race to the Top initiatives demand for students who "fail" a year means there is tremendous pressure on us to "pass" everyone. At the same time, teachers are pressured to train students to score "proficient" or "advanced" on high-stakes tests. In one elementary school where I worked, the principal wanted everything to "match." A child's Stanford test scores, MCAS scores, and class grades had to align. The principal sometimes sent grades back to teachers saying they were "too high." In the middle school where I currently work, not all students receive a mid-quarter progress report. Only those students who are failing a course at the mid-quarter receive a "warning card." These are distributed during the afternoon homeroom period. Since only those students who are failing receive one of these warning cards, it is easy for all students to figure out who is

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failing a course. This practice is as much an invasion of privacy as were my childhood grading experiences.

These personal and professional experiences have led me to make certain assumptions that may or may not be true for all students and all teachers:

1) Grades represent a form of oppression for some students.

2) Grades should be private but are often public, which leads to humiliation for the student and a negative view of herself as a learner.

3) Seventh grade students do not believe they have positive control over their grades; therefore, they sometimes take a negative path and refuse to do work, thus causing failing grades. This may create a negative pattern for the student and cause the student to have less and less confidence in himself as a learner, leading a student to consider dropping out of school.

I have watched teachers manipulate grades, I have seen students manipulate teachers for grades, and I have seen parents come in to demand good grades for their children. I have come to believe that grades are part of a system of oppression designed to allow some to succeed and force others to fail. True academic liberation that will empower students to transform their lives may well mean eliminating the current grading system from education.

In the following section I will outline my data collection tools and methods of analysis. I am attempting to study and understand the multiple contexts of a "pedagogical phenomenon" (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2006). I am attempting to learn something about the students' experience as learners, because this phenomenon is part of

the experience that students live. I need to go to the students themselves to learn how they create meaning for the phenomenon known as teacher-assigned grades.

Urban Location

The participants for this study were recruited from an urban public middle school in an old industrial city in the southeastern region of Massachusetts. The United States Census bureau (2006) categorizes "urban" as "areas having a population density of at least 1,000 persons per square mile and a total population of at least 50,000." The city where the public middle school used in this study is located had a population of 92,538 in 2006 according to the data on the census website.

It is a city with a rich and varied history that has drawn in a diversity of cultures. Initially, the city's wealth was the result of whaling in the 1800s. The whaling ships attracted immigrants from the Azores to the South Sea Islands. All of this is documented in city records held by such institutions as the local public library, the city hall, and a local museum. Later in the 19th century mills sprang up along the river. The textile mills attracted workers from Northern England and other areas of Great Britain as well as a number of French Canadians. Areas of the city still contain neighborhoods dominated by Portuguese from the Azores and Madeira, as well as the mixed races from Cape Verde and Brazil. Other neighborhoods harbor French Canadians, descendants of the British mill workers, and Polish immigrants. The Jewish population was, at one time, large enough to support two synagogues.

The fishing industry is still a major part of the city's economic base. This industry has attracted among others Norwegians, Azoreans, Cape Verdeans, and within the last

decade Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and, most recently, Central and South Americans as well as Chinese and Vietnamese. Many of the most recent immigrants come to work in the fish houses.

The school in which the study was done is a large urban public middle school with approximately 1,200 students. It has been divided into three autonomous subunits within the larger school. The school is divided into three houses, Red House, Gold House, and Blue House. According to the principles of "schools within schools" (Ready, Lee, & Welner 2004, Jacobson, 2001, Sicoli 2000), each house is on a separate floor of the building with its own administrator, teams of academic teachers in three grades – sixth, seventh, and eighth – and its own guidance counselor, clerk, and set of house rules.

The school is located in a high poverty community as evidenced by the large numbers of children on the free and reduced lunch program and by the fact that it is a Title I school.

At the time of the data collection, the school was designated as a "commonwealth priority school" which means that it was considered underperforming as a result of not meeting its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Data used to calculate AYP includes Math and English test scores and attendance numbers. As a "commonwealth priority school," Cormorant Middle School developed a target intervention and restructuring plan designed to improve student performance.

When data was collected, the school was in the second year of restructuring in mathematics and the first year of restructuring in English Language Arts. The performance rating for ELA was "Moderate" although the improvement rating was

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labeled "declined". In mathematics the performance rating was "very low," and the improvement rating was "improved below target."

Characteristics of Participants

The participants in this study were drawn from a pool of 56 seventh grade students at an urban public middle school in southeastern Massachusetts. All students were from one team in the same "house"—yellow house.

The diversity of ethnic backgrounds found in the city is reflected in the population of the middle school used for this study, which was one reason for choosing it. The city has three middle schools; the school where this study was conducted is in the center of the city and draws from several populations. According to the 2007-2008 school report card, the school's demographic includes 17.3 percent African American or Black students; 29.1 percent Hispanic or Latino; and 42.8 percent White. Another 9.4 percent are Multi-race, Non-Hispanic and 0.6 percent is Asian and another 0.6 percent is Native American. The report card does not include a further breakdown; however a significant number of the students labeled Black or Multi-race have a full or partial Cape Verdean background. At the time the data was collected, more than 75 percent of the students participated in the free and reduced lunch program. In addition, according to the 2008-2009 report card, 20.4 percent of the students came from families where English is not the first language. There were more males than females in the school: 54.5 percent were males, 45.5 percent were female.

The report card shows that 21 percent of the students are special education students, compared to 19 percent in the district and 17.1 percent in the state. The goals

on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for special education students may affect how these students are graded and may also affect their ideas of what their grades mean. The school uses an inclusion model. I therefore asked the teacher ahead of time if any of the students needed any special accommodations such as scribing. She told me that none of the students I would be working with had this type of accommodation in their plans.

Recruiting Process

Students were selected from one of the three floors of the school. Because I did not work in the school, I was easily able to present myself as an outside observer to students. It was important that the students viewed me as a researcher – an impartial, objective outsider – in order to avoid students fearing that I would have any input into their grades. No individual has been identified, and students were told that no teacher would have access to results of the study unless the teacher happened to read the anonymous group report in this paper. Students had to feel free to tell their stories and voice their opinions in a non-threatening milieu.

Just prior to the end of a quarter I asked students to write a short response to a question about what grade they felt they had earned in ELA and why they should receive that grade. Later, I asked the teacher, Ms. Read, to provide the actual grades the students received so as to compare the actual grades to the grades the students said they expected.

I initially planned to recruit two or three small focus groups of students (no more than five in each group) from the larger group. Originally, I had hoped to have a stratified purposeful sample (Miles & Huberman 1994) that would represent the demographic makeup of the school, but not enough students volunteered for the focus

groups, and students also had certain days they could not meet. As a result, I accepted the students who volunteered and returned signed permission forms, then organized them into two groups and gave them choices of days to stay after school to participate in the groups.

Collateral Site Approval

I had written permission from the principal of the school to conduct this research at Cormorant Middle School. The Bayside City Public School District does not have an official research protocol or an office for research. All requests are made to the building administrator.

Data Collection

I collected data through participant observation, document analysis, and focus groups that yielded field notes, transcripts of focus groups and samples of student writing about grades. What I was looking for in analysis of this material was insight into the thought process of young adolescents as they make meaning for their teacher-assigned grades. In constructing a methodology for this type of inquiry with early adolescents, it was crucial to consider the role that the school setting might play in limiting responses, in addition to the fact that students might view me, as a researcher, as a type of teacher (Cappello, 2005).

In looking at grades as an educational phenomenon, I would argue that students experience grades in three ways. First, there is the concrete reality of the grade itself. This represents their actual average, progress, or achievement according to the teacher. Data related to this experience – the concrete reality – are simply the actual grades a

student receives. This data came from the teacher when she provided the actual grade that each student in the study received in that quarter. The grade is part of the student's permanent school record. In Cormorant Middle School there is no standard method of calculating grades. Each teacher calculates grades based on her own educational philosophy.

Second, there is the student's own meaning for a grade. That is, what the student believes should be on the report card. In order to gain insight into what students think their grades should be, I collected narratives from students about what they believe their grade on the next report card should be and why they think this.

Finally, there is the way the student projects her experience with grades onto others. Projection of the experience onto others as a way of gathering data was the rationale behind the use of vignettes in the focus groups. This will be explained in more detail later in the chapter. The data collection methodology was developed from consideration of these three areas of student experience.

Student narratives

The first set of data I collected were the elicited narratives from students in their ELA classes. I spent a day at the school and in each class asked students to write a paragraph responding to a prompt. The prompt was as follows:

What grade do you believe you have earned this quarter in this class?

Explain why you believe you have earned this grade.

I made a typescript of all student responses in order to code the narratives and look for patterns or themes. The purpose of this was to find out if themes or patterns other than those suggested by the literature appear in student work.

Observations

I observe Ms. Read's homeroom students, who were among the 56 who participated in the elicited narratives portion of data collection, when report cards were distributed. By observing student behaviors when they receive the report card and taking detailed notes on body language, facial expressions, and student comments to each other as they receive their report cards, I hoped to get a deeper sense of what this ritual actually means to students in order to help me contextualize the role the report card plays in the students' lives.

Focus groups with Vignettes

The major advantage to using focus groups for a study of young adolescents' meaning making lies in the fact that "this method is socially oriented, studying participants in an atmosphere more natural than artificial experimental circumstances and more relaxed than a one-to-one interview" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 114). Early adolescents are very social; they like interactions with one another, and may feel more relaxed in a group setting than in one-to-one interviews. However, Marshall and Rossman point out there are disadvantages to focus groups including "the issue of power dynamics." This means the interviewer may have less control than in a one-on-one interview. Marshall and Rossman note further disadvantages: lost time when discussion veers toward irrelevant issues, the difficulty with integrating data analysis of the narrative

with the context, the need for special room arrangements, and the need for "highly trained observer moderators." Additionally, groups can be difficult to put together and there may be logistical problems associated with management of the interview while gathering quality data. Nevertheless, in this study I believe the advantages outweighed any perceived disadvantages.

I wanted enough students in each group to allow me the "flexibility to explore unanticipated issues as they arise in the discussion" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.114) as well as providing a method large enough to check early conclusions, but small enough to allow students to feel comfortable both with myself as the researcher and each other. I certainly encountered difficulty in putting groups together. I had hoped to have more students volunteer. Transportation issues, after school activities, and possibly disinterest mean that fewer students volunteered than I had anticipated. Nevertheless, those who did volunteer were enthusiastic and more than willing to share their thoughts on the vignettes and on the issue of teacher-assigned grades.

The discussion tool used in the focus group was a set of five vignettes. Vignettes in qualitative research are associated with a scenario devised by the researcher, which is designed to prompt participants "to think aloud about ways in which they would frame, think about, and resolve" certain problems, experiences, or issues in their own lives. Wepner, Wilhite, and D'Onofrio (2002) describe using vignettes saying that the "think aloud protocol with vignettes offered the opportunity to have direct evidence of [participants'] reasoning strategies as they grappled with four different situations. This approach was intended to elicit responses that were less canned and more spontaneous

than answers to the type of interview questions used in previous research" (p. 41) These researchers presented their participants with four vignettes and asked for the participants to comment on each.

In my groups, I provided each student in the group with a copy of the vignette and then I also read it aloud. Next, I asked a series of follow-up questions designed to allow students to fill in the spaces of the simple stories, and to tell me what was going on in the stories so that through the students' discussion of others experiences I could begin to make inferences about how they made meaning of teacher-assigned grades.

The expectation in this study was that in a casual, after school meeting complete with snacks such as pizza and soda, students would be relaxed and willing to share their thoughts on several vignettes about grades and report cards. I found this to be the case. The students were very willing to talk, to share their thoughts, and were quite animated at certain points as they gave their opinions on the vignettes.

In constructing the following vignettes, I attempted several things. I tried to keep all emotion out of them. I tried to avoid loaded or judgmental language, and I also tried to keep them devoid of any reference to gender by using unisex names and writing them to avoid use of gender. My hope was that any student, male or female of any ethnic background would be able to feel a connection to the vignettes and thus be comfortable discussing them. The vignettes are as follows:

Vignette One

Sydney does most of the assigned school work, asks to make up missing work, does most homework, but does not do all homework. Sydney does not always complete work but does turn it in. At the end of the term Sydney gets a C.

The follow up questions are:

Why does Sydney get a C?

What does Sydney feel?

Vignette Two

On report card day Colby is standing by the lockers with a friend. The two students are comparing their report cards. The English teacher walks down the hall. Seeing the English teacher in the hall Colby asks, "Why did you give me a C?"

The first question I asked students after reading the vignette was "What is going on here?" Other follow up questions were "How do you think Colby feels?" After getting a response I asked, "Why does Colby feel that way?" Other possible follow up questions I had ready to ask were, "Should Colby feel that way? Why?" The idea is to ask questions that were as non-leading, and be as neutral as possible in order to elicit the most honest responses form students.

Vignette Three

Jayden completes all work and generally gets As. Just before the end of the quarter, Jayden goes to the teacher and asks, "Am I passing?" The teacher picks up the grade books and says to Jayden, "All your class assignments are completed. All your homework is completed. You have a 91 average on your tests and quizzes and an A on the quarter project. All your written work meets the standard we have been working on. What do you think your grade is?"

The first question was: Why does this student not know what the grade is? Why does Jayden ask this question? Another question was: What grade should Jayden expect? What do you think is going on here?

Vignette Four

Jessie has not completed an English assignment all quarter. Jessie has also not read the assigned books and stories. Jessie spends most of the class time talking to friends, chewing gum, folding paper, writing notes to friends, and doodling on work papers. Jessie never does homework. The day before grades close for the quarter, Jessie goes to the teacher after school and asks for extra credit work. "I want to bring up my grade," Jessie tells the teacher.

What do you think the teacher will say? Why will the teacher say that? What should Jessie do to ensure bringing up the grade? Why did Jessie ask for extra credit work? Should the teacher have given Jessie extra credit work?

Vignette four is a sequel to Vignette Three. Rather than having one long vignette I decided to break the concept of what effect not doing work has on grades and what students should do to get a good grade into two separate vignettes in order to get a better sense of what students think about these concepts.

Vignette Five

The teacher gives Jessie a packet of make up work containing 10 of Jessie's missing assignments. Jessie completes two assignments that night and turns them in the next day. Jessie does not finish any more of the work. A week later report cards are issued. Jessie is surprised by the English grade.

What do you think Jessie had for a grade? Why do you think that? Why is Jessie surprised by the grade?

The focus group discussions were tape-recorded, and I later constructed a typescript of the recordings.

Informed Consent

In order to ensure that the participants were properly informed and knowingly consented to participating in the research, one week before students were asked to write the narrative, I provided each child with two copies of the passive parent permission form

(see appendix A) for the parent/guardian. I asked the teacher if any of the families needed to have this information sent home in Spanish or Portuguese, and she said that none of the families had asked for any school information in another language. For the narratives, I used a passive consent form, which meant the parent/guardian only needed to check a box and sign if they did not want the child to participate. They were asked to return one copy to school in an envelope I provided and keep one for themselves. The students gave the envelopes to Ms. Read, who gave them to me. Only one child brought back a signed form to say he could not participate. He was given an alternative task assigned by Ms. Read on a paper that looked exactly like the writing prompt so that no one would know who was a participant and who was not.

One week prior to beginning the focus groups I gave the volunteer students recruited for the focus groups a sealed envelope with a parent/guardian permission form (see Appendix A). One copy of the consent form was to be signed and returned in the envelope to Ms. Read, who gave them to me; the other was for the parents to keep.

Once all permission forms had been returned, I arranged a time with the students for the focus group. I distributed the assent forms, went over them with the students, and allowed them time to ask me any questions they had. At the beginning of each focus group I reminded students that they are free to stop, to leave, or to end participation in the focus group at any time without penalty.

Ethical Issues

This study has benefited from real stories from real seventh graders about their experiences with grades. I hope that it also benefited the participants of the study by

encouraging them to be more reflective about themselves as learners. The nature of the research questions, my own status as an outsider (I was neither a teacher nor an administrator at the proposed site), and confidentiality resulting from careful protection of participant anonymity and privacy meant I was able to provide protection to the greatest degree possible for a vulnerable population.

Ideally, the process of writing about their grades, then talking about the experiences of others (in the vignettes) encouraged the participating students to begin to think about what active learning means. If the assumption I have made – that some students may not feel in control of their grades – is true, then I hope that participation in this study has helped make students aware that they can take control of their learning experiences.

It was important to ensure that the study benefited participants as well as maintaining researcher neutrality so as not to marginalize or disempower the study participants (Creswell, 2003). I gave serious consideration to all ethical dilemmas that might impact participants in this study with intent to protect the well-being of participants in every way possible so that there would be minimal threat to participants. No names are on the written portion of the study. Both the site and the students who participate in the focus groups and interviews were only identified with pseudonyms. I designed the project with the object of causing no harm to participants or to allow any significant disruption of the setting. I worked hard to maintain careful neutrality during focus groups.

In order to maintain ethical standards in the research, I was careful to see that the purpose of the study was clearly described to the participants. In order to avoid deception, I made sure that the participants understood the purpose of the study. I was careful to let the students know they could ask questions at any time and that they could choose not to participate at any time.

Conclusion

This study asks a question about what an educational phenomenon means to urban students. In order to understand how these students create meaning for this phenomenon – teacher-assigned grades – I went directly to the students in order to collect data for analysis.

The combination of student writing, and the transcripts of focus groups along with field notes resulted in data for coding that provided a rich perspective of student reflection and allowed their meaning-making of teacher-assigned grades to emerge.

Recent research has clearly demonstrated increasing educational disengagement and apathy among urban students. The high dropout rate in Massachusetts' schools may be attributed in part to this academic apathy. One part of this problem may be the result of academic failure that some students experience in grading period after grading period, year after year, when they receive low grades on report cards. Educators and policy makers need to understand more clearly how students give meaning to teacher-assigned grades and what that means in the bigger picture of school success or failure. In the next chapter I will discuss the analysis of the data.

CHAPTER 4.

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This study explores what a teacher-assigned grade on a report card might mean to a seventh grade student. The three research questions that formed the basis for this study are:

1. How do 56 seventh grade English Language Arts students in an urban middle school make *meaning* of their teacher-assigned grades?

2. What do 56 seventh grade ELA students in an urban middle school believe about their *control* over the teacher-assigned grade?

3. What evidence, if any, can be found supporting a relationship between attribution for success or failure and the academic performance of these students?

In this chapter I will describe the data collection process, including classroom observations, elicited narratives, report card data and focus groups. Next, I will discuss the data analysis procedures, including the explanation and rationale for coding of data. I will then look at the initial data analysis before describing in detail the thematic data that arose from the coding. Finally, I will discuss my conclusions following the data analysis.

Data Collection

      Data for this study were collected during a four-month period in the spring of

2010. Total N for the study was 62 seventh grade Language Arts Students in Cormorant

Middle School. Four data collection methods were used: classroom observation of

students receiving report cards, elicited narratives using vignettes, two rounds of focus

groups, and actual report card data. Table 4.1 shows the timeline for data collection and

the number of participants associated with each method.

Table 4.1

Data Collection Timeline: April-June 2009-2010 school year

April	1st week May	3rd week May	June
Observed 19 students in one homeroom receiving report cards. 19 students = 31% of the entire 62 on the team.	Collected 56 elicited narratives during four ELA classes. 56 equal 90% of 62 students.	Returned to school on two separate days after school for focus groups. One group had 7 students; one had 5 students. Total of 12 students which was 19% of total 62	Received report card data on 56 students from ELA teacher.

      The first data set was collected during a classroom observation of the 19 students

in Ms. Read's homeroom receiving their third quarter report cards. The elicited narratives

were the next piece of data collected. At this point, students were asked to say what they

believed their grade on the final report card of the year would be, and why they thought

they would have that grade. Fifty-six ELA students took part in that part of the data

collection. A more comprehensive discussion of this process follows in the next section.

At the end of the school year, Ms. Read shared the fourth quarter grades with me so I

could compare them to the grades the students said they expected. Finally, I conducted

two focus groups with 12 students. This will be discussed in more detail in the next

section. This section includes several charts to show both the timeline of data collection

as well the sorting process for the codes. The timeline of data collection is shown above

in Exhibit 4.1.

Setting and participants.

The 56 participants were recruited from a middle school in "Bayside City," an old

industrial city in Massachusetts. Bayside City has a rich history predating European

settlements. The first people, including various tribes such as the Pokanokets, populated

the area prior to the arrival of the English because of the comparatively mild climate and

the plethora of fish and wildlife. Historians believe that in the sixteenth century European

fishermen spread diseases that decimated the native populations. Prior to these diseases,

the Pokanokets in the region of present-day Bayside City had an estimated population of

more than 12,000. When the English began to explore the region in 1602, the Pokanoket

population was down to an estimated 5,000.

In 1652 English settlements began to be established in what is now known as

Bayside City. One of the sects that settled in the region was the Society of Friends,

known as the Quakers. They were very influential in the establishment of the whaling

industry, which brought great wealth to the city.

For about 100 years whaling dominated the economy of the city. The discovery of petroleum in Pennsylvania in 1859 led to a decline in the demand for whale oil, which led to the eventual decline of the whaling industry. As the whaling industry waned, the availability of river water to power mills led to the growth of the textile industry in the city. The mills needed workers and wave after wave of immigrants arrived to work the looms. Immigrant groups included British workers from Northern England, Irish, French Canadians, and East European Jewish immigrants, Portuguese mainly from the Azores and Madeira, and Cape Verdeans.

Prior to the Civil War, many self-emancipated enslaved Africans from the South also made their way to Bayside City, which was a destination on the Underground Railroad. The elite and powerful of the city at that time were mainly members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) who were sympathetic to the plight of enslaved persons, in favor of emancipation, and were both willing and able to protect them from recapture.

The rise of the factory system led to the construction of large factory complexes, three-decker worker housing, schools, and hospitals, which resulted in less open space. In addition to textile mills, other industries also established factories in the city including a toy factory, a boot factory, and a sealing wax factory. The factory culture was dominant until the early 20th century, when the factories began to move south in search of cheaper labor.

Currently, Bayside City still has several factories that are operational, but the big factory-style industry is fish processing. The most recent immigrants from Central America work in the fish houses.

The growth of population in the city in the 19th and early 20th century also meant more schools needed to be built. Initially, many of the schools were K-8 schools because many students left school after 8th grade to work in the mills. After World War II, a large, new high school was built, and at the beginning of the 21st century three new middle schools were constructed.

The middle school where data were collected is one of three in the city and is referred to as Cormorant Middle School. Cormorant Middle School is divided into three "houses," one on each floor. Participants were recruited from the English Language Arts students in one house called the "yellow house". Sixty-two students from the "yellow house" seventh grade team were in school on the day that elicited narratives were collected. Of the sixty-two students, 56 agreed to participate in the elicited narrative portion of the data collection. Of these fifty-six, 30 were boys and 26 were girls.

The students who took part in the focus groups were recruited from the 56 participants who returned narrative responses. The students who took part in the focus group were essentially a convenience sample. I was dependent on volunteers and, because I was working with a vulnerable population, I felt I needed to be very careful during the recruitment process not to pressure any student to participate or to overstep the boundaries of the protocol approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

Report card day.

The first data collected were the field notes recorded on the day third quarter report cards were distributed. I observed 19 students from the group of 62 students from which participants were recruited. The reason why these 19 were observed is that they

were in the cooperating teacher's homeroom. Thus this group was a "convenience sample."

Additionally, after collecting the elicited texts, the teacher was asked to supply the final grade for all participants. This was done so that the expected grade could be compared to the actual assigned grades (see Exhibit 4.3, p. xxx).

Narratives.

Six weeks after the third quarter grades were distributed, I returned to collect a set of elicited written narratives from the students on the team where the prior observation had been made. Fifty-six seventh grade students, all of whom were on the same academic team with the same ELA teacher, wrote narratives. They responded to the prompt:

What grade do you believe you have on your report card in English for this quarter of the 2009-2010 school year? Explain why you believe you have this grade.

It is important to note that this prompt was given near the end of the final quarter of the school year in June. This is significant because a close reading of the narratives and the patterns that arose from the coding raises questions about how students would respond if they were asked this question at a different time during the school year. At this point in the school year, students have had ample opportunity to discern what qualities the teacher values.

Comments on the report card may be another influence on students' meaning making for teacher-assigned grades. Ms. Read provided me with a copy of the comments available for teachers. These comments have number codes that the teachers bubbled in on report card scantron sheets. No allowance was made for personalized comments, and the available comments were either positive or negative, with no nuances or qualifiers. For example, negative comments included such phrases as "major project not completed," "seldom participates in class," "needs to improve study habits," "needs to control talking in class," and "generally disruptive behavior." Positive comments included such phrases as "pleasure to have in class," "works well with others," "shows creativity," and "conscientious."

One recurring theme in both elicited narratives and in focus groups was work completed or not completed and the effect students believed this had on their grades. Students also seem to believe that behavior is part of the grade. The fact that the district only allows for comments that emphasize behavior as well as work completed or not completed may influence student meaning-making for their teacher-assigned grade. A student who sees the comment "generally disruptive behavior," adjacent to his grade for all the years of middle school may well believe that the behavior is the major determinant of his grade rather than mastery of skills and content.

Focus groups.

Twelve students took part in the two focus groups, seven in one group and five in the other. Originally, the proposal was for three groups of up to five students. As discussed above, not enough students volunteered for the focus groups, and students also

had certain days they could not meet. As a result, the students were organized into two groups and given choices of days to stay after school to participate in the groups.

In the focus groups students were read vignettes about grading situations in a middle school. They were then given an opportunity to comment on the vignettes. Later, transcripts were made of the focus groups and coded.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected from the 56 students at Cormorant Middle School included elicited student narratives regarding their anticipated grades as well as the actual teacher-assigned grades. The data also included tapes of two focus groups with five students in one group and seven in the other and researcher field notes that included observations on the day third quarter grades were distributed.

Coding.

The process for data analysis began with close reading of the transcripts to look for patterns that might help answer the research questions. The theoretical framework guided the identification of patterns. For example, the first thing I looked for were patterns that would show what attributions students appeared to be making for their grades. When I began to see certain patterns, I flagged them and identified them for analysis using particular words or codes to assist me in organizing my findings. For example, I identified a pattern of words and phrases referring to the work turned in, work completed, or work not completed and designated this by the code word "work."

In order to track the data more accurately and efficiently as I coded it, I used a software program called HyperResearch designed for qualitative data analysis. This

software was a repository to help store, organize, and sort the data. The program allowed for creation of a study file to hold the data, lists of codes and coded source material. The use of this software assisted in identifying how many times I had assigned code words to data. It also helped me to streamline the sorting process. The program itself was not designed to assist with the actual coding; it was, in effect, an electronic index card box.

Keeping track of the words and phrases I had chosen as code words in the software program helped me to dig deeper into the data and allow patterns to arise from the data rather than attacking it with preconceived ideas about categories. Frequency counts of words and categories of words were the initial type of coding I did with HyperResearch.

Initial codes suggested categories that could be combined as well as analyzed individually. This allowed the examination of patterns within the categories that could be used to tease out less obvious meanings.

Finally, themes that arose from the data were analyzed using the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Two to arrive at some understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

Initial Data Analysis

Report card distribution.

The first data collected were field notes from observations in the classroom. The researcher visited the classroom on the day third quarter grades were distributed arriving at 2 p.m., which was a half-hour before the end of the school day when report cards were handed out.

The classroom was on the second floor of a three-year old, three-story brick school building. Windowed classroom doors allowed glimpses of the other classrooms in the building. The six classrooms before the one being observed were all set up in traditional rows; some of the classrooms had desks together in pairs and some were individual seating.

The classroom being observed was also set up in traditional rows. The desks – four rows of five and one row of four – faced the three double windows on the west wall overlooking the inner courtyard of the school. The teacher's desk was along the north wall, facing south. Motivational posters above the white boards on the north and south walls had slogans such as "No Whining Anytime," and "Quiet Learning in Progress." There were five bulletin boards in the room: two four-foot-square ones on either side of the white boards and one that was eight feet by four feet on the west wall above the computers. Most of the bulletin boards had been stripped of student work and other academic information because of recent MCAS testing. In the field notes the room was described as "traditional."

The last class of the day ended at 2:20; at this time students returned to their homerooms where report cards would be distributed. The report cards had been given to the teacher as a pile of computer printouts with carbon paper between the white originals and the pink copies. The teacher had to separate the report cards and copies in advance of distribution.

Nineteen students returned to homeroom.

"Everyone here take a seat and sit down," the teacher said from a sitting position at her desk. "You are all going to get a report card in a minute." The teacher picked up the thin pink paper carbon copies of the report cards. The white originals were on her desk to be held until students brought back signed copies.

OK, are we all back?"

The teacher stood up holding pink report cards and walked to the front of the windows facing the desks.

"I'm scared to look at my report card," said a boy at the back of the room.

The teacher repeated, "Ok, everybody, take a seat. All right kids – as always this is confidential. It's nobody else's business. No one needs to look over the shoulders. Keep it confidential 'til you are outside the building."

The teacher folded the report cards lightly in half, print side inward and handed them to students one by one. Students immediately unfolded them and looked at them.

The boy who had said he was scared to look at the report card said, "Ohhhh," raising his arm in a fist and quickly lowering it in the sign for "yes!" He smiled and leaned back in his chair, all the while staring at his report card. When the students left the room, the teacher told the researcher that this boy wanted A's but indicated each quarter that he was scared he would not have A's. She showed the researcher the copy of his report card; on it there were 2 A+'s, 3 A's, and one B+.

From all parts of the room came student voices commenting on the report cards. One student said, "No C's." A girl leaned over to look at a boy's report card. Other students made comments such as:

"I got straight A's. I'm so happy."

"I would have got straight A's if it wasn't for Mrs. Watson."

"What does W mean?"

"Can we leave?"

Students stood up and clustered in pairs and triplets looking at report cards. The comments about the report cards continued:

"She gave me B's."

"Oh, she got a B."

"I'm mad--gimmie an A – at least!"

It took the teacher less than five minutes to hand out the report cards. Students went to their lockers and returned to the room to wait for dismissal. They continued to talk about the report cards.

"I got 3 F's I swear it. God, I got 3 F's"

"What did you get in social studies?" One boy asked another as they looked at each other's report cards.

Most students appeared cheerful. One girl looked at her report card and folded it. She asked the teacher: "May I rip this off?" referring to the computer edge with the holes. Students continued to cluster in small groups, looking at each other's report cards.

"I got a B; she keeps giving me B's," one boy said.

"Michael got an F in social studies."

"I can't stay back! Look, I didn't get all F's!"

A voice over the intercom announces, "Yellow House is dismissed." The students kept talking about the report cards as they left the room.

"What did you get in social studies?"

"The only thing I went down in was Math. I suck at Math."

During the five minutes between the time the teacher began handing out the report cards and the time the students were dismissed from the room by the voice on the intercom, some form of the verb "to give" was recorded 11 times.

Thematic Data Analysis

I transcribed the narratives elicited from the students, as well as the data from the two focus groups recording the material exactly as the students wrote it with no corrections to their grammar and spelling errors. This was done to preserve the authentic student voice. These typescripts were coded using the program HyperResearch. Field notes were also transcribed and coded. Finally, a table was created comparing the expected grade with the actual teacher-assigned grade.

The frequency of words used by participants in both the elicited texts and the focus groups were sorted into seven major categories. These categories are as follows: Work, Effort, Attendance, Behavior, Perceptions of Teacher Input, Time, and Prior Grade Experience. Later, I added an eighth category – Mastery – because further analysis suggested that some students were expressing awareness that mastery of material might be part of the grade. I then analyzed and interpreted these categories to address the three research questions.

Often, the passages from the elicited narratives contained reference to more than one code. For example, a student would posit several reasons for a grade such as work and attendance, or behavior, attendance and effort. (See Table 4.2)

Table 4.2

Table of Codes

Work	Effort	Attendance	Prior Experience	Behavior	Perceptions of Teacher	On Time (Work)	Mastery
Assignment	Pay attention	Attendance	Prior Experience	Pay Attention	Gave me	Time	Good enough
Focus	Participation		Not best subject	Participation	How Teacher Grades	Turn in work	Overachiever
Homework	Listen			Listen	Misgrade		Achievement
Good Student	Good Student			Friends	Teacher		Good Student
Hard Work	Time			Nervous	Teacher fault		
Important Essays	Turn in work			Cheating	Teacher Good		Desire to be good (academically)
Turn in Work	Effort			Attitude	Teacher Good		Effort
Study	Study			Behavior			Good Grades
Smart	Smart			Chatty			Smart
Slips up	Slips up			Cooperation			
Slacking	Slacking			Slacking			
Important Essay				Disrespect			
Make-up work	Make-up work			Don't talk			
Missing work				Talk			
Missed assignment				Focus			
Grades				Lazy			Grades
Work				Time			
				Video Games			

The following thematic discussion examines evidence from the observations, the narratives, and the focus groups. Certain themes appeared frequently in one area or in the other. For example, attributions of the grade to the teacher, which I consider to be external, appear more frequently in the observations and the narratives and less frequently in the focus group discussions.

Work.

This theme emerged from the coding as one of the most overwhelming factors influencing students' meaning making for their teacher-assigned grades. The student

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narratives were typed to create a text document to use for data analysis with HyperResearch. During the process of creating the text document from the handwritten student narratives, it became clear that "work" would be an important category to examine because the word "work" was used over and over again by participants both in the elicited narratives and in the focus groups.

The word "work" both as a single word and as a part of the compound words "classwork" and "homework" was used 66 times in the student narratives. The word "work" as a simple word was used 48 times. The code "work" marks places where students have made reference to the work they have or have not completed, done, or handed in. After coding the student narratives, I ran a report and found that I had used the code word "work" 37 times. The reason it was less than the 48 is because the word "work" sometimes appears more than once in a student response and I coded those together.

The Frequency report both for this case alone and for all cases in the study show the code word "work" being used with greater frequency than any other code. The number of times this word either appeared as part of the narratives or appeared as a code word suggests that this is thematically important.

A close look at the participants' responses reveals that they frequently attributed the grade to work completed and turned in on time. Typical responses found in the narratives were as follows:

> I think that I deserve an A for the English grade all together. I believe that because I do all of my work.

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I belive that I desrve an A- minus because I'm here everyday and I do my work everyday.

For the duration of the final quarter, I think I deserve a A. I believe so because I am a Student that does the work I receive and I ensure it gets in the teachers hand in time.

I believe I got an A on my report card in English. I always turn in my work and I put in my effort.

I believe that my grade in English is an A or a B because I do my work

I think for this quarter on my report card I got a B+ to a A. I think I got this grade because I've been doing all my work and participating in all the projects/essays.

These responses show that participants place a great deal of emphasis on getting work done. Work completed appears to be major criteria for a grade according to these participants. Participants not only stated that they expected a high grade because work was turned in, but they also cited missing work as a reason for a lower grade.

The grade I believe that I have on my report card in English for this quarter would be a B. I think I would have that grade because I don't finish my work all the time.

I think that I have a D or C because I don't really bring in any reports or project.

The grade I think I have is a D because I think sometimes I don't pass in homework, work, or project because I don't doing homework at home.

Thus, it appears that participants place a heavy emphasis on work that is completed or not completed, be it class work or homework.

The importance that students attach to whether work was completed or not completed was also a theme that emerged from the focus groups. During one discussion of the question concerning Vignette One (see chapter 3) that asks why Sydney gets a C on the report card students commented on the work aspect saying:

> Because she doesn't make up all homework and what she does she don't complete the work but turns it in

> I think she got a C because she didn't do all the homework and she had extra time to do it and so she got a c because she didn't do it.

> I think she got a C because when she had to do her literacy homework it was part of her grade and she didn't do a lot and when she did do work it wasn't all complete

The same students attributed the lack of work to Sydney's being "lazy." The same student who said that Sydney did not "do a lot of it" said that the reason for this was:

> she probably felt lazy and only did a couple of it so she probably feels mad about it and feels like she could improve on it but she just felt lazy at the time.

The same reason is given for Colby's C in Vignette 2 (see chapter 3). A typical comment about Colby is "it's probably because he didn't do all his work." Another student said, "he's asking why the English teacher gave him a C, and it's probably cause he didn't do his work".

During the discussion about Jessie in Vignette 5 one student said Jessie's grade should be "a D because the teacher at least gave her extra time to do it. But she only did two."

Throughout focus group discussions students placed emphasis on the work that the character in the vignette did or did not do, which mirrored many of the work attributions made in the narratives. Whether talking about themselves and their personal grades or discussing a character in a vignette, students placed a great deal of emphasis on work as the foundation of the grade. The finding that students believe work is the primary component of a teacher-assigned grade and the implications of the finding will be discussed in further detail in chapter five.

Effort.

Weiner (2010) identifies effort as one of the four areas of attribution. In his conception, effort is *internal, unstable and controllable*. That is, the attribution is located within the student (internal), its cause may change over time (unstable), and the student has control over this area of attribution (controllable). While work completed or not completed was the dominant theme in the narratives, effort was also frequently cited as a reason why students expected to receive a certain grade on their report cards. For example, one participant wrote, "I believe I got an A on my report card in English. I always turn in my work and I put in my effort."

This occurred in 15 of the narrative responses but only once in the focus groups. Originally, it was coded under the different terms students used such as "tried," "try my best," "work very hard," and "I've tried hard." These codes were combined within the category of effort.

In many of the responses, participants such as the ones cited above, related work to effort. The students cited some type of effort in conjunction with work handed in, work complete, and homework completed and handed in on time.

> I believe that I deserve an A- minus because Im here everyday and I do my work everyday and I don't gie miss Read disrespect and I m always getting good grades and every paper I hand in on time and if it's a bad grade I'll go the extra mile to redo it and make sure that I do get a good grade.

The student is indicating that the A- should be based in part because "if it's a bad grade" he will "go the extra mile to redo it and make sure that I do get a good grade." While there is no mention made of why the grade might be a "bad" one or of what needs to happen within the paper to make it a "good grade," the student appears to feel that putting in the extra effort required to "redo" the paper will be enough to ensure the "good grade." The attribution here is to an internal locus that the student has control over through going "the extra mile."

Another student who claims "English is not my strongest subject" also believes the grade will be an "A." This student attributes this to several factors including effort:

> For the last quarter of the 2009-2010 school year I believe that I should get an A in English. I believe this because I have Ms. Read when capable I have also tried to get A's throughout the year not only in her class either. I have also done all of my homework and classwork this quarter When I do not finish my work I remember to make it up. I think that cooperated with her. I know English is not my strongest subject but I try my hardest to complete the school year with good grades.

> I believe I got an A on my report card in English. I always turn in my work and I put in my effort. I try to do the best I can. I don't talk a lot or

misbehave at all. I think if I keep trying, I will differently [definitely] get an A.

I think I deserve a B because I try my best and turn in most of my work

I think I deserve an A- or A because I work hard in this class on everything I do. Espcially stories & I work hard in every other class. The reason I do that is because I've NEVER gotten anything lower than a B- in my life & I'm looking to keeping it that way. considering I want to go to {Bayside City} Vocational Technical High School (VOC) for medical to be a pediatrition. I work hard & that's why I believe I should have an A.

The Vocational School where students from this district apply to go is highly competitive. A large number of eighth grade students from all three middle schools in this district apply to the vocational school. They regard it as a place to go to prepare for technical professions, including engineering and medicine. The teacher told me that her students view the vocational school as a serious academic setting where they will not have to "put up with" students who are behavior problems and who regularly disrupt classes.

Evidence of student thinking on effort in the focus groups was mainly visible through the attributions of the character's lower grades to laziness. Student participants in both focus groups referred to the characters in the vignettes as being "lazy." One student stated that Sydney in Vignette 1 "knew she was going to get a bad grade if she didn't do it [work]" but that Sydney "just felt lazy at the time." Throughout the focus group discussions the word "lazy" was used to explain a low grade or why students were not doing their work. Colby was "lazy, he put any kind of answer."

It appears from the data that these students believe that personal effort is a component of a grade. They view effort as an internal, unstable attribute and believe that the student has control over the amount of effort she puts into the academic task.

Attendance.

Attendance was identified as a theme, even though it did not occur with the same frequency as some of the other themes, especially "work" and effort." Nevertheless, it appears to be something participants associated with a grade, either negatively or positively. Two participants mentioned attendance in narratives. One student in the focus groups attributed low grades to not coming to school.

During the discussion of the vignette in which Colby asks the teacher, "Why did you give me a C?" one participant mentioned absenteeism.

> He might be asking why he got a C because he thinks he got most of the homework or assignments but he might have been absent a lot too and he never asked for extra help or extra work.

This student views attendance as a determinant of a teacher-assigned grade.

Two students discussed attendance in their narratives. The participant quoted earlier, who said he would "go the extra mile" to rewrite a paper, began his narrative by attributing the grade to the fact that "Im here everyday." His belief that he has an A- is linked to attendance first and work, effort, and behavior second.

The second participant links a grade that "is not to be happy with" to attendance, work and behavior:

> [F]or this quarter I know my grade is not to be happy with because I know I'm suppost to go to school and do what I am supost to do but I get destracted with talking and fooling around.

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The inference is that one reason for the possibly poor grade is that he did not attend school as often as a student with a higher grade. Interestingly, this student received an F as the actual report grade. The participant appears aware that he has a very low grade even though he does not specify the F.

Behavior.

This theme includes both the positive and negative behaviors that participants cited as reasons for their own grades and as components of the grades of the characters in the vignettes (see Table 4.3). Positive behaviors included cooperation with the teacher, listening to what she had to say, not talking, paying attention, studying, staying focused. Attitude was associated with negative behavior. One participant wrote:

> In this school year 2009-2010 the last quarter of the year I believe that I will be getting a B+ or B. I believe I will be getting that grade because I do all my work and I listen but sometimes I don't feel like doing anything and have an attitude with Ms. Read.

Here, the participant is indicating that attitude is a negative behavior. Students also referred to "chatty" and "talking" as behaviors that may have a negative effect on a grade:

> For the duration of the final quarter, I think I deserve a A. I believe so because I am a Student that does the work I receive and I ensure it gets in the teachers hand in time. Also I think so because despite the fact I can be Chatty sometimes I am a overachiever.

> The reason I might not get an A is because I sometimes talk in class I also think I'm going to get a B because I talk a lot with my peers but the teacher always thinks I'm not doing my work.

> I believe for this quarter I deserve an A- because I pass in all my work on time. I try hard when I wright my essay's. I believe I have nice

penmenship. Also, I particepate in class. Such as, reading aloud and passing out papers. The minus comes from me being chatty at points.

In Focus Group Two, one of the participants made a direct comparison between the character, Sydney, in the vignette and herself. In the vignette it said, "Sydney does most of the assigned school work, asks to make up missing work, does most homework, but does not do all homework. Sydney does not always complete work but does turn it in. At the end of the term Sidney gets a C." The question being asked was "Why does Sidney get a C?" The participant's response was:

> Kind of disappointed. Because that's how I feel I kinda feel disappointed because I knew I could have brought in that work. I could have spent the extra time to remember that I needed to turn something in or do something but was too lazy and was caught up with talking to friends all day, not paying attention to what the teacher was saying, or forgetting that we had homework or assignments and then the last day trying to make it up but that's forget it.

Table 4.3

Codes Attributing Grade to Behavior

Codes for behavior	
Positive	**Negative**
Cooperation	Lazy
Participate	Cheating
Listen	Disrespect
Don't talk	Lie
Pay attention	Chatty
Study	Slacking
Focus	Talking
Attitude	Attitude
	Slips up

"Talking," "cooperation," and "chatty" were mentioned as grade influences.

Participants often noted that they had "cooperated" with the teacher or that they were

"chatty." They mentioned attitude and other components of behavior that they indicated affected a grade negatively or positively. There are more than 31 references to items that fall under the umbrella category of behavior including "chatty," "talking," "disrespect," "slacking," "cheating," "lying," and "cooperation." All are actions that may or may not be conscious choices. Even so, the fact that participants mentioned them and discussed them indicates that students are aware of what they are doing.

> I think I have a B- because I have everything handed in to Ms. Read. I have been pretty good in her class.
>
> I think my grade would be A on my report card because I always get 100 on my test, I always pass in my work before it due, sometimes I ask question and I'm a person who has good behavior.
>
> I belive I got a B because I all ways do my homework, and I get somewhat a good grade on my tests. I also pay attention in class and I like to read out loud.
>
> I think I deserve an A. I do all my work and I get good grades. I have gotton straight A's for every subject of every quarter so far. I am smart and I don't goof around.

Perceptions of teacher input.

During the classroom observation when students received their third quarter report cards, many of the student comments were centered on the teacher. Some participants appeared to attribute grades to the teacher. As with behavior, teacher input was sometimes viewed as having a positive effect on the grade and sometimes having a negative effect. Many students appeared to view the grade as "given" to them rather than "earned." For example, one student commented, "I would have got straight A's if it

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wasn't for Mrs. Watson." Another student said, "She gave me B's" and yet another boy commented, "I got a B, she keeps giving me B's."

The "gave me" and "I got" phrases were used over and over again as students studied their report cards and exchanged comments with each other as they left the room. These two phrases were used as code phrases to identify times when students appeared to be making external attributions for their grades.

"I got 3 F's I swear it, God, I got 3 F's," a boy said as he left the room. Another student said, "I'm mad, give me an A at least." These are two more examples of students using forms of the verb "to give."

"What did you get in social studies?" was a common question heard as students discussed their report cards (despite the fact that the teacher told them not to do this).

Attributions to teacher input also appear in the elicited narratives.

"I don't get an 100 on the big Comps. She gives us a lot," one girl wrote.

Attribution theory suggests that these students may be attributing their B's to an external, uncontrollable factor. They indicate that the teacher, in a way they do not understand, determined the grade — thus, they attribute the grade to an external, uncontrollable factor.

The truth is that teachers determine grades. The danger lies in teachers not being clear with students that the most important element of a grade is mastery of standards, which should be within the student's control. If students continue to believe the teacher "gives" a grade based on some arbitrary factor, this belief will have a negative effect on "expectancy shifts" (Weiner, 2010). The student will attribute a grade to an

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uncontrollable external dimension and the expectation of future success will diminish. Recommendations for addressing this will be discussed in chapter five.

One boy had a positive view of the teacher's input. He wrote in the elicited narrative, "I received good grades in English because I have a wonderful teacher that is willing enough to teach [me] the right tools that I need to pass to 8th grade." The comment appears positive, but the stress remains on "forms and not the content" (Labaree, 1997). This student is focused on having the credentials to move on to the next grade. The student did not indicate a particular grade he expected but wrote, "I think I have good grades in English class this quarter of the 2009-2010 school year. I also think my grades are good enough to pass 7th grade this year and be able to move to 8th grade." Twice in the same narrative he referred to upward mobility—promotion to the eighth grade.

Another boy wrote about teacher input negatively saying:

> The grade I think I will have at the end of the year is a B-. Why, my teacher loses some of my work sometime. She will give us work that she never gave us or never told us about She lost one of my papers That was worth a huge amount of your grade and she lost it. The next day we came back to school she tells us to hand in homework that she never gave us and expects us to write like pros.

This boy appears to be attributing the grade directly to actions of the teacher. It is external and uncontrollable. What the truth of the situation is cannot be determined, but based on what the boy wrote, it would appear that the student's belief is that his expected B- is in the control of the teacher.

Another boy who wrote that he expected a "D" attributed it in part to task difficulty, which is external and uncontrollable. He wrote, "Ms Read's work or project is kinda hard." The task set by the teacher is "kinda hard," so attribution for the grade is placed on the teacher. Once again, the locus is external and uncontrollable.

Yet another boy who expected an "F" attributed the grade to the fact he does "not like the work we do." The task is either too hard or he does not care for it. The attribution here is to task choice. This student also wrote, "I no school is not spose to be fun." He states that as a fact and for him it may very well be what experience has taught him to believe. He comments on the teacher: "Even worst are [our] teacher is like the old Navey manicans [Old Navy manikins]." Finally, he states what needs to happen to improve his grade, writing: "To get a better grade we would have to do projects that are of inters to me." Adolescent development theory suggests that choice and interest are a big part of student engagement in school. This boy appears to be disengaged from academic activity in this class. He also is attributing the expected "F" to task. He indicates that tasks set by the teacher (external and uncontrollable) do not interest him.

A few students in the focus groups also attributed grades to teachers. Jayden, in Vignette 3, not only completes all work but is also told by the teacher, "All your written work meets the standard." When asked what grade Jayden (Vignette 3) might expect one student in the focus group said:

> I think Jayden should get a B or an A depending on how the teacher grades the students. If They [teachers] expect a lot of the students for a B but if the teacher is easy-going over grades I would expect an A.

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None of the students in either focus group commented on the teacher's telling the student that written work met the standard.

When discussing Colby and his grade, the same student who commented on the teacher's policies and Jayden's grade stated that the reason Colby asked the teacher why he got a C was that "he feels like the teacher misgraded him. Then again I feel that the teacher did grade him correctly if my hypothesis is correct". In an earlier comment the same student indicated she believed that Colby had not done enough work for a grade higher than a C.

Time.

Work handed in on time or late was another theme that emerged. Participants stated that they expected a good grade because work was handed in on time.

> I believe that I deserve an A- minus because Im here everyday and I do my work everyday and I don't gie miss Read disrespect and I m always getting good grades and every paper I hand in on time

> The grade I think I will get this quarter is an A. Some reasons why I think that are that I pay attention very well in class. Also I get all my work done and I make sure it is right. I always get my work done in time. So I think I am getting an A this quarter.

> I would justify that my most compatible grade would be B+ - A. I work very hard on my papers that are due. Every due paper, I pass in on time for the best grade. I believe I should have more towards an A for my ELA grade. I hope I do get an A or A+.

> I believe for this quarter I deserve an A- because I pass in all my work on time.

In these comments, students appear to be assuming a relationship between effort and turning work in on time. There may also be a relationship in the students' minds between doing work, making an effort, and turning in work by a deadline.

Prior grade experience.

This theme was related to grades both negatively and positively. Some participants stated that they "always" had A's and therefore expected to have an A this quarter. Prior experience was the participants' linking past teacher-assigned grades to the grade expected on the current report card.

> I also believe that because I got all a's before and I think it will at least be in the A category for an average.

> I m always getting good grades

> The grade that I think that I have for this quatter is a "A-." The reason that I think that I have an "A-" is because I have mostly "100" and "90" for my grades. There is one "75" that I got on the how to esay that lowered my grade. An "A-" is what I got last quarter too, and I think that that is around what my grade is right now.

> I believe that I have a C or B for this quater becaus I never get an A. I don't get F anymore.

> In my English class this quarter of the year 2009-2010 school year, I think my grade is an "A". From the past years in English class; I have always gotten an "A", possibly a "B". Out of all the subjects I have this year, my favorite subject is English. All my friends when I was in Elementary School said that I was the best writer of the class. Everytime my teacher asked to write one single sentence, I would end up writing a whole paragraph I don't think I will every get lower than an "A" in English class.

> I think I have an A for this quarter this year because I got A's the last three quarters. The techers bass your grade on your other grades of the last three quarters.

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I think I deserve an A. I do all my work and I get good grades. I have gotten straight A's for every subject of every quarter so far. I am smart and I don't goof around. I try my best at everything. I personally feel that in E.L.A this quarter I am going to get an A.

The reason I do that is because I've NEVER gotten anything lower than a B- in my life & I'm looking to keeping it that way. considering I want to go to Greater New Bedford Vocational Technical High School (VOC) for medical to be a pediatrition. I work hard & that's why I believe I should have an A.

Some of these students appear to expect that if they have received good grades in the past for performance, effort, and work completed, they will continue to receive good grades as long as they maintain good work habits.

Student Expectation vs. Teacher Assigned Grade

After collecting the elicited texts the teacher was asked to supply the final grade for all participants. This was done so that the expected grade could be compared to the actual assigned grades (see Exhibit 4.4).

Further analysis of the data in Table 4.4 shows that the greatest percentage of students believed their grade would be higher than it actually was. 36.8% believed their fourth quarter ELA grade would be higher than it actually was. 24.6 percent believed the grade would be lower than the actual grade turned out to be, and 35% were on target with the grade they believed they would get be a match with the grade the teacher-assigned them on the report card. Two of the students (3.5%) did not commit to a grade. The one who thought the grade "is not to be happy with" had an actual grade of D and the one who claimed the report card would "have good grades this quarter" had a B.

Table 4.4

Student expectation of grade vs. assigned grade

	Grade Student expects	Grade Teacher Assigned
1	A-	B+
2	A	A
3	A	A-
4	A	A-
5	A	A
6	A	A
7	A or B	B
8	D	F
9	"My grade is not to be happy with"	D
10	B-	B-
11	B	B
12	A	B
13	B or A	B+
14	B+ or an A-	A-
15	B	B-
16	A/A-	A-
17	B	B-
18	D or C	C-
19	B	B
20	B+	A-
21	B-/C+	B-
22	C	C+
23	A- or A	A-
24	B	C-
25	A	A-
26	A-	A-
27	A-	A
28	D or a C	D
29	B	B
30	B	C-
31	A	A
32	B+ or A-	A
33	B+	B
34	C or B	B+
35	A-	A
36	A	A-
37	A	A
38	C	B-
39	C	F
40	A	B
41	C	B-
42	A to A+	A-
43	D	C-
44	"I think I have good grades this quarter"	B
45	A	A
46	B-	B
47	C or B-	B
48	B+ or A	B+
49	A	C
50	B	B+
51	B	B+
52	A-	A-
53	B+ or B	C+
54	B	C
55	F	D
56	C	C+

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In table 4.4, it is clear that most students were not on target. However, very few were way off target. Twenty-four of the 56 students were within a half-letter grade of what their actual grade was. As this was the final quarter of the year, it appears that the students had a solid understanding of what went into the grade they could expect from this teacher in this class.

Because this was the final quarter of the year, the 35% of the students who predicted they would get the grade that the teacher actually assigned to them probably were able to be accurate because they were familiar with the teacher's grading policies and procedures.

Viewed through the lens of narrative and focus group data, one interpretation of the data in the above chart is that students, at least in this class, believe that work completed together with behavior forms the basis of this teacher's grading policy. Others may look at this data differently, but it does appear that these students seem to understand what goes into the grade in this class, consequently tailoring their expectations to the teacher's policy.

Conclusion

As a seventh grade ELA teacher I was not entirely surprised by the emphasis students placed on work completed. Seventh grade students are in the process of moving from the stage of a very concrete understanding of the world to the stage of formal operations. A grade that is the result of work completed is something they can understand in concrete terms. "I did my work, I get an A" seems to be a recurring theme.

The data collected from observations, elicited narratives, and focus groups contained, for the most part, similar themes concerning student understanding of grades in this class. As stated above, the theme of work completed or not completed was the strongest thread, especially in the narratives and focus groups. Interestingly, the students in the focus groups had remarkably little sympathy for the students who wanted extra work or make up work. The students I worked with indicated that they felt these students had had plenty of time to complete work and that a poor grade was their own fault.

Most students seemed to have a very accurate understanding of what their grade would be, according to exhibit 4.4. As noted above, this data was collected in the final quarter of the year. The assumption is that the teacher and the students are comfortable with each other and the students have three quarters of experience with the teacher and her grading practices behind them.

The middle schools in this district have a very traditional approach to grading. A conversation with the teacher suggests that the majority of teachers average grades collected from various types of work and arrive at the grade that way. According to the grade book Ms. Read shared with me, that is how she arrives at her grades. There has been no move yet toward standards-based grading policy in these middle schools. The following chapter explores more deeply what the results of the study suggest about how 56 seventh grade students make-meaning for their ELA grades, why this happens, and what educators might do to ensure that their students know how to link competence and mastery of standards to teacher-assigned grades.

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CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop an understanding of the meanings that 56 seventh grade students attribute to their teacher-assigned grades. The study was driven by questions concerning how students make meaning for grades; whether or not students think grades mean incentives; accurate reports of academic or behavioral progress; tools for metacognition; or just another facet of the school experience arbitrarily controlled by teachers and administrators. The study provided a way to identify and elucidate student meaning-making about their grades using history, prior research, and the theoretical frameworks of adolescent development theory and attribution theory.

Overall, a single, over-riding conclusion emerged from the data. Despite recent research on reporting student learning using mastery standards, despite decades of calls by evaluation experts for standards-based report card, the students in this study did not make a direct connection between their grades and mastery of knowledge and skills. Instead, it appears that, for the students I studied, a report card measures work completed or not completed, school attendance, and behavior in the classroom.

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Limitations

The research gives an insightful view of the meaning the students in the study give to teacher-assigned grades; however, the study is limited, in large part, due to the small size of the sample. It is also limited by the low response rate to the call for student volunteers to take part in the focus groups. Another limitation stems from the safeguards that are necessary when working with a vulnerable population. Because the participants were seventh grade students and part of a vulnerable population, I was very careful to observe all protocols that had been approved by the IRB, which meant that I did not make changes to the focus group protocols or attempt to interview students individually. Were I to replicate this study, I would want to do so on a large scale, perhaps comparing student responses from different districts. I would also design a protocol that would allow me to interview individual students after analyzing the elicited narratives.

Summary of the Study

The theoretical framework of this qualitative study helped to create a model for collection of data regarding what students believe about teacher-assigned grades. The literature review situated teacher-assigned grades in a context of historical background and urban milieu, current research about teacher-assigned grades, attribution theory and adolescent theory.

As previously stated, the purpose for data collection and analysis were designed to address the following three research questions:

1. How do 56 seventh grade English Language Arts students in an urban middle
   school make *meaning* of their teacher-assigned ELA grades?

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2. What do 56 seventh grade ELA students in an urban middle school believe about their *control* over the teacher-assigned grade?

3. What evidence*,* if any, can be found supporting a relationship between attribution for success or failure and the academic performance of these students?

In order to address the research questions, I collected and scrutinized both written and oral information from the seventh grade participants during the final quarter of the 2009-2010 school year. The study used elicited narratives, observations, focus groups, and artifacts related to teacher-assigned grades (the final grades for student in that quarter) for analysis. I observed 19 students (those in the cooperating teacher's homeroom) receiving their third quarter report cards. I collected the elicited narratives on one full school day during the fourth quarter of the school year during the students' ELA classes, and conducted two 60-minute focus groups with two groups of students. I also compared the grade the students actually received from the teacher with the grade students stated in their narratives that they expected to receive.

One of the goals was to identify what meaning grades had for these students. The second goal was to analyze how much and what type of control students believed they had over their grades. The final goal was to look for any relationship between attributions for grades and students' success or failure.

The analysis of these seventh graders' responses to the questions asked of them was influenced in part by where they were developmentally.   The seventh grade students who participated in this study were young adolescents between 12 and 13 years of age who were engaging, enjoyable to spend time with, and for the most part very thoughtful

in their responses to the focus group vignettes. Some of the responses were very concrete while others demonstrated a higher level of critical thinking, depending on where the students were on the spectrum of adolescent development.

The data collected from the narratives, the focus groups, and the classroom observations were sorted and coded into categories. I began with 60 main codes at the word or sentence level and eventually sorted this into seven major categories as follows: Work, Effort, Attendance, Behavior, Perceptions of Teacher Input, Time, Prior Grade Experience, and Mastery. These themes were used for both data analysis and discussion of the findings.

Discussion

Effects of the historical and urban context.

Although this study concentrated on how students make meaning of a teacher-assigned grade, grading practices of teachers created the essential context in which students made meaning for their teacher-assigned grades. Cormorant Middle School is one of three middle schools in a large urban district; at any given time the district has approximately 3,000 students enrolled. This number goes up and down during the school year because the district has a significant transient population. Because there is no district grading policy, individual teachers – especially at the secondary level – use their own formulas and philosophies to calculate report card grades. In the past five years, the district has attempted to standardize the elementary report cards and align them with state standards, but according to their teacher, the students in this study had never experienced that type of report card.

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During the years they attended Bayside City Public Schools, they had only experienced traditional A, B, C, D, and F report cards with a district-generated list of comments. The only comments available to teachers for the comment section of the report card are a series of negative and positive remarks that are largely centered on behavior. Nowhere is there a place for teachers to indicate whether or not material has been mastered.

While this study did not look for a relationship between the comments and the student attributions for grades, it is logical to wonder to what extent this emphasis on work and behavior has an influence on the students' apparent belief that these two factors are major determinants of their teacher-assigned grades.

In addition, the importance of "passing" from one grade to the next has historical significance. During the common school era, when larger schools were being built to accommodate a growing population of students, it became necessary to sort students into manageable groups, not necessarily by subject mastery. The most convenient way to sort them was by age, which led to the current grade level system. The district in which the data was collected regularly retains students based on report card grades. On report card day, at least one student in this study referred to retention as follows: "I can't stay back, look, I didn't get all F's." While I was not able to find out the exact percentage of students who are retained each year, the teacher did comment on the fact that the principal is always asking the teachers to find ways to allow all students to be successful in order to avoid having to retain large numbers of failing students.

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Research question one.

The first question that guided this study asked how 56 seventh grade students in an urban middle school make *meaning* of their teacher-assigned ELA grades. The data discussed in chapter four suggest that the students base the meaning of their teacher-assigned report card grade on work, behavior, attendance, and effort. There is no evidence that these students think their grades reflect an evaluation of their mastery of standards and skills. Additionally, they seem not to understand that the grade can be used as a tool for metacognitive thinking that will help them master standards and skills.

It appears that, to the students in this study, work completed and turned in equates to a good grade. This can lead to a disconnect between student expectations and actual teacher-assigned grades.

As discussed in chapter four, student comments such as, "I think that I deserve an A for the English grade all together. I believe that because I do all of my work," and, "I think I deserve a A. I believe so because I am a Student that does the work I receive" are typical of the responses given by the majority of students in the elicited narratives. Lack of work is also a determinant for a grade, as evidenced by the words of a student who wrote, "The grade I think I have is a D because I think sometimes I don't pass in homework, work, or project because I don't doing homework at home." Almost half of the coded responses in the elicited narratives were to work – completed, not completed, turned in, turned in on time, homework done or not done.

The grades students actually received were not that far removed from what they thought they would be getting. One student who expected an A received an A, while

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another with the same expectation received an A-. The actual grade of the one who thought he had a D was an F. The fact that in almost all cases the grades were within one letter grade of the expected grade – some higher, some lower (see exhibit 4.4) – shows that most of these students' expectations of what their grades would be were reasonable.

This study did not investigate the relationship between what the teacher said to students and what those students' expectations were. However, the elicited narratives were collected in the final quarter of the school year, so presumably students knew the teacher's grading practices and could estimate the grade based on prior experience.

The twelve references to prior experience in the student narratives included such comments as, "I also believe that because I got all a's before and I think it will at least be in the A category for an average." It is clear that prior experience with both high and low grades affects these students' belief about what they will earn on a report card. Students who have received A's in the past expect to have A's in the future; similarly, students who receive low grades expect this pattern to continue.

Analysis of the data demonstrates that most students in this study do not appear to connect the grade to the quality of the work. This raises the question – "Why not?" and "How do we teach them to make the connection between a grade and mastery of a standard?" One possible reason why it is easier for these students to believe that completing the work is the key determinant of the grade is that seventh grade students are only just beginning to make the transition from being concrete thinkers to being formal operational thinkers. To the concrete thinker, work completed is evidence of achievement. The challenge for teachers is to provide students with multiple

opportunities to develop the cognitive pathways that lead to metacognitive thinking. In other words, students need to learn to make the connection between standards posted on a white board, the task they are asked to perform, the quality of the final product of that task, and the teacher-assigned grade.

Research question two.

This question asked what these 56 students believe about their *control* over the teacher-assigned grade. Control over the grade seemed to be located both within the student and without. The fact that so many students attributed the grade to work completed or not completed demonstrated that they attributed it to an internal, unstable factor (Weiner, 1995, 1979). In other words, they control whether or not they do the work. It is an unstable factor because the student's willingness to complete work may change over time.

Most of the responses – both in the elicited narratives and in the focus groups – could be coded under multiple categories. Overwhelmingly, students appear to believe that grades were derived from work completed plus good behavior and good attendance. Some indicated a willingness to "go the extra mile" and redo unsatisfactory work. All of these factors are very concrete and are within the student's control. Behavior may change over time, i.e. the student may be listening quietly one day and be "chatty" the next, but the student controls whether or not he is talking.

The most obvious pattern that led to a finding is that the 56 students in this study appear to assign meaning to the grade based on work completed as well as certain behavior issues. Using the lens of attribution theory leads to the conclusion that students

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believe that the combination of work completed and good behavior will lead to a grade of A or B. Students who indicate they think a grade means they have completed enough work and are behaving well are attributing this to an internal locus. The effort and behavior may change from time to time, as some students indicated, but they are in control of whether or not that work is completed.

Some students, however, attributed the grade to an external, uncontrollable dimension – the teacher. In these responses, both negative and positive, the teacher is a focal character in this story of how students make meaning for teacher-assigned grades. For example one student wrote:

> … I also think my grades [are] good enough to pass 7th grade this year and
> be able to move to 8th grade. I received good grades in English because I
> have a wonderful teacher that is willing enough to teach [me] the right tools
> that I need to pass to 8th grade.

Here we see that the burden is on the teacher to present the correct material to the student so that she can "pass" to the next grade level.

This attribution of a grade to an external influence, the teacher, was especially evident on report card day when 19 students were observed receiving their third quarter report cards. As noted in the last chapter, some form of the verb "to give" was used over and over again by students. Some students appeared to believe that the teacher was in charge of the grade. Attributing the grade to some decision made by the teacher means the student is attributing it to an external influence over which the student presumably has

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no control. While others could interpret this differently, it seemed clear on report card day that, from some students' point of view, the teacher was in control.

Behavior is also something that students can control. While a few students cited ability as an attribution for a "good grade" – that is an A or a B – the majority appears to believe that the good grade is the result of both work completed and good behavior. Both effort and behavior are internal attributions. Both are also unstable as they may change from day to day, depending on the student's mood or attitude. Students made it clear that work completed and behavior were something they could comfortably control.

It is important to note that the quality of the work – i.e. whether the work represents mastery of a standard – never directly enters into the equation. No relation is posited between work quality and grade. This was an overall pattern that arose from the data. Factors students viewed as components of their report card grade that were definitely within their control included extra effort – "going the extra mile" – as well as attendance, behavior, and punctuality, all of which can be regarded as behavioral, rather than strictly academic.

Work completed, the effort made to complete that work, and good behavior are not only internal and unstable attributions; they are also concrete ideas that early adolescents may find easier to understand and grapple with than the less concrete factors that go with mastery of many ELA standards such as inferences drawn from a reading and synthesis of ideas. These students are at a stage where they have not yet moved fully into formal operations and still find it easier and more comfortable to deal with very concrete ideas such as completing work, or behaving well in a classroom.

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Research question three.

Unfortunately, the data did not provide conclusive findings or a direct theme to answer the third question, which asked what evidence there was to support a relationship between attribution for success or failure and the academic performance of these students. In fact, few students appeared to interpret a grade as meaning they had achieved mastery of skills and concepts.

When students said such things as; "I think my grade would be A on my report card because I always get 100 on my test, I always pass in my work before it due, sometimes I ask question and I'm a person who has good behavior," there is some indication that the A is connected to the score on the test. However, we would need to know if the student associated the 100 on the test with mastery of a learning objective in order to know if the grade meant more than just following the teacher's directions and getting the high score as a result of compliance. This student is also associating the grade with passing in work and with "good behavior." The student also mentions asking questions. Without knowing what the student is asking questions about or why the student is asking questions, it is not possible to reach a conclusion about the importance of the questioning in relationship to academic performance and mastery of learning standards. This student is suggesting that many different factors are associated with an "A," and a 100 on a test is only one of the factors.

Another student wrote, "I believe I might have a B or an A: because I have been doing really good in English and I always get the 100 grade on every quiz I take in English and I did to [two] important essays in this class." As with the first student, a

grade of 100 is associated with the A or B grade, but these students do not appear to

associate the 100 with mastery of learning standards.

The student who plans on attending the vocational school writes that:

> I think I deserve an A- or A because I work hard in this class on
> everything I do. Espcially stories & I work hard in every other class. The
> reason I do that is because I've NEVER gotten anything lower than a B- in
> my life & I'm looking to keeping it that way. considering I want to go to
> {Bayside City} Vocational Technical High School (VOC) for medical to
> be a pediatrition. I work hard & that's why I believe I should have an A.

While the primary factors to which this student ascribes the grade are work and prior

experiences, the student is also indicating that he wants to attend the Vocational

Technical High School which demonstrates some awareness that the grade means quality

and mastery of standards.

The traditional view of a vocational school is that it is a place to learn a trade such

as auto mechanics or plumbing; however, the vocational school that serves the district

where this data was collected has a reputation for academic excellence and preparing

students for higher education. Many of the middle school students in this city view the

vocational school as a place to prepare for technical professions, including engineering

and medicine. While I do not have data to support this understanding, I have anecdotal

information from other teachers and from my own work in the city that suggests the

middle school students in this population view the vocational school as a selective

environment where they will not have to "put up with" students who are behavior

problems. Many of the best middle school students in this city apply to "Voke" for this

reason. The aforementioned student wants to pursue a medical career. This is a hint that

a student may be connecting the attributions for success to future academic performance, but there is no indication that the student believes that mastery of learning standards is a critical factor in how his grade is derived. The report card is a "credential" he needs to be accepted into the school of his choice.

The data does not answer the question of whether or not there is a relationship between attributions for success or failure and the academic performance of these students. However, the data suggest that if some of the students receive the right feedback in the future they will begin to interpret a grade as an indication of mastery of learning objectives and also be able to use their grades as a tool to help them on their academic journey. The students quoted above show an eagerness to achieve. What they need is to understand what achievement means in academic terms.

Both the alignments and the discrepancies found in the comparison of the students' expectations of the grade and the actual grade assigned give rise to questions about the relationship between what the teacher said to students and what those words meant in terms of student attributions that helped them create meaning for the grade. The fact that the data showed a pattern of students finding the meaning of a report card grade in whether or not work was completed, suggests questioning the message the teachers give their students. How often does the emphasis on turning in work so that the teacher has something to assess lead students to interpret this as a major component of a grade?

Clearly, teachers need to share standards and learning objectives explicitly with students. Teachers also need to phrase the standards and learning objectives in language that is meaningful to students. They need to provide rubrics that are not just about

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completing work on time but also about exactly how students can demonstrate mastery of a standard and/or learning objective.

The best way of figuring out what academic success means to students is to ask them and listen to their voices, a practice which is not commonly engaged in, despite all the research that shows that student voices must be heard in order to improve all aspects of education. Ignorance of what is required for academic success means that students will not be in control of their own learning.

Recommendations For Practice

This study was essentially driven by action research. What I was seeing in the classroom each year made me want to know more about what my students thought of grades so I could improve my own practice as well as make suggestions to others. I have had many conversations with my colleagues about grades. I make the point each time that we must impress upon our students that their grades are a reflection of their learning not simply behavior or work completed.

One reason so many students attributed grades to behavior could be the emphasis teachers and administrators place on "good" behavior. In the district where this data was collected, a high value is placed on silence, despite the fact that a classroom utilizing best practices, cooperative learning strategies, and student discussion will never be a quiet place.

In order to place the emphasis on mastery of standards, teachers and administration need to sit down together to decide the purpose of report card grades (Brookhart, 2011) and then what this type of grading will look like in this school. Every

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teacher, in every grade, needs to give the same message to students: the objective is mastery of skills and content indicated by state standards, which will in turn determine a report card grade. Along with this, reporting of grades should be rethought so that the report card truly represents where a student stands in relationship to mastery of standards.

Teachers at Cormorant Middle School clearly communicate that completing work is important. The teachers also seem to be communicating that there is an expectation that students will be respectful and well behaved. Completing assignments and behaving in a way that is respectful toward peers and teachers certainly contributes to a peaceful, productive classroom; however just telling students to do work is not enough. Teachers must make clear to students why they need to do this work. Students need to know what they will learn, how they will learn it, and most critically, why it is important for them to master whatever standard is being studied. What will this do for them, and how will they show they have mastered the standard? It would appear that students at Cormorant Middle School believe that merely completing work is the end game, not mastering the skills and content stipulated by the learning standards.

Implications and Recommendations for Grading Policies

As noted in Chapter Two, much of the current literature on K-12 grading systems consists of discussion about standards-based report cards. It would be interesting to replicate this study with a group of students who had experienced only standards-based report cards and see if they make different attributions for grades. While completing work is a good first step towards earning an A or a B, one has to wonder why students do not make the connection between mastery of material and the superior grade.

The conversation on grading in the secondary years in the Bayside City school district needs to include all stakeholders: administration, teachers, parents, and most of all students. A policy for grades must be formulated that is directly linked to student learning and student demonstrations of that learning. Currently, the only guidelines provided to teachers at the middle school level specify what the percentages equal in letter grades. For example, 90 equals an A-, 60 is a D and below 60 is failing. No other policy or guidance exists. It is left up to individual teachers to decide how to grade the students, and each teacher apparently has a different philosophy and a different methodology for grades.

In order to change the approach to grades, teachers will need professional development. It would be money well spent if the district hired one of the experts on grading such as Robert Marzano, Thomas Guskey, or Susan Brookhart to spend time with teachers, leading them through conversation and study on the subject of grades.

Recommendations For Future Research

This was a very small qualitative study done with one group of seventh grade students at one middle school. The framework for this study was constructed using attribution theory and adolescent development theory. These theories were used to develop the methodology as well as for data analysis; however, analyzing student responses created more questions than answers.

Continued studies of the meaning grades have for students are essential to gain understanding of whether students create meaning for teacher-assigned report card grades based on mastery of skills or if they simply think the report card grades are an indication

of work completed. If other studies show similar patterns then we need to understand *why* students think this way. It is essential to understand what teacher-assigned grades mean to students if grades are to be any help to them as learning tools.

The themes and categories that arose from the student comments and responses suggest that one fruitful method for more fully understanding what teacher-assigned grades mean to seventh grade students would be to employ the perspectives of critical theory.

Critical theory perspectives would provide a natural extension of the methods used in the current study, in that many of the questions raised by advocates of the standards-based grading systems discussed in the literature review are similar or identical to those posed by critical social theorists. The common questions revolve around two big issues: what do grades actually measure and report, and why is that valued? If what is valued and measured are cooperative behavior and correct responses, then the danger is that freedom, dignity, and self-transformation will be denied (Kinchloe 2008).

As Giroux points out, the social situation in the classroom between teacher and student is generally "based upon power relations inextricably linked to the teacher's allotment and distribution of grades" (1988, p.38). In many cases, rather than a means of fostering academic excellence, grades are "the ultimate discipline instruments by which the teacher imposes his desired values, behavior patterns and beliefs upon students" (p. 38).

The ability to impose discipline reflects power, and the data collected in this study suggests that these seventh grade students appear to make meaning for their grades based

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on a model of power relations. Evidence also suggests that these students viewed the report card grade as a method of discipline. The power relations in classrooms at the site where this study was conducted appear to be based on a teacher-student relationship where the students are generally from a working-class or poverty background and the teacher is a middle-aged, white, middle-class, educated professional. It is also worthwhile noting that the majority of teachers in the building are females. Further research is needed to tease out the role of power in how seventh grade students make meaning for teacher assigned- grades.

The power of the teacher-assigned grade and the student's construction of meaning for the grade based on that power reflect the values and beliefs the political community, the district administration, and the teacher transmit to the students. Much has been written about the connections between schooling and maintaining the *status quo* (Bourdieu, 1990; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Lareau, 2003). In order to maintain the continuation of oppressive pedagogical practices, McLaren (2015) states "power relations correspond to forms of school knowledge that distort understanding and produce what is commonly accepted as 'truth'" (p. 146).

Critical theory suggests a way to recognize this power at the classroom level. In this study, the patterns that arose during coding reveal an emphasis on routine and regimen. The dominant themes identified in the analysis include references to work: work completed, work not completed, and work turned in on time or turned in late in addition to attendance, and behavior. This, together with the history of the city in which the school

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is situated as a factory town, gives rise to questions about the role culture, class, and socio-economic standing play in student attributions for grades.

As noted in the literature review, attributions are not created in a vacuum but have cultural constructs that affect the reasons ascribed for success and failure (de Haan & Wissink, 2013; Georgiou, Christou, Stavrinides, and Panaoura, 2002; Weiner, 1979). The economic and political influences outside of school have a direct impact on the educational process (Giroux 1983). The community where this data was collected is one of the old factory cities in the state. For more than 100 years factories and the factory culture dominated the city's economy. Even today there are several factories left in the city as well as other businesses that rely on unskilled labor. In this setting, getting to work on time, completing the work, and being compliant with workplace rules are dominant cultural values. In many sectors of the city's economy these are still the prevailing behaviors that employers seek. In a recent roundtable discussion, local business leaders complained of the lack of "blue collar" workers with the aforementioned habits. The patterns identified in the analysis, viewed through the lens of critical theory, suggest that some of the attributions may have their roots in the working-class, immigrant culture of the city in which the students are being raised. It would also appear that those who profit from a compliant work force encourage these values and the education that promotes continuation of the *status quo*.

One then needs to ask what role the curriculum and the reporting of the student progress in that curriculum play in maintaining the *status quo* of the community. Is the unspoken agenda to mold a new generation of obedient, compliant workers, or is it to

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foster intellectually curious, well-educated, well-rounded, independent thinkers who will become the leaders in their technical and professional fields?

Curriculum, according to McLaren (2003), "represents the introduction of a particular form of life; it serves in part to prepare students for dominant or subordinate positions in the existing society" (p. 86). In the sixth edition of *Life in Schools* (2015) McLaren states that hidden curriculum "refers to the unintended outcomes of the schooling process" (p. 147). In his discussion of elements of hidden curriculum including such areas as teaching and learning styles, pedagogical procedures, classroom organization and teacher expectations, McLaren (2015) includes "grading procedures" (p. 147). In the school in which this study was conducted, not only do teachers tend to have a traditional approach to grading by averaging scores, they are also limited in the qualitative feedback they can give to students. The district provides teachers with a list of comments that may be included on the report card. The comments all relate to discipline, order, and the amount of work completed. Further research might explore what effect these comments have on student meaning-making for report card grades.

Teacher-assigned grades may have the stated goal of reporting student progress, but the grades are also the gatekeepers of academic credentials linked to cultural capital because these credentials are an important factor in economic advancement, those who do not have them – usually those who are already marginalized – soon find their ability to achieve a higher economic standing is negatively impacted (McLaren, 2003). Teacher-assigned grades are part of the link between cultural capital, education, and economic advancement. This, according to McLaren (2003), is because academic performance is

not representative of a student's ability or lack of ability but rather "the school's depreciation of their cultural capital" (p. 94). This means that marginalized students will be less likely to end up with high-paying jobs because they will not have the same academic credentials and cultural capital as students from the dominant culture. The culture of averaging grades and only providing feedback on discipline and the amount of work completed would appear to be designed for socializing obedient workers. Again, more research is needed to ascertain whether or not this is an accurate reading of the situation and to give guidance to educators in how to make the student experience in school more transformative.

It would be useful to study this further with the purpose of discovering whether or not the public education at Cormorant Middle School as well as at other schools in the city, has the unspoken agenda of teaching students to replicate their environment, to be good worker-cogs in the economic machine of the city, which still is driven by factories and factory-style workplaces.

This type of education has the capability "to minimize or annul the students' creative power and to stimulate their credulity [this] serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed" (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 73). Grades on report cards play into this by focusing students on what the teacher wants rather than on taking responsibility for their own learning. This establishes a hegemonic hidden curriculum in the classroom. What Freire emphasizes is that students must assume an active role in the learning process if education is to be liberating. The essence of a Liberatory Education, one designed for self-transformation, "is for the

people to come to feel like masters of their thinking" (p. 124). Thus, if students are always thinking, "what does the teacher want? What must I do to get a good grade?" they are not working towards being masters of their thinking, they are just being filled with the knowledge the teacher thinks is important, whether or not it has meaning for them.

In order to be effective with students, teachers need to develop a critical understanding of the forces that shape schooling. Educators need to be part of a vision "that celebrates not what is but what could be, that looks beyond the immediate to the future and links struggle to a new set of human possibilities" (Giroux, p. 242). In order to do this, teachers need to move beyond the traditional classroom, in this case, the traditional methods of judging students and reporting that judgment in the form of teacher-assigned grades to a more democratic approach to pedagogy including how student progress toward mastery of skills and concepts in reported. Further research using the lens of critical social theory may help guide educators in finding new, more democratic methods of reporting student progress.

In addition to follow-up research using the lens of critical social theory it would also be useful to conduct a larger cross-site study. Would the results be the same at a suburban school in an economically advantaged community? What would the results be at a rural school? Do urban areas with different demographics have different views? Lastly, how do the teachers in different schools explain grades to their students or in the same school, but different classrooms?

Both the alignments and the discrepancies found in the comparison of the students' expectations of the grade and the actual grade assigned give rise to questions

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about the relationship between what the teacher said to students and what those words meant in terms of student attributions that helped them create meaning for the grade. The fact that the data showed a pattern of students finding the meaning of a report card grade in whether or not work was completed, suggests questioning the message the teachers give their students. How often does the emphasis on turning in work so that the teacher has something to assess lead students to interpret this as a major component of a grade?

Thus, more research also needs to be done at the other end of the grading equation: teachers' beliefs about report card grades, different philosophies of grading, and individual methods of arriving at a grade. More research needs to be conducted on how teachers explain to students what a grade represents.

The students in this small, qualitative study were all in seventh grade. As noted earlier, this is a grade where many middle schools, including the school where the study was conducted, begin to departmentalize the curriculum. Thus, students may find themselves being taught and assessed by up to six or seven teachers. It would be interesting to conduct further studies to see what effect this change has on student interpretations of grades. Do sixth graders view grades through the same lens as seventh graders? Does anything change in eighth grade? Do students carry their meaning making for grades from middle school to high school? As students mature, does the meaning they assign to a grade change?

Conclusion

The majority of students in this study provided evidence that they believe that the main component for a grade is work completed. However, work merely completed is not

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sufficient. Students must provide proof of mastery, and they need to develop an understanding of what this means. This also translates to an important life value: it is not enough just to complete a task; the task must be competently performed.

What teachers say to students, as well as what information they give the students about mastery objectives and their importance must be scrutinized. Although work was turned in, students had no sense that mastery of skills and content was a critical component of the grade. This leads to the question of whether or not this is the result of one teacher's grading practices or a cumulative effect of teaching practices during the elementary years.

We need to change grading policy so that all students are truly measured on their mastery of the subject and the skills they need to demonstrate competency. More importantly, it is not just teachers who need to know grading criteria; they must be shared with students and their parents so that everyone has a clear understanding that students are required to demonstrate competency, not just show up and turn in a paper or a project.

The most important piece of the puzzle is teaching students what competency and mastery mean. Students should know not only what work is required of them but should know that the reason for the work is to provide evidence that they have achieved mastery of certain specified knowledge and skills that will give them the power to transform their own lives.

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