THE EFFECT OF STANDARDS-BASED GRADING ON
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN WRITING

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Abstract

Teacher perceptions regarding standards-based grading practices and correlations to student achievement on the TNReady End-of-Course writing assessment in English I and English II were examined in this qualitative study. This study was conducted to support standards-based grading initiatives by showing a direct comparison of standards-based grading and student achievement using teacher perceptions in a rural, Appalachian school district. Teachers were asked to participate in the study through either a survey, interview, and/or as a participant in a focus group. The research included in this study is guided by cognitive constructivism. Teacher contributions were based on their own schema in using standards-based grading to impact student achievement in writing on the TNReady End-of-Course exam. To provide teacher support, teacher perceptions of how standards-based grading influences pedagogical writing practices and how teachers create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement are included, along with any identified correlations of standards-based grading and student achievement on the writing portion of TNReady. According to teacher perceptions, competency-based learning utilizing a standards-based grading approach correlates to student achievement on end-of-course exams. This correlation is a result of teachers understanding how to interpret state provided data, setting an example through the use of standards-based rubrics, and utilizing the “I do, we do, you do” approach to learning. Results from the findings indicated a need for teacher support in using state provided data as well as a need for professional development on implementing competency-based learning through a standards-based grading model.

Keywords: Standards-based grading, student achievement, competency-based learning, writing, TNReady End-of-Course, English I, English II
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CHAPTER 1: PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION

Introduction and Background of the Study

A considerable portion of school improvement plans and initiatives promote an increase in student achievement; however, the methods for reporting such information vary widely among educators. Educational reforms highlight the intent of standards in relation to student learning, but how accurately reporting measures portray student achievement is debatable (Espin et al., 2008; Haptonstall, 2010; Knight, 2018; Reeves, 2004; Scarlett, 2018; Townsley & Varga, 2018; Welsh et al., 2013). In traditional grading practices, reporting student achievement typically results in a number and/or letter grade to identify mastery without specific, detailed criteria or measurement of understanding (Cureton, 1971; Layne, 2018). With newer initiatives focusing on students’ abilities to master a standard based on opportunities of growth, competency-based learning through standards-based grading reports student achievement in specific levels of knowledge acquisition (Paeplow, 2011; Scarlett, 2018).

Competency-based instruction and grading exist in multiple forms in education; both are used in an effort to determine student progress based on ability to show mastery of a given skill or task (Paeplow, 2011; Scarlett, 2018). Traditionally, teachers have awarded students number and/or letter grades to exhibit specific learning goals or targets that do not include specific, detailed criteria (Scarlett, 2018). This number and/or letter distinction on student work, however, does not provide a clear insight into the students’ acquisition of knowledge (Paeplow, 2011). In contrast, competency-based learning intends to allow students to progress in learning based on individual needs by utilizing standards-based instruction and grading. The use of standards-based measures provides educators with learning objectives and growth measures that indicate specifics in a student’s level of mastery for a given skill or task to more accurately assess and
report student learning. However, standards-based grading is varied among teachers and grades. As a derivative of competency-based learning, standards-based grading additionally provides educators, parents, guardians, and students with tools to set measurable goals for student achievement (Scarlett, 2018).

Goal setting through competency-based learning has allowed and continues to allow students the opportunity to show growth and progression of learning by identifying the expected outcome for a course or grade level (Brush & Saye, 2017; Scarlett, 2018). Research findings indicate students are motivated to engage in their learning as either a reflection tool or to identify specifics required in a task or standard (Bell, Mladenovic, & Prince, 2013; Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller, & Townsley, 2017). Utilizing standards-based grading measures to identify what level a student is mastering a standard is also an opportunity for educators to specifically address the individual needs of the student. This consists of teachers assessing students’ work through various methods to include written work, oral presentations, as well as teacher observation of student growth in comparison to a standard. With multiple ways to show new learning and knowledge, students have various opportunities to demonstrate mastery of a standard, and teachers have resources to provide constructive, useful feedback (Scarlett, 2018).

In assessing student work, finding a consistent, measurable tool that identifies a set norm for grade-level expectations is a keystone in standards-based grading. The use of rubrics is a specific tool that identifies levels of learning. Rubrics indicate growth measures that provide guidance and direction on expectations in learning the specific standard (Gibbs, Andres, & Barnes, 2016). The gradual increase of learning levels on a rubric indicate exact targets, thus providing educators, parents, guardians, and students with the distinct and clear knowledge of the student’s mastery of the standard at each level (Brookhart, 2013). On some occasions, the rubric
scores are then transferred onto a standards-based progress report where, over time, students, parents, guardians, and teachers may discern student growth in levels. Additionally, students can see the range of growth levels through rubrics that provide information regarding opportunities missed by the identification of the specific criteria needed to move levels (Hendry, Armstrong, & Bromberger, 2012). This is a distinct difference between standards-based grading and traditional grading.

In traditional grading, students receive number and/or letter combinations that do not represent specifics in a standard or a certain level of knowledge acquisition, but rather stand in the form of a proxy for student knowledge based on the determination of the teacher. Those determinations may vary among teachers, creating an inaccurate reflection of student learning due to the variety of interpretations (Brimi, 2011; Paeplow, 2011; Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller, & Townsley, 2017; Reeves, 2004). Through standards-based grading practices, the expectations and learning outcomes for a specific grade or course are well defined and students are measured on the specifics of the standards (Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller, & Townsley, 2017). This does not mean, however, that there is no room for interpretation. This indicates that standards-based grading offers expectations and learning outcomes that translate into measurable, visual tools for students, parents, and guardians in identifying the progression of learning (Knight, 2018; Scarlett, 2018). Although standards-based grading includes the leveling of learning to meet the expectations of the standard, general measuring tools often include a representative proxy by way of a number and/or letter grade similar to traditional grading practices. The proxy used in standards-based grading, however, provides teachers, students, parents, and guardians with a representative scale that identifies the progression of learning, not just a number or letter that lacks additional information (Knight, 2018; Scarlett, 2018). Teachers want what is best for
students and are inundated with new ideas, approaches, and strategies; teachers also want to understand standards-based grading through meaningful training.

In deciding what is best for students, studies surrounding student motivation in relation to competency-based grading report both positive and negative results. In Fowler’s (2018) study regarding student motivation in relation to competency-based grading, it was noted that students who feel competent, autonomous, and related also feel intrinsically motivated to learn; however, it was also reported, in the same study, that standards-based grading decreased student motivation. Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller, & Townsley (2017) reported that students’ motivation decreased with the use of standards-based grading. Some students were unmotivated because they knew they could reassess, while others were unsure of what they needed to do to improve (Peters et al., 2017). Bell, Mladenovic, and Price (2013) found students were pleased with provided standards because the standards provided guidance and supported motivation to engage in learning. While student motivation surrounding standards-based grading is an identifiable factor in research, it is not the focus of this study. This study aims to add to the body of research concerning the perceptions between standards-based grading and the effects on student achievement outside of student motivation.

Although not new to education, standards-based grading has been at the forefront of educational reform. With the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, standards-based instructional initiatives were highlighted, and they continue to be a driving factor under the newly enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA notably endorses the role of standards in the educational development and growth in student achievement and charges states with setting accountability measures where academic indicators, which may be assessed under standards-based grading, carry the most weight (Darrow, 2016).
In keeping with the requirements of ESSA, the state of Tennessee assesses students annually through the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) as a component of TNReady (TNReady, 2018). Among many other courses, subjects, and grades, the TNReady End-of-Course exam in 9th and 10th grade English language arts (ELA) courses contain a writing assessment that is correlated with a state blueprint and writing rubric for three different modes of writing: narrative, explanatory/informational, and argumentative. The blueprint and rubric correlate and outline the specific ELA skills to be assessed. With teachers utilizing the blueprints and writing rubrics as guides in preparing students for the TNReady writing assessment, competency-based instruction is then coupled with standards-based grading (“English Language Arts Standards and TNReady Writing Rubric,” 2017; Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee, 2017; “Writing Rubrics for 2017-18,” 2018). This process is additionally evident in the department’s initiation of a competency-based pilot in multiple districts across the state (Ashe et al., 2018). As a participant in the pilot program, one principal touted that her teachers recognized that their use of competency-based teaching strategies and grading systems were predictors of the end of year assessment (Ashe et al., 2018). The relationship, however, of standards-based grading to student achievement on the TNReady End-of-Course writing assessment lacks sufficient evidence to support a correlation between the two.

Research Problem

Although competency-based learning through standards-based grading is researched, including Brookhart et al.’s (2016) recent addition to the body of research, there is a distinct lack of information regarding the correlation of standards-based grading to student achievement on state writing assessments (Scarlett, 2018). This additionally includes a lack of information regarding pedagogical practices utilizing standards-based grading to assess student writing to
positively impact student achievement on end-of-course state exams. Brookhart et al. (2016) reported that while many teachers support standards-based grading practices as meaningful to student feedback, teachers also continue to grade using multiple layers beyond standards-based grading to include motivation. Subsequently, this creates a variance in instruction and assessment. With the limited research available, there is indication that standards-based grading and student achievement correlate, yet the absence of identifiable research puts educators in a position to question the validity of standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement in writing.

Additionally, there are concerns regarding the variability in teacher discretion when assessing student work (Brimi, 2011; Paeplow, 2011; Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller, & Townsley, 2017; Reeves, 2004), as well as lack of training in utilizing standards-based grading as a means to measure student achievement (Gibbs et al., 2016). In addition, despite the instructional shift to standards-based learning through recent reforms in education, many teachers continue to utilize traditional grading to report mastery of content (MacCrindle, 2017). To support teachers and districts in the transition to standards-based grading initiatives and school-level teacher buy-in, research that identifies the correlation and benefits of such instruction is necessary. Also, educators should have access to pedagogical writing practices that support these transitions, as well as strategies that utilize standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores in English I and English II if research supports the transition.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is multifaceted and aims to support educators in the transition to standards-based grading initiatives and to provide research that aids in creating buy-in at the
school level. One purpose is to investigate the perceptions between teacher practices in using standards-based grading and student achievement results from the TNReady End-of-Course state writing assessment in English I and English II in a rural, Appalachian school district. Additionally, the study aims to collect pedagogical writing practices and new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores in English I and English II. In identifying new ways of knowing and learning, the study intends to identify how students create new schema in an effort to build new knowledge through assimilation or accommodation, as represented in Piaget’s constructivist theory of learning. Results in English I and English II were selected in an effort to manage the study within a reasonable timeframe. The intent was to interview and survey teachers regarding their perceptions on how standards-based grading impacts their pedagogical writing practices, as well as how they currently support standards-based grading implementations to positively affect student achievement. As a result of the study, information will provide insight into teachers’ perceptions of implementing competency-based teaching strategies through a standards-based grading approach in teaching writing to students in English I and English II, as well as add to the needed research regarding the perceptions of standards-based grading and student achievement.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions will drive and inform the study:

1. How does the use of standards-based grading to assess student writing in English I and English II relate with student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores according to teacher perceptions?
2. How does standards-based grading influence pedagogical writing practices in English I and English II, according to educators’ perceptions?

3. How do educators work to create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement?

**Rationale for the Study**

This case study aims to investigate the perceptions between standards-based grading and student achievement on the TNReady writing assessment in English I and English II in hopes of supporting educators in their move from traditional grading practices to practices aligned to standards-based instruction. Through interviews, survey results, and a focus group, I will be able to identify educators’ previous knowledge and experiences in influencing pedagogical practices and student achievement in writing, as well as current instructional writing practices. Additionally, the study will provide information on how educators work to create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement on the TNReady writing assessment in English I and English II.

The lack of research specifically related to how standards-based grading affects student achievement in writing on end-of-course exams is the premise of the study. Although there is limited research to support the effects of standards-based grading on writing instruction, research shows correlations between standards-based grading and student achievement on state assessments in multiple content areas (Espin et al., 2008; Haptonstall, 2010; Hochbein & Pollio, 2016; Welsh, D’Agostine, & Kaniskan, 2013).

Student motivation is also correlated to the use of competency-based learning through standards-based grading in multiple content areas (Bell, Mladenovic, & Price, 2013; Hochbein & Pollio, 2016; Layne, 2018; Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller, and Townsley, 2017). Because of specific
research findings that conclude there is a correlation, be it positive or negative, between competency-based learning through standards-based grading and motivation, this study does not focus on motivational factors in student growth in writing. Instead, the study aims to identify the correlations that are evidenced on the TNReady state writing assessment in English I and English II to the use of standards-based grading practices that include specific instructional strategies that positively affect student achievement according to teacher perceptions.

**Researcher Positionality Statement**

During my time as an English language arts teacher, I worked with students ranging in their abilities to express knowledge and learning through writing. Numerous students struggled to begin writing, let alone continue a thread of coherent thoughts comparing two articles or consistently developing their opinion on a given topic. I made it a mission to create a format that would support the process of writing while allowing students the opportunity to create, set, and meet goals. In my research as a classroom teacher, writing rubrics that identified qualities of students’ writing at various levels emerged in each resource I reviewed. The idea of competency-based learning through a rubric led me to change my instructional focus from traditional grading practices to standards-based grading.

As soon as I employed a standards-based approach to teaching writing, I noticed a difference in my students’ writing. What I later learned was that student achievement levels in writing throughout the year corresponded to student achievement scores on the end-of-course state writing assessment. Although I no longer teach writing in the classroom, my role as a district English language arts administrator allows me the opportunity to work with educators in creating instructional methods proven successful in growing students’ knowledge and understanding of writing processes. The opportunity to share writing strategies that work with
other educators encourages me to study the influence of standards-based grading on students’ growth in writing.

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are specific to the study and are defined to provide the reader a better understanding of the concepts and constructs included in the research.

**Blueprints.** “Assessment blueprints are designed to show educators a summary of what will be assessed in each grade, including a range of number of items that will address each strand of standards. This resource is designed to help educators as they plan for the upcoming school year” (Blueprints for 2017-18, 2018).

**Competency-based learning.** “Enabling students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning” (Competency-Based Learning or Personalized Learning, 2018). “Competency-based learning refers to systems of instruction, assessment, grading and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating that they have learned the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn as they progress through their education” (Competency-Based Learning, 2014).

**Criterion-referenced.** “Assessments designed to measure student performance against a fixed set of predetermined criteria or learning standards” (Criterion-Referenced Test, 2014).

**Feedback.** “Feedback is information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal. Whether feedback is just there to be grasped or is provided by another person, helpful feedback is goal referenced; tangible and transparent; actionable; user-friendly (specific and personalized); timely; ongoing; and consistent” (Wiggins, 2012).
Norm-referenced assessment.

“Assessments designed to rank test takers on a ‘bell curve,’ or a distribution of scores that resembles, when graphed, the outline of a bell. Test questions are carefully designed to accentuate performance differences among test takers—not to determine if students have achieved specified learning standards, learned required material, or acquired specific skills” (Criterion-Referenced Test, 2014).

Standards. “Statements which indicate what students are expected to know and be able to do in each curriculum area. Learning standards are concise, written descriptions of what students are expected to know and be able to do at a specific stage of their education. Learning standards describe educational objectives—i.e., what students should have learned by the end of a course, grade level, or grade span—but they do not describe any particular teaching practice, curriculum, or assessment method” (Glossary of Education Reform Great Schools Partnership, 2014 as cited in Layne, 2018).

Standards-based grading. Standards-based grading measures students’ proficiency against specifically defined learning outcomes for a grade level or course (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). “Standards-based refers to systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating understanding or mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn as they progress through their education” (Competency-Based Learning, 2014).

Tennessee state writing rubrics. “The Tennessee writing rubrics are designed to score the student responses from the writing portion of the TNReady assessment. Each rubric is aligned to the appropriate grade-level standards in the Writing and Language strands. Though the rubrics are not explicitly designed to be used as instructional resources, the
department provides the writing rubrics in advance so that educators can prepare students for the writing portion of the TNReady assessment” (Writing Rubrics for 2017-18, 2018).

**TNReady end-of-course exam.** “TNReady is a part of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) and is designed to assess true student understanding, not just basic memorization and test-taking skills. It is a way to assess what our students know and what we can do to help them succeed in the future” (TNReady, 2018).

**Traditional grading.** “Simple letter grades ranging from A, B, C, D, and F. Assessments are based on teacher-defined criteria. A single overall grade per student based on a combination of related and unrelated assessments of skills, knowledge, performance and conduct over a period of time” (Cicmanec, 2001 as cited in Layne, 2018).

**Summary**

Information to support standards-based grading in regard to student achievement on state writing assessments is sparse. As districts and educators alike are consistently presented with standards-based instructional strategies and initiatives, the need to provide support structures is apparent. This study is an effort to support standards-based grading initiatives by sharing perceptions between standards-based grading and student achievement on the TNReady writing assessment in English I and English II in a rural, Appalachian school district. Through the data collected and examined, this study also aims to identify teachers’ perceptions of how standards-based grading influences pedagogical writing practices and how teachers create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement to include the constructivist approach to learning. To substantiate the study and provide current research, a review of literature surrounding standards-based grading, including governing laws
regarding educational policies specific to competency-based learning, as well as literature on traditional and standards-based grading is presented in the second chapter.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In my attempt to support all students in their writing instruction, my first years of teaching included reviewing multiple methods concerning best practices in teaching writing. In my reviews, competency-based learning using a standards-based approach consistently emerged. This approach to teaching writing seemed like a natural fit for students and a purposeful strategy for me to offer individualized support to meet the needs of various learners. As I moved into the implementation of competency-based writing instruction, I changed my instructional focus from traditional grading practices to standards-based grading, utilizing writing rubrics to level growth and mastery of a specific standard or writing strategy. What I noticed when I received student scores from end-of-course testing was a correlation between the writing scores students received throughout the year. Throughout my time in the classroom, I continued using this method to teach writing, and without fail, my students’ results on end-of-course writing assessments were encouraging. I knew that the leveled approach evident in scoring student writing on a rubric throughout the year provided insight into student growth and achievement. Although my role in education has changed from a classroom teacher to a district-level support in English language arts for K-12 teachers, my desire to offer strategies that promote positive student growth and achievement remains. Based on my personal experiences with encouraging correlations using competency-based learning strategies in conjunction with standards-based grading and student achievement, I wanted to explore other studies that examine similar practices to better provide support to teachers in my school district transitioning to competency-based instruction.

In the first chapter, I provided the introduction to the research, including background information on traditional grading, standards-based grading, and competency-based learning (Cureton, 1971; Layne, 2018; Paeplow, 2011; Scarlett, 2018). Traditional grading measures
report student achievement in a number and/or letter grade (Cureton, 1971; Layne, 2018) while competency-based learning includes standards-based grading centered on the ability of a student to show mastery of a skill or task (Brookhart, 2013; Gibbs, Andres, & Barnes, 2016; Paeplow, 2011; Scarlett, 2018). Although not new to education, standards-based grading is at the forefront of educational reform. Initially, standards-based grading was brought to the attention of educators through the federal enactment of No Child Left Behind. This attention continues through the sustained push to utilize competency-based learning with the recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (Darrow, 2016).

With this consideration comes the need to associate standards-based grading practices to student achievement. To support district standards-based grading initiatives and school-level teacher buy-in, research correlating the two is needed. Due to the lack of such available research, I intend to study the relationship of competency-based learning using standards-based grading. Additionally, I intend to identify how standards-based grading affects the teaching of writing and ways educators employ standards-based grading practices to positively impact student achievement. The research will revolve around standards-based grading and teacher perceptions of student achievement results from the TNReady state writing assessment in English I and English II in an effort to manage the study within a reasonable timeframe.

I also included the background knowledge I have on the topic, as well as how this research is useful and purposeful in my current role of supporting teachers in teaching English language arts to students in my district. The definition of terms specific to the study were outlined and defined to provide the reader a better understanding of the educational jargon included in the research, and I concluded the first chapter with a summary of the proposed research and recommendation of the literature review for the second chapter.
**Overview of the Chapter**

To substantiate the study, the second chapter contains a review of literature on several topics surrounding standards-based grading, including governing laws regarding educational policies specific to competency-based learning as well as literature on traditional and standards-based grading. This review of literature identifies the progression of grading to support the lean toward reporting student growth through standards-based grading and recognizes concerns under both traditional and standards-based grading practices. The second chapter also includes the theoretical framework that underpins the study, as well as identifies the research methods used to obtain relevant literature germane to competency-based learning and standards-based grading.

**Organization**

In the second chapter, I focus on standards-based grading and research that compares standards-based grading and writing correlations to state tests that measure student achievement in writing specifically. Detailed references to empirical studies, other articles, books, and reports that explore the direct results of standards-based grading in relation to student achievement are provided. I also include a review of competency-based learning and the correlations to standards-based grading.

Governing laws that include No Child Left Behind, the newly enacted Every Student Succeed Act, as well as Tennessee’s requirements through the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program are detailed to identify mandatory requirements in relation to reporting student achievement. Following the broad overview of governing laws, I detail the framework for the study. The research in this study is undergirded by the theory of cognitive constructivism and includes descriptions of the history and development of this theory. This provides a path for examining teachers’ support and students’ attainment of new learning and knowledge based on
prior knowledge and previous experiences, as well as how both teachers’ support and students’ attainment of new learning and knowledge translate into student achievement.

Additionally, I include a brief report in the second chapter on the history of grading, including writing practices in English and concerns with traditional grading practices. This brief history gives the reader background knowledge on the relationships between traditional grading practices and standards-based grading practices through competency-based learning. This is included to help readers identify the differences between the two. I then include standards-based grading initiatives, along with reports outlining student performance in writing. This is followed with concerns in standards-based grading measures. In this section of the second chapter, I respectively identify the relevance in correlating standards-based grading practices and student achievement levels in writing. In this review, I specifically reference the use of Tennessee state writing rubrics in English I and English II, as well as the state’s recently published assessment overview for grades 5-8. I conclude the second chapter with a summary of findings from the review of literature correlating standards-based grading and student achievement in writing and lead readers into the methodology presented in the third chapter.

**Research Method**

Standards-based grading in relation to student achievement in writing on end-of-course state assessments is the focus of the review of literature. Empirical studies, articles, books, and reports include research retrieved from educational research databases, including EBSCO Discovery Service, ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and JStor through the Carson-Newman online library with the search terms standards-based grading/learning, non-traditional grading/learning, competency-based grading/learning, outcome-based grading/learning, and other various terms specific to writing and state assessments. The review of literature provided
numerous resources on standards-based grading. Two extensive literature reviews on standards-based grading were evaluated and used to inform further research (Brookhart et al., 2016; McMaster & Espin, 2007). Additionally, an in-depth review of the Tennessee Department of Education’s website outlining testing policies and structures was used to inform and guide references to the TNReady state assessment (TNReady, 2018).

Although there are multiple studies and research regarding competency-based learning and standards-based grading available, the research directly comparing standards-based grading to state writing assessments is limited. To find the most current information directly comparing the two, a specific search in ProQuest under the dissertation category yielded additional studies to further enhance and support the research. While the literature review focuses on scholarly work since the inception of No Child Left Behind in 2001, it does include a historical look at traditional grading practices that precedes 2001.

**Governing Laws**

Federal laws governing education have in all attempts focused on the successful attainment of knowledge; however, more recent initiatives incentivize learning to support standards-based instruction with student outcomes directly affecting elements, such as accountability measures (Darrow, 2016; *Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee*, 2017). Although states have liberties within federal law, two specific acts ignited educational reform that emphasized competency-based learning. The first of the acts, No Child Left Behind, highlighted competency-based learning using a standards-based approach (Haynes, 2008). More recently, the newly enacted Every Student Succeed Act remains steadfastly in favor of supporting student growth employing competency-based learning through a standards-based approach. Both acts have garnered the attention of educators with either positive or negative
associations; nonetheless, educational reform is underway and competency-based learning through standards-based grading remains at the forefront (Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee, 2017).

**No Child Left Behind**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) changed the landscape of education when passed in 2001, representing the initiation of educational reform. At the time NCLB passed, student reading levels across the nation were alarmingly low, with students reading well below grade level (Hayes, 2008; No Child Left Behind, 2001). Accordingly, a major focus of the legislation required states to create reading or language arts standards that included a directly linked state assessment to accurately evaluate students’ knowledge of the standards to raise student reading levels (Hayes, 2008; No Child Left Behind, 2001). To aid in supporting curriculum and standards-based learning, specific grants were awarded through NCLB (No Child Left Behind, 2001). These grants were ultimately in position to raise reading levels so that inevitably no child was left behind his/her peers (Hayes, 2008; No Child Left Behind, 2001). These resources provided learning structures that encouraged educators to align instruction to meet the needs of the individual student and support the student’s acquisition of knowledge through the use of the standards (No Child Left Behind, 2001).

Time and effort were spent in raising achievement levels on state assessments in an effort to meet the expectations of NCLB mandates (Hayes, 2008). In addition to raising student reading levels, NCLB mandates placed heavy emphasis on English and math (No Child Left Behind, 2001). Teacher training moved instruction toward competency-based learning in alignment with standards-based grading, and in response, teachers created formative and summative assessments that addressed standards (McIntosh & Milam, 2016) including writing rubrics that detailed the
standards in levels. These rubrics allowed students to experience learning through an avenue of a growth model mindset (TNReady, 2018; TNReady Grades 9-12 Informational/Explanatory Rubric, 2017).

NCLB placed emphasis on the standards, which consequently prompted educators to use standards as the foundation for teaching (No Child Left Behind, 2001). Creating environments that supported standards-based learning in all academic areas under NCLB required educators to fully grasp the depth and rigor required of each standard, with special focus in reading, English, and math. While NCLB contained additional focus areas, as well as pros and cons in educational outcomes, this research aims to highlight those areas pertinent to standards-based grading and student achievement levels regarding state writing assessments and the progression in educational reform to include the most recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act.

**Every Student Succeeds Act**

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) notably identifies the role of standards in the educational development and growth in student achievement in much the same manner as previous legislation; however, ESSA allows for considerable modifications that were not permitted under NCLB outside of the role of standards (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). By way of accountably, ESSA allows states to set accountably measures with the caveat that academic indicators must carry the highest percentage of the weight (Darrow, 2016; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), which is a noticeable departure from NCLB. An additional departure under ESSA allows for federal Title I provisions under state-identified interventions (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Furthermore, the act allows states the flexibility to decide how student achievement affects teacher evaluation scores (Darrow, 2016; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Although ESSA allows for additional modifications since the previous
legislation, the change does not come as a major hindrance to the modifications and changes made during NCLB. States responded to NCLB by restructuring education to place emphasis on standards-based instruction and student growth in a competency-based learning environment—a parallel to ESSA.

The Tennessee Department of Education responded to ESSA by creating, and in many instances maintaining, formats and procedures for assessments to indicate student learning that were present under No Child Left Behind. “Tennessee Succeeds” (2018) explained that ESSA works to “reaffirm the importance of standards, assessments, and accountability through empowering states to make decisions for our kids,” which is in direct alignment with the Tennessee Department of Education’s goal to provide and prepare students with an education focused on student growth in and out of the classroom (Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee, 2017). This growth is intended as a derivative of competency-based learning through an emphasis on a rigorous standards-based approach. Setting academic standards that are rigorous and demand critical thinking skills, along with problem-solving skills, is a focus area of the department that trickles down to focus areas in districts, including student achievement in writing. Knowing that the academic standards are more rigorous and for the purpose of helping educators understand the change, the Tennessee Department of Education established a clear objective to build teacher capacity in understanding the depth and implications of the standards through competency-based training and supplied resources. This includes specific training seminars and professional development opportunities that outline best practices in teaching writing instruction to prepare teachers so these teachers may prepare students for the demands of the state writing assessments. Specific state resources that aid in the instruction outline alignment and expectations, including the assessment blueprints and rubrics
for scoring student writing in preparation for TNReady (TNReady, 2018). While ESSA contains multiple layers, this research aims to focus on the effects of the act in relation to standards-based writing instruction and student achievement on TNReady writing assessments in English I and English II.

**Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program: TNReady**

TNReady, as a division of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program, works to identify student achievement based on identified standards (TNReady, 2018). Tennessee state assessments are detailed through state blueprints which associate assessments with the state academic standards. According to the Tennessee Department of Education, course and grade level blueprints are intended to provide teachers with a map of the assessment to assist in planning and developing standards-based instruction (*Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee*, 2017; TNReady, 2018). Blueprints are available in all tested subject areas and include writing rubrics in English language arts (TNReady, 2018).

Although the blueprint does not identify each grade level standard as an assessed item, it indicates the areas of emphasis for teachers to connect lessons and writing instruction to the required end-of-course exam. Teachers are expected to instruct students using each grade-level standard (*Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee*, 2017). The blueprint, however, only identifies the specific standards assessed for the specified state assessment (TNReady, 2018). This allows teachers the opportunity to make instructional decisions to include emphasis areas in teaching writing. During the administration of the TNReady writing assessment, students are tasked with responding to a writing prompt based on either one or two literary or informational texts referred to as a passage set (“2018-19 TNReady English Language
Arts Grades 5-8 Assessment Overview,” 2018). Students in grades 3 through English II are then scored against the corresponding writing rubric (TNReady, 2018).

The state writing rubrics include four categories (focus and organization, development, language, and conventions) with each category containing four levels. The four levels translate into targets with opportunities for growth through specific, detailed criteria at the given level (TNReady Grades 9-12 Informational/Explanatory Rubric, 2017). The criteria correspond to the expectations of the state writing tasks, as well as the overall performance measures of academic growth specific to grade-level standards: below, approaching, on track, and mastered (Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee, 2017). While the rubrics are not intended or designed to guide instruction, educators are provided the scoring criteria in which students are scored with the intent that educators use the rubrics and the blueprints to assist students in the preparation of the state writing assessment (“Writing Rubrics for 2017-18,” 2018). The blueprints and standards-based writing rubrics provided for English language arts courses, specifically in English I and English II, are the blueprints and rubrics referenced in this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

According to O’Donnell-Allen (2012), the teachers that are most effective in teaching students to write are teachers that write themselves. Teachers that write understand the process in a way that is relevant to supporting students authentically. Being a writer alone does not cumulatively sum up the process of teaching writing. In fact, the National Writing Project (2017) outlines teaching writing in one of their core principles to say that “knowledge about the teaching of writing comes from many sources: theory and research, the analysis of practice, and the experience of writing.” Teaching writing is a conglomeration of strategies that includes an
exposure to multiple methods and experiences that include opportunities for teacher growth in their own pedagogical writing practices, as well as student growth through practice and revision (Griffith & Brown, 2017). The exploration in teaching writing and the graduation of methods leads to student growth in writing. According to the theory of cognitive constructivism, growth exists in the realm of the experience based on personal associations with previous understandings. This growth is built on schemas that allow for either an equilibrium of new knowledge through assimilation or a disequilibrium of new knowledge through accommodation. This framework outlines a roadmap for individual learning and acquisition of knowledge for both teacher and student. This study aims to use the theory of cognitive constructivism as the informing framework to explore the impact of previous knowledge and experience in teaching writing in relation to the use of standards-based grading to assess student writing, to influence instruction, and to create new ways of knowing and learning to positively affect student achievement in English I and English II.

Jean Piaget, in developing the cognitive constructivism learning theory, identified learning as a construct derived from experiential, existing factors within the learner’s own knowledge base. As a psychologist, Piaget studied the implications of new learning and derived specific learning structures based on the learner’s acquisition of knowledge. The emphasis of cognitive constructivism focuses on the factors within an individual and how new learning and knowledge are developed (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Piaget theorized that new knowledge must be personally constructed and not simply handed to or taught to an individual for immediate consumption and use. This includes creating individualized learning paths with the understanding and knowledge of the learner. When educators know and understand the
implications of cognitive constructivism and are able to identify the specific needs of students, new learning and knowledge occur effectively.

Constructivists hold that new learning and growth are acquired through surrounding environments in conjunction with prior learning and experience (Liu & Matthews, 2005; Powell & Kalina, 2009). This growth is based on a personal experience with the information in contrast to growth through the aid of others (Powell & Kalina, 2009). This approach to learning and growth also predicts that early interactions between a mother and a child, including emotional and language interactions, are key factors in the development of a student’s individual acquisition of knowledge (Chen, 2004). This underpinning of experiential knowledge forms the beginning associations of learning that supports the discovery of new knowledge through additional and accumulated experiences that are centered on the learner as an individual and the process of discovery (Liu & Matthews, 2005). Subsequent environmental experiences through social interactions serve solely as a stimulus in the learning process through the cognitive constructivist approach.

The implications of cognitive constructivism in education and teaching include new ways of knowing and learning based on previous experiences and knowledge. This includes creating environments that offer opportunities for personal growth. Effective teaching practices allow for individualized student discovery of knowledge in addition to providing the environments in which students have open opportunities for new learning. This includes a paradigm shift in classroom instruction that cultivates an environment for the individual student to construct new learning through active engagement rather than receiving new knowledge through others (Green & Gredler, 2002). Students become active learners that experience growth through exploration. A traditional grade, in essence, is contrary to this idea of personal growth. Traditional grading
scores students based on performance through a behavior that does not offer student advice on how to improve. This causes a disequilibrium in schemas. Through Piaget’s idea of schooling, teachers should continually provide students with probing questions that challenge their knowledge through classroom experiences that foster active, spontaneous learning (Green & Gredler, 2002).

While other theories work in conjunction with cognitive constructivism, the theoretical framework for this study will remain focused on the cognitive constructivist approach to learning as developed through Jean Piaget’s work in relation to a student’s individual cognitive development. Understanding the framework of the theory allows for a detailed examination of student growth regarding a student’s individual acquisition of knowledge and how this growth translates into student achievement through assimilation and accommodation.

**Traditional Grading**

Traditional grading includes reporting student achievement based on selected criteria that mark specifics in learning and student acquisition of knowledge (Brookhart et al., 2016; Comes, 2015; Cureton, 1971; Lyon, 1993; Zak & Weaver, 1998). This type of grading is widely used today and includes assigning specific marks either numerically and/or utilizing a letter as a grade representation for student artifacts, be it via an essay, quiz, test, presentation, or any other measure to assess student learning (Zak & Weaver, 1998). Grades are gathered, averaged, and assigned representative percentages with a specific letter grade to provide an end of term score illustrative of the student’s acquisition of knowledge during the given time frame (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). This number and letter grade equate to a final determination of mastery for a given student in a specific course, class, and/or grade.
Students are assigned grades based on teacher discretion; however, the basic premise is the same (Layne, 2018). Traditional grading includes combinations that may include a letter grade with a corresponding range of percentage points earned, such as an “F” for student work averaging 60 percentage points or below or a “B” for student work averaging between 81 and 90 percentage points. The association from such grading may include a student has failed with the score of an “F” or a student has passed with above average work with the score of a “B.” In number/letter combinations, the number and/or letter represent an overall subjective representation of knowledge in respect to a student’s level of understanding (Marzano, 2006). In traditional grading, teachers may score student work utilizing the means they deem accurately measures understanding, which does not necessarily translate into what the student knows and understands (Marzano, 2006, pg. 30; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). This may include the use of grade scales, ranges of proficiency, and/or other factors outside of academics, including effort and growth (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Grades are reported in number and/or letter combinations on student work, progress reports, and end of term report cards. Students, parents, and guardians identify with the number/letter combinations in respect to the student work as either failing, below average, average, above average, or well above average.

Students are also ranked and categorized based on ability and overall percentages under traditional grading practices. This includes clustering students who are considered “failing students” with a percentage grade of 60 or below and recommending remediation, intervention strategies, and/or tutoring. This also includes clustering students well above average and extending services through providing enrichment. Percentages also categorize students in learning categories for class and/or course placement. Lower performing students with averages in the lower spectrum of the grade scale may be considered for an intervention or skills level
class. Higher performing students with averages in the upper end of the grade scale may be
deemed honors level students in need of enrichment through an honors level course, such as
Advanced Placement. The options for measuring student work are numerous and varied under
traditional grading practices, and feedback given is relative to teachers’ interpretations of
learning measurements. Paeplow’s (2011) research found grading student work using letters is
not an accurate reflection of student learning due to the vast variation in grading in education.
Additionally, this type of grading creates a disequilibrium not supported by the constructivist
view to learning. Constructivists utilize rubric levels to compare and contrast their work against
the levels to identify a new way to approach knowing and learning based on their experience
through assimilation. Traditional grading does not provide the details; it provides an end result
void of specifics in learning (Marzano, 2006; Paeplow, 2011). This form of grading has changed
very little over the course of time with beginnings evident as early as the 19th century (Cureton,
1971).

History of Traditional Grading

The early ideas of grading introduce the reporting of student achievement. Initial grading
practices included ascertaining students’ knowledge in identifying new learning and knowledge,
mainly through essays and oral examinations (Lyon, 1993). The grade assigned to such student
work equated to categories indicating students’ abilities as either below, average, or above their
peers’ work (Cureton, 1971). Percentages that equated to the same levels of learning made
appearances in the 19th century. The use of marking student work with either percentages and/or
a number/letter combination emerged in an effort to identify areas of strength and areas of
weakness as students graduated learning levels and progressed in their education (Lyon, 1993).
This also included the averaging of multiple grades with a final overall percentage earned. This
method of grading became widely accepted in the 20th century (Cureton, 1971) and was developed based on that of the work in place at Yale University (Comes, 2015).

In the later part of the 20th century, government officials found it obvious that the educational standard in the United States was one at risk (A Nation at Risk, 1983), so much so that when comparing education in the United States to international progress, students in other countries were clearly ahead of American students (Layne, 2018). This noticeable identification of the declining education system resulted in recommendations from the Secretary of Education in a report titled “A Nation at Risk.” This report declared recommended standards to comprise a robust curriculum to measure student achievement in core content areas (A Nation at Risk, 1983). It additionally led educators to examine and implement various methods of measurements in assessing student writing.

**Typical Methods Teachers Use to Grade Student Writing**

Teachers use various methods to score written expression. Percentage-based grading that equates to a representative letter (A-F) is a common practice in education for all courses, grade levels, and subjects and includes the element of scoring student writing (Layne, 2018; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Typically, teachers instruct students to write using a strategy that may or may not include specific criteria with the understanding that students recall language conventions learned in previous years of schooling, such as rules for capitalization, comma usage and placement, subject verb agreement, and pronoun antecedent agreement. Students are then graded on whether they are able to fulfill the expectations of the writing task or strategy. The measurement of grading is at the sole discretion of the teacher (Marzano, 2016; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Teachers may use a point system to create an overall grade based on the task or strategy or may simply award students a letter grade based on effort, improvement from
previous writings, or additional measurements deemed appropriate by the teacher. Zak & Weaver (1998) likened this method of grading to a minimalist grading structure that additionally includes specific marks such as exclamation points, checkmarks, and codes that indicate approval or disapproval in student writing. Additionally, teachers may provide oral feedback on student work for suggestions in improving writing (Mumford, 2015).

The use of *norm-referenced grades* is an additional practice used when grading writing to equate students’ achievement levels to that of their peers and adjusting accordingly (Comes, 2015; Fink, 2015). This system for reporting student achievement levels in writing does not require any specific standard or criteria due to the measurement of student writing being reported based on the student’s writing abilities in comparison to his/her peers. Norm-referencing offers no specific feedback to students, parents, guardians, or teachers other than where students’ place in reference to a standard norm (Fink, 2015). Insight into students’ abilities is not detailed and insight for teachers to inform instruction is limited, which creates concerns.

**Concerns with Traditional Grading Practices**

Teachers’ knowledge of students’ abilities are based on their own experiences and practices in teaching. This creates a variance in scoring student work (Brimi, 2011; Brookhart et al., 2016; Marzano, 2006; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011, Lyon, 1993; Paeplow, 2011; Weed, 2018). By the early 20th century, researchers took note of the discrepancies among teachers’ grading practices (Lyon, 1993). According to Starch and Elliott (1912), research findings acknowledged that student scores were results of subjective grading by teachers. Because of the inconsistency in subjective grading, either knowingly or unknowingly, negative comparisons of students’ abilities are made based on overall grade point averages. This subjectivity, however, leads to inconstancies in accurately identifying student growth or acquisition of knowledge,
which results in an obvious disruption in formal, public education (Marzano, 2006). Without equal grading standards based on equal measures, students are assessed and labeled by a proxy that may or may not be representative of their understanding (Brimi, 2011; Brookhart et al., 2016; Marzano, 2006; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011, Lyon, 1993; Weed, 2018). Without equal measures identifying a reason behind a student’s score, the student may not adjust for improvement, which contrasts with the constructivist theory of learning. According to Cureton (1971), evidence of these variances was reported as early as 1912. Chen and Bonner (2017) found that even though the report of student achievement is placed under the discretion of the teacher, the discretion is grounded in beliefs and values that are purposeful and driven with specific intent and not arbitrary in nature.

In addition, averages are not necessarily indicative of student understanding. Layne (2018) explained:

Take for example student one who received an end of term grade of 75%. Grades earned during the course of the term included a 90, 30, 90, and 90. Student two received the same end of term average with the grades 67, 67, 100, and 67. What is reported to students, parents, and guardians is that the student earned a 75% which translates to average work with a “C” letter grade; what remains is how each student actually performed over the course of the term. Student one performed well with one area of weakness while student two performed poorly with one area of strength. This then leaves students, parents, and guardians without knowledge or insight into student progress. They simply know that the student made, for example, a “C” in math, an “F” in social studies, a “C” in English, and a “C” in science. (p. 29).
With the knowledge provided in the example, the student, parent, and guardian would ascertain that the child is average among his/her peers in most subjects but has failed in social studies (Marzano, 2006). What they do not know, however, are the specifics into why the student failed or how the teacher scored student work (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). This form of measurement is “not necessarily the best representation of a student’s true score at the end of a grading period” (Marzano, 2006, p. 108). The same is true for norm-referenced assessments.

Norm-referencing student achievement poses potential inaccuracies in student learning as well (Comes, 2015; Fink, 2015). Under traditional grading, norm-referencing student work, be it in writing or in any other category, does not provide insight or detail into the specifics of student weaknesses and strengths, thus lacking the need to provide valuable instructional feedback to the student for opportunities to self-evaluate and for teachers to provide opportunities to inform instruction. This method in traditional grading also conflicts with the constructivist model. Norm-referencing does, however, provide a general scale that equates all student peers on the exact norm but does not indicate the measurements that determine the norm. Conversely, standards-based grading provides specific measurements to assess student learning.

**Standards-Based Grading**

Standards-based grading is not a novel idea. For centuries, educators have reported and scored students on their abilities to accomplish a task (Cureton, 1971; Layne, 2018; Lyon, 1993). Generally, standards-based grading includes achievement levels as indicators of student growth. With a continued focus on competency-based learning, standards-based grading provides elements that support validity in student achievement based on student growth measures (Winton, 2015). The use of growth measures is translated to set criteria for a given task where the criteria establish specific learning levels for students’ acquisition of knowledge with the basic
premise involving “communicating current levels of learning based upon standards, eliminating the influence of practice work on the final grade, and providing students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding” (Townsley, 2018). This basic premise additionally supports student motivation in that students feel supported in the growth process (Bell, Mladenovic, & Price, 2013; Peters et al., 2017). When students set goals by identifying levels of mastery and then demonstrate their proficiency, students may be intrinsically motivated to continue the growth process (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011).

Levels may be in the form of a rubric that includes representative numbers and/or letters identifying students’ level of mastery based on standards-based criteria. For example, level “4” on the “TNReady Grades 9-12 Informational/Explanatory Rubric” (2018) represents mastery of a given standard under the standards’ specific criteria that equates to the following: “Demonstrates consistent and sophisticated command of grade-level conventions of standard written English; may contain a few minor errors that do not interfere with the meaning.” It may be inferred that students at a level “4” have reached grade level, standards-based expectations exhibiting the named criteria in the rubric. As such, standards-based grading utilizing a rubric provides students multiple opportunities to show growth (Gibbs, Andres, & Barnes, 2016). Students also see the range of growth levels and the opportunities missed by the identification of the specific criteria needed to move levels (Hendry, Armstrong, & Bromberger, 2012). Rubrics offer descriptive levels that students may reference in comparing their work against set criteria, which aligns with the schema under the constructivist model.

Moreover, standards-based grading makes note of the essentials in the standard (Marzano, 2006). All stakeholders may review standard specifics for grade-level expectations (Knight, 2018). These standards represent the prescribed curriculum but allow for the
employment of resources outside of a specified text or method. The premise in standards-based grading is for teachers to utilize the standards to guide instruction and score students in a manner that consistently refers to the criteria set within the standard. The goal for educators is to create opportunities for students to experience growth in learning using tools that guide students to set measurable goals which, in turn, increases student motivation (Hendry et al., 2012; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011).

**Initiatives Surrounding Standards-Based Grading**

In an effort to support standards-based grading and increase student motivation, initiatives have emerged. The Tennessee Department of Education created the monitoring of student progress and growth through the kindergarten portfolio process as one initiative supporting standards-based grading (Pre-K/Kindergarten, 2018). As a result, educators have revised the reporting of student growth through traditional grading methods and aligned student performance to a given set of standards leveled by learning indicators on state provided rubrics. Samples of student work provide evidence of achievement as indicated on the state rubrics, along with a correlating number such as a level “3” being “on grade level” (Pre-K/Kindergarten, 2018; “TN Student Growth,” 2018).

Standards-based grading through the use of progress reports is an additional initiative that communicates student achievement and growth (Marzano, 2006). Generally, competency-based learning through a standards-based approach accompany a common report to identify specific criteria representing student achievement (Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011). This tool for communication specifically aligns state standards to student progress. This is a major shift in reporting student progress for all stakeholders. While students, parents, guardians, and teachers are accustomed to reporting progress in a specific manner, the standards-based grading approach
offers feedback in the progression of new learning based on the students’ acquisition and display of knowledge, which does not always equate to a reportable score (Marzano, 2006; Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011). This initiative supports the constructivist model for learning, where feedback is based on a student’s specific growth.

A standards-based progress report will contain all areas in which students will be assessed and progress will be reported. Typically progress reports do not include all academic standards, just those that are deemed appropriate for reporting progress. In some instances, specific standards may not have been covered during a certain timeframe but will be covered later in the school year. This is particularly confusing for parents and guardians when unaware or unsure of the reporting practices (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). It is sometimes problematic for teachers to understand that each category may not receive a mark. Fearful of parent complaints and interrogations and to eliminate confusion and frustration, educators are tasked with ensuring understanding and reasoning behind standards-based progress reporting.

In Knight’s (2018) study, seven participating high school teachers utilized standards-based grading practices for a minimum of one school year. The process of reforming grading in their classrooms from traditional grading practices to standards-based grading practices did not come without hesitation. Reluctant due to the lack of research outlining the effects of the transition in grading, teachers nonetheless participated in the research. Through direct observations, interviews, and recording of data, what teachers found was that planning, instruction, assessment, and individualized instruction were more purposeful under the standards-based grading approach. As a result, teachers reported an increased use of assessment data to inform differentiated instruction, more rigorous assessments, and a clearer communication of expectations with student specific feedback (Knight, 2018). Teachers in this
same study also reported that standards-based grading provided clear expectations of learning objectives which, in turn, offered measurable, visual tools for students, parents, and guardians in identifying the progression of their student’s approach to new learning and knowledge. This prompted guided conversations surrounding areas of strength and areas to strengthen, which led to parents better understanding purposes and expectations. The classroom environment became one of student-centered learning that included individualized conversations that focused on student growth. Teachers’ perceptions using this method also included a noticeable increase in student achievement due to the increased teacher support that ensured students’ successful completion of learning targets. The results suggested that the overall findings in using standards-based grading created a more purposeful and intentional classroom because teachers planned for the successful implementation of learning. Teachers were able to articulate student level of mastery more specifically based on “clearer assessment data.” Student teacher conversations were more focused and individualized to meet the needs of the learner and his/her learning goals.

The teachers in Knight’s study, reluctant at first, seemed to doubt the possibilities of standards-based grading based on their lack of knowledge on the method, as well as their previously held beliefs in teaching. Through experience and exposure, along with their previously held beliefs in teaching, teachers created a new way of learning for their students and a new way of teaching for themselves. Teachers created an environment that offered an opportunity for growth for both themselves and their students.

**Standards-Based Practices in Grading Student Writing**

Practices in grading student writing have generally been coupled with a percentage, letter grade, and/or a norm-referenced score (Layne, 2018; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011); however, with standards-based grading, writing is scored through the lens of learning levels of growth as
represented through rubrics. The Tennessee Department of Education encourages the use of such rubrics in assessing student growth in writing (TNReady, 2018; TNReady Grades 9-12 Informational/Explanatory Rubric, 2017). The kindergarten portfolio, for example, along with resources in grades 2-12 offer representative rubrics to monitor, score, and attribute student growth on a learning level (Pre-K/Kindergarten, 2018). These measurements then translate into correlating end-of-course assessments. Research shows that standards-based grading and student achievement on state assessments correlate in multiple content areas (Espin et al., 2008; Haptonstall, 2010; Hochbein & Pollio, 2016; Welsh, D’Agostino, & Kaniskan, 2013).

Hendry, Armstrong, and Bromberger (2012) used a mixed-methods approach to study first year college students’ use of assignment exemplars with embedded standards as universities move to support student learning through criterion-referenced or standards-based assessments. The mixed-methods approach included teacher and student focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires. Five university teachers created and distributed written descriptors to guide and clarify expectations and found that modeling and discussing exemplars led to students increased knowledge of standards which resulted in higher achievement. This led students to rely on the exemplars more for understanding and as a guide to teacher expectations in writing. Hendry et al. (2012) report that students find the exemplars beneficial as a modeled guide to writing and also report higher performance levels from students that understand the standards within the exemplars. The study also found that students preferred a range of exemplars to include all levels of quality as a reference for personal growth and goal setting. In one of the teacher’s classes, students determined that teacher-led discussions were useful in clarifying expectations and offered a fairness in grading. Quantitative results from the study suggested student achievement was higher in classrooms where teachers led discussions on why exemplars were
marked at certain levels as opposed to students in classrooms where teachers led discussions based on students’ errors or in classrooms with little to no discussion of the exemplars. This led to the conclusion that elements of good teaching include examples of standards-embedded exemplars at various levels with explanations as to why the exemplars were scored at each level. Through the exemplars, students were able to experience growth based on set criteria in an environment that supported learning through leveled exemplars. Teachers were able to take a cognitive constructivist approach in their instruction by identifying the specific needs of students for new learning to occur effectively (Powell & Kalina, 2009).

**Standards-Based Grading and Student Motivation**

Although there is minimal on standards-based grading as it directly relates to state writing assessments, the current research shows a correlation. The findings are clear that identify student motivation in relation to competency-based learning and standards-based grading in multiple content areas (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Part of the studies examined detail an evident relationship between student achievement through the lens of standards-based grading and student motivation surrounding standards-based grading.

Bell, Mladenovic, and Price (2013) researched the perceptions of 119 students’ understanding of tasks given set criteria. Findings indicated that students were pleased with provided standards because they provided guidance and a motivation to engage in their learning as either a reflection tool or to identify the specifics of the given task. Student responses to the usefulness of set criteria indicated students either sought specific guidance outside of the set criteria or that they found the set criteria provided such guidance and were happy with the idea of having standards. To encourage student motivation, it was suggested that “learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessments must be clear, related, and integrated.” Accordingly, this
provides support to both the students’ needing additional, specific guidance and those happy with
the set standards. These findings correlate with Haptonstall’s (2010) research, where clear and
effective feedback aided in the motivation and engagement of students in their learning, which
translated to positive student achievement.

Layne (2018) reported that standards-based grading directly impacted students’ self-
efficacy and that motivation and self-efficacy are determining factors in student performance on
state assessments. The study included students in grades 6-7 in ELA classes in one middle
school. To maintain students’ motivation and self-efficacy and to ensure they are positively
correlated to standards-based grading, students must be continually exposed to standards-based
grading practices, supported through the process, and encouraged to seek understanding of the
standards. Thus, teachers must have sufficient training and understanding in the use of standards-
based grading practices in order to support students’ motivation and self-efficacy.

In contrast to the studies that demonstrate positive correlations in standards-based
grading and motivation, there are studies that found negative correlations. According to
Hochbein and Pollio (2016), teachers struggled to report low levels of learning to students
deemed as “good” students in fear that an indication of a lower level may discourage them and
suppress their motivation to positively respond to standards-based grading practices and build
resistance. Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller, and Townsley (2017) analyzed student resistance to
standards-based grading and found that students were concerned for numerous reasons, including
having concerns regarding teachers’ instructional methods, their own acquisition of knowledge,
and personal motivation. This concern highlighted student motivation and noted that motivation
was hindered by the deterring inconsistencies of teachers’ grading practices, as well as the
concerns of the effects of varied grades on overall averages, which proved paramount. Students
in this study were impacted by standards-based grading for the first time in their high school classes, and results from student surveys suggested a need for teachers to have greater clarity and/or buy in. Without such clarity or buy in from the teacher, students also lacked the clarity and motivation to participate fully.

Additionally, Fowler (2018) stated that students clearly understood expectations and found meaningful feedback in scores; however, it was also noted that a decrease in student motivation was a result of competency-based grading. Students were selected based on levels of motivation to include highly motivated through low motivation and were asked to document their experience. Students and teachers were interviewed, observed, and surveyed. Through this mixed-method study of 12 students and two teachers at a rural high school in Middle Tennessee, data indicated a statistically significant negative correlation between competency-based grading and student and teacher motivation.

Because of this established set of findings, the focus of this study is not on motivational factors in student growth in writing, but rather teacher perceptions of standards-based grading relating to academic achievement as evidenced on the TNReady state writing assessment in English I and English II, as well as students’ acquisition of new knowledge based on previous experiences and learning.

**Standards-Based Grading in Correlation with Student Achievement**

In reviewing the available research that includes standards-based grading as a predictor of student achievement, results of the studies indicated that student performance on state writing assessments in correlation with standards-based grading show progress in learning. The research of both Espin et al. (2008) and Haptonstall (2010) examined the results of curriculum-based measurements in writing as predictors of success on state assessments and found correlations
between the two. Students exposed to curriculum-based measurements prior to state assessments showed growth in student achievement.

Espin et al., (2008) studied the appropriateness of curriculum-based writing measures as indicators of success on state assessments, with results showing a correlation in curriculum-based writing progress measures and state assessment results. The focus of the study was to examine the validity and reliability of curriculum-based measures as indicators of student achievement on end-of-course exams. The study included 183 high school students from two Midwestern high schools. Results revealed validity and reliability in the relationship between scoring student writing using curriculum-based measures and end-of-course assessments.

Although the research of Haptonstall (2010) was limited to one state assessment program, multiple school districts from the state of Colorado were included in the study, and results concluded that there was a significant level of correlation between standards-based grading throughout the year in reading, writing, math, and science with the end-of-course exam scores. In all but a few districts, the correlations were significant, with the strongest correlation in science. Findings from the study included positive correlations were results of aligned and clear learning targets and assessments.

Paeplow’s (2011) mixed-method research focused on the implementation of standards-based grading using a sample of 4-12 teachers in focus groups at six schools, as well as the distribution of students’ grades in those schools. The study determined that there was a strong correlation between students’ classroom grades and state assessments, and research further validated measuring student achievement on the standards-based state assessment under study. In addition to the strong relationship between standards-based grades and end-of-course exams, the equitability of grading in all subgroups was noted. Through standards-based grading methods,
teachers can score students’ work with less bias. Additionally, with the strong, positive correlations in standards-based grading and student achievement on end-of-course exams in all subgroups, students’ grades throughout the year can be used as predictors of student achievement. This creates an opportunity to individualize support for students identified as below grade level at any marking period in an effort to prepare them for the grade level end-of-course assessment. Although the sampling of teachers and schools seem small in comparison to the school system’s 102 elementary schools, the results are compelling.

In Winton’s (2015) study of 12 students’ and eight teachers’ perceptions of standards-based grading and student performance, it was determined that standards-based grading provides clarity and direction, thus making it a more reliable and valid measurement of student achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of students graded using standards-based grading methods and those graded with traditional grading methods to determine if there was a significant difference on standardized test scores. A stratified sample of teachers and students from one high school were selected for interviews, and artifacts were analyzed to determine the implementation and use of standards-based grading measures. Additionally, quantitative data were collected from the state’s end-of-course reporting scores for students in both standards-based grading and traditional grading classes. The data revealed that in three of the eight classes studied, there was a statistically significant difference in student end-of-course scores for those students who received standards-based grading as opposed to those students who were scored under traditional grading. While there was a differing of opinions between teachers and students regarding the effectiveness of standards-based grading, the findings of the study concluded that the effectiveness of standards-based grading on student achievement on end-of-course assessments should continue to be an area to analyze.
Winton’s (2015) study focused mainly on perceptions. Winton’s research would have benefited from researching the methodologies of the three teachers using standards-based grading whose students scored statistically higher than their peers in classes who did not receive standards-based grading. While it is unknown how the teachers using standards-based grading methods were trained to implement such measures, the teachers whose students did not report statistically significant scores on the end-of-course may resort back to traditional grading methods due to the lack of evidence of its effectiveness.

Hochbein and Pollio (2016) compared traditional grading and standards-based grading practices in relation to state assessments at 11 high schools that implemented standards-based grading practices. The results of the study revealed that those students receiving standards-based grading exhibited clear correlations between grades and end-of-term assessments. In the same study, results indicated that the same students receiving standards-based grading more often earned higher marks than those receiving traditional grades, and these students scored higher on the state end-of-term assessment. Findings from the study concluded that improving effectiveness and student achievement come with consistency in standards-based grading practices across domains. In addition, teachers in the study reported improved instruction with standards-based grading with a focus in preparing how to teach the standards, not what to teach.

Ashe, Nixon, Robbins, and Scott (2018) recently participated in a discussion panel for the Tennessee Department of Education’s LEAD conference to discuss the lessons learned from their participation in a competency-based education pilot program offered by the state. In their discussion, they found that teachers must understand the standards before using standards-based grading. Once teachers fully understood, they were able to focus instruction on mastery toward the standard and create an environment for student growth. For Scott, this was not only a
paradigm shift for her teachers, but also a drastic change in motivation and growth for both the teachers and the students. Scott, the Principal from Vance Middle School in Bristol City, stated that her teachers saw that their use of competency-based teaching strategies and grading systems were predictors of the end of year assessment so much so that her once low scoring student achievement and growth scores, transformed into the highest student achievement and growth scores as deemed by the state.

The work of Welsh et al. (2013) revealed that the correlation between standards-based grading throughout the year and students’ grades reported on end-of-course state assessments yielded only moderate to weak correspondences, with the weakest correlation reported in standards-based grading and writing. Research was conducted using the information collected from 125 3-5 grade classrooms from 11 elementary schools in an urban southwestern United States district that were assessed on the state’s “Six Traits of Writing Rubric,” which was also the focus of writing instruction in the classroom. One caveat to note was there were no clear indicators identifying how the six traits were converted into a final reporting score on writing in either the classroom or the end-of-course assessment.

In another study of two comparable Midwestern high schools on standards-based grading practices in relation to overall student achievement in regard to grade point averages and ACT scores, results indicated standards-based grading did not negatively or positively impact grade point averages but may have negatively impacted ACT scores (Townsley & Varga, 2018). Although the schools were implementing standards-based grading practices, there seemed to be a disconnect between standards-based grading practices and the relation to standardized assessments that left teachers and administrators unsure of next steps.
Although there is conflicting research of the benefits of standards-based grading as an indicator of student achievement in writing on state assessments, overall grade point averages, and ACT scores, the breadth of research is extremely limited, thus making contradictory statements may prove invalid based on the sampling and methodologies of the research. To state that student exposure to standards-based grading is or is not an indication of student achievement on the TNReady End-of-Course state writing assessments in English I and English II based on the limited research regarding standards-based grading and writing performance is premature. Additionally, there is minimal research regarding student learning under the constructivist model in response to competency-based learning. The review of literature neither adequately supports or negates the use of such instruction.

**Concerns Regarding Standards-Based Grading in Assessing Student Writing**

Brimi (2012) studied how the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program’s writing assessment affected teachers’ instruction of writing. Results found that teachers curtailed their instruction of writing to meet the demands of the assessment by utilizing the state provided rubric, but teachers struggled to teach the various modes of writing and then assign those writing types to their students. Layla Canton, one of the five high school English teachers who participated in the study, stated, “Most of us are English majors and not writing teachers. I think teachers need much more instruction on how to teach writing.” Without the proper training, teachers may use the rubrics to support writing instruction as a means to an end rather than as an informing factor in the instruction of the writing process. Although the state assessment and rubrics were not the only factors guiding the instructional strategies used for teaching writing, the results of the study found that the state writing assessment and rubrics were major factors in how teachers exposed students to writing.
Kiuhara, Graham, and Hawken (2009) concluded for competency-based learning to be effective, the implementation must be consistent, otherwise the integrity of the process is weakened. Cox (2001) also suggested that for effective implementation there must be “a strong knowledge base and philosophical foundation for assessment.” In Brimi’s (2011) research, the reliability of grading among ninety English teachers in a single school district was studied. All teachers studied were trained on “6+1 Traits of Writing” and were tasked with grading the same student paper based on the traits using the standards-based writing rubric. Teachers were also tasked with creating a 100-point rubric based on the traits of writing and score students based on their ability to align to the traits. Results indicated that English teachers varied in their evaluation of student writing, which inevitably resulted in a wide variance in reporting students’ scores as indicators of achievement. Brimi (2011) stated, “They [teachers] are either ignorant of current research and practices in grading writing, or perhaps they just do not care to change their views on writing assessment.”

Other research confirms a heavy influence of state writing assessments on teachers’ writing instruction (Troia & Graham, 2016). Surveyed participants included a random sample of 482 teachers in grades 3-8 from across the United States. The majority of the teachers reported themselves as good writers but only half reported enjoying teaching writing. Additionally, 39% of teachers reported that they were very familiar with their state writing assessment, which heavily influenced how they taught writing. This research does not, however, identify the training these educators received in teaching students to write. According to Fowler (2018), properly training educators with the tools and knowledge of proper implementation of curriculum-based grading is essential.
Yet another concern in standards-based grading involves the use of rubrics. Standards-based grading rubrics articulate a minimum and maximum in learning, which does not allow for growth beyond the highest measure. According to Knight (2018), hesitant adopters of standards-based grading argue “the lack of empirical evidence demonstrating their effects.” A major concern in utilizing standards-based grading is that there is not a level beyond the highest mark. The ceiling has been set with no room to advance beyond, even if able to do so. The reluctant teachers fear that standards-based grading locks students into a certain category without room for growth outside of the specifics in the standard.

**Expectations Regarding Standards-Based Grading Practices**

Along with teachers’ variability in scoring student work, there is a concern that students, parents, and guardians will not identify the shift in evaluating student work based on progress instead of a number/letter grade. Gibbs, Andrews, and Barnes (2016) scrutinized teachers in a small, rural high school to evaluate the results of standards-based grading. In this research, one of the weaknesses highlighted was the lack of understanding and knowledge of standards-based grading by all involved. Students accustomed to traditional-grading practices had difficulty in understanding the move to competency-based learning with a standards-based grading approach to indicate growth. Student surveys indicated they still yearned for a number/letter grade to show achievement. This translated to additional confusion when reporting student progress to parents and guardians. Parents and guardians who completed the survey reported that they expected to see grades of student achievement much like they were graded during their educational career. The suggested findings indicated a need for improving the knowledge base of all stakeholders and clearly defining the purpose of standards-based grading through support.
Gogerty (2017) researched the support teachers received in one high school in the first year of a district standards-based grading policy and found support to be imperative to the success of such change. Winton (2015) reported that proper education on competency-based grading is necessary to aid in the understanding of the purpose behind standards-based grading. Students must also be supported in identifying and understanding specifics within written standard criteria as it relates to effectively accomplishing a given task, as shown in the research of Hendry et al. (2012). If there is a clear understanding of the task by all, expectations are set, and students have direct learning targets they can hit. After having these supports, students reported learning was purposeful because they were able to identify the specifics of the standards and understood what was expected in the end.

Summary

Researching grading methods identified a consistent trend in traditional grading practices until the NCLB emerged and called for teachers to measure student competency levels utilizing a standards-based approach to learning. This initiative charged educators to create opportunities for students to show attainment of knowledge through levels of learning, as indicative in such measures as rubrics. This continued with ESSA as the act maintains and supports the continued use of competency-based learning processes initiated with NCLB. The Tennessee Department of Education, in response to both NCLB and ESSA, supports the position of competency-based learning through the state’s TNReady state assessment, which is directly aligned to state standards and levels of learning.

Although standards-based grading is not new to education, traditional grading practices have typically included percentages, letter grades, and/or norm-referenced assessments. This includes assessment of students’ writing abilities. Concerns in using traditional grading practices
include inconsistencies in scoring student work and inaccuracies in reporting student learning. With standards-based grading focusing on levels of learning, the concerns of traditional grading practices are addressed. Rubrics indicate criteria that correlate with elements present in student work at specific levels. Current initiatives include the Tennessee Department of Education’s kindergarten portfolio process and writing rubrics, along with district supported standards-based progress reporting.

While some studies show a correlation between standards-based grading and student achievement on state assessments, the research directly related to student writing is scarce. One evident factor in this correlation, however, is student motivation. While there were some exceptions in the review of literature, it was clear that most correlations yielded positive results in student motivation. With the preponderance of information surrounding motivation as an evident factor, this research aims to specifically review the findings of standards-based grading in writing as it relates to student achievement on the TNReady writing assessment in English I and English II, excluding motivational factors and including student acquisition of knowledge based on the cognitive constructivist approach to learning.

Although standards-based grading practices address concerns under traditional grading practices, standards-based grading practices incumber concerns among educators as well. These concerns include educators lack of training, ultimately leading to variances in grading similar to traditional grading practices, and the concern that students cannot show growth in learning beyond a specific set of leveled criteria. The review of relevant literature surrounding the lineage of standards-based grading in the second chapter reveals a specific need to research the correlations between standards-based grading and student achievement on state writing assessments. With this knowledge, the research will specifically focus on teacher perceptions in
English I and English II in a rural, Appalachian school district, and the third chapter will outline the methodologies in which the research will be conducted.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter grounded the study with current provisional evidence of the relation between standards-based grading and student achievement in writing. This chapter describes the proposed research project of identifying how standards-based grading influences pedagogical writing practices in English I and English II according to educators perceptions in a rural, Appalachian district, as well as how the same educators’ work to create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores in the same courses.

Description of Qualitative Research

Included in this chapter is a description of the specific research approach, which is a qualitative case study; the study participants and setting that included teachers in a rural, Appalachian school district; data collection procedures that utilized interviews, survey results, and conversations from a focus group; ethical considerations with special note given to the respect of anonymity, instruction, and teacher planning, as well as the use of trustworthiness techniques to reduce researcher bias; and data analysis procedures that incorporated open, axial, and selective coding along with journaling and correlations of artifacts. The chapter concludes with a summary of the proposed methodology and introduces the presentation of the findings that leads to the fourth chapter.

Description of the Specific Research Approach

The research was guided by cognitive constructivism, which allowed for the identification of educators’ previous knowledge and experiences in influencing pedagogical practices and student achievement in writing through either assimilation or accommodation. Cognitive constructivism framed the researcher’s study in examining educators’ perceptions of
the influence of pedagogical writing practices and how standards-based grading affected student outcomes on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores in English I and English II. Teachers considered that any new knowledge and understanding was based on their own schema of prior knowledge and experience. Through the cognitive constructivist approach to learning and the examination of such practices, the study incorporated an examination of multiple data points, including information from interviews, survey results, and a focus group.

The study was a qualitative case study that supported the “openness of inquiry: asking open-ended interview questions, doing fieldwork in a way that is open to whatever turns up, studying documents to discover patterns that are hidden in the details, and observing with open eyes and an open mind” (Patton, 2015). Moreover, this qualitative case study provided an exploration of data through multiple avenues to support a phenomenon within a context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This case study was also designed to answer “how” and “why” questions, as well as contextual conditions and relationships and included the study of a single case which included teachers of English I and English II (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995). This involved an exclusive look into the case as a sole entity that identified the uniqueness of the case without making any comparisons (Stake, 1995).

The qualitative case study created a space for the review of teachers’ practices in using standards-based grading to affect student achievement on writing scores in English I and English II within a specific population. This included a detailed study of data surrounding the participants’ present and past knowledge and experience, the environment, and the relationship between the factors (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson, & Walker, 2013). This case study correspondingly provided a focused study of the current status of standards-based grading in relation to writing in English I and English II classrooms that may also influence a progression of change in the way
teachers approach writing instruction in the future (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson, & Walker). With this method, data were examined to highlight any parallel structures or existing patterns in teachers’ use of standards-based instruction and/or grading that yield positive results in student writing. Additionally, the use of a qualitative case study permitted the use of raw data that revealed teachers’ perceptions, experiences, and depth of emotion that “provided a thick description with contextual details that captured and communicated someone else’s experience of the world in his or her own words” (Patton, 2015).

**Description of the Study Participants and Setting**

A purposive sampling of five teachers of English I and/or English II in a rural, Appalachian school district were selected for the qualitative case study. The school district that participated in the study had five high schools that spanned grades 9-12 and two junior high schools containing grades 7-9 at the time of the study, all of which were accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. According to the State Report Card (2018) for 2016-2017 in grades Pre-K-12, there were 1,090 teachers and 14,717 students. In the same year, 12.2% of students in English I were below grade level expectations, 57.8% were approaching grade level expectations, 24.2% were on track, and 5.8% had mastered grade level expectations. For English II in the same year, 19.1% were below grade level expectations, 41.2% approaching grade level expectations, 32.5% on track, and 7.2% had mastered grade level expectations. Participants were chosen based on their experience in teaching English I and/or English II courses in one of the seven schools within the last two school years. Participants were also chosen based on their willingness and availability to contribute to the study. At the time of the research, there were approximately two English I and two English II teachers at each of the
schools in the district. This sampling of teachers was an attempt to include one teacher participant per school.

An additional reason for the purposive sampling of teachers surrounded the set criteria for writing instruction in English I and English II. The Tennessee Department of Education created academic grade bands in English language arts that included the 9-10 and 11-12 grade bands. Grade bands shared the same standards, rubrics, and blueprints during the study. The option to select teachers in English I and/or English II did not impact the use of standards-based grading or writing instruction because both English I and English II shared the same standards as per the requirements established by the state.

Selected participants ranged in years of teaching experience and in levels of education. All teachers in the study taught English I and/or English II on a block schedule at some point in the past two school years, which was equivalent to approximately 90 days of instruction per semester. Semesters were broken up into fall and spring semesters, with each semester containing approximately 90 instructional days. While teachers instructed three class periods per semester, not all three classes were English I or English II classes. These teachers were, however, identified as an English I and/or English II teacher for the high school at least one semester in the past two school years. Teachers were given Tennessee state writing rubrics prior to the study as example resources to evaluate student writing; however, there was no specific training teachers attended to implement the provided rubrics as an evaluation method for student writing.

**Data Collection Procedures**

This case study involved teachers’ specific and personal teaching practices regarding the grading and instruction of writing in English I and English II. Interviews were used to gain
teacher insight without peer influence. Survey results were used to expand the pool of teachers, and a focus group of teachers was used to open dialogue around standards-based instruction through peer collaboration and discussion. Triangulation supported dependability through the collection of data from multiple sources, including interviews, survey responses, and a focus group that provided data and insight into standards-based grading. A set of predetermined questions were outlined for each procedure; however, the interview and focus group questions were open-ended and allowed teachers to explain personal thoughts, processes, and procedures outside of the identified topics evident in the questions. This process supported the cognitive theory of learning in that teachers were able to explain the schemas surrounding their knowledge and understanding of competency-based learning through standards-based grading.

**Interviews**

Through interviews, the researcher gathered teachers’ personal background knowledge concerning the role of standards-based instruction in teaching writing, teachers’ experience of utilizing standards-based instruction in teaching writing, and teaching strategies used to implement standards-based instruction (see appendix G). Data were gathered utilizing audio recordings and journaling. Interviews were also used to increase validity and reliability in teacher use of standards-based grading in pedagogical writing practices through open-ended questions (Willis, 1999 as cited in Patton, 2015). Interviews included one-on-one conversations with the distinct focus on standards-based grading. All interviews allowed for the exploration of teachers’ feelings and thoughts concerning the process of standards-based grading and instruction through open-ended questions. Interviews were guided by prepared questions in an interview guide. Within the conversational interview, teachers and I were able to discuss information beyond the questions contained in the interview guide, which allowed for the
exploration of information in a way that was appropriate to the topic and that fostered conversation that informed the study. All interviews included data from observations as well. While I acted as a participant in interviewing and responding to questions of the teachers, the purpose of reporting observations during the interviews was to provide a rich description of the setting, activities, and people in relation to the topic. Descriptions from observations were accurate and included the interactions of the participants to deepen understanding (Patton, 2015).

**Survey**

Rankings and open-ended questions through a survey provided additional perceptions not shared in interviews, as well as specific pedagogical practices in teaching writing. The survey was sent via email using Google Forms with a due date to provide feedback in a timely manner to inform the study. Survey responses expanded the participant pool and were collected and analyzed to identify themes and information. Survey questions included opportunities for teachers to express personal views, instructional strategies, and recommendations for improvement regarding standards-based grading practices in scoring student writing.

**Focus group**

Through a focus group with questions mimicking the interview questions, a review of teaching practices identified teacher knowledge of standards-based grading as a method of assessment. Teachers were asked open-ended questions as a group that outlined and reviewed standards-based grading practices used in reviewing student writing samples. The discussions allowed teachers to identify current practices and knowledge of the use of standards-based grading when evaluating student writing. Discussions also allowed teachers to build on one another’s expertise in teaching utilizing standards-based grading.
Figure 3:1. Triangulation of Data.

The timeline of data collection and analysis are outlined in Table 3:1.

| Week 1: | After gaining IRB (see appendix A) and district approval (see appendix B), I emailed teachers to seek their participation in the interview and focus group process (see appendix C) as well as emailed the survey to all teachers (see appendix D). Additionally, I emailed the principals to inform them of teacher selections and the details surrounding the case study (see appendix E). |
| Analysis | I analyzed responses from survey. |
| Week 2 | After teachers agreed to participate, a consent form was signed (see appendix F), and I interviewed selected teachers at (see appendix G for interview questions). |
| Week 4 | I analyzed audio responses and journal entries, including first impressions, intonations, and mannerisms not detected in audio recordings. |
| Week 5 | I sent a reminder email for survey participation (see appendix I for reminder email), conducted the focus group conversation (see appendix H for focus group |
questions), and verbally asked for survey participation after the focus group discussion as a reminder.

| Analysis | I recorded responses through audio and journaling, including first impressions, intonations, and mannerisms not detected in audio recordings. |

Table 3:1. Timeline of Data Collection and Analysis.

**Limitations Regarding the Assessment Scores Provided on the State Report Card**

According to “Online Testing” (2018), students in grades 5-12 are required to test online, giving districts the option to test online in grades 3-4. With the writing assessment available online in grades three through English II in high school, districts must assume the responsibility of educating students to master utilizing and manipulating the assessment platform, as well as the skill of keyboarding in addition to the content. This adds additional concerns in that students not competent in keyboarding or manipulating the platform may not report as showing as much growth as a peer who is on the same writing level and is capable of navigating the keyboard and platform. Because of the lack of knowledge and/or ability to navigate the keyboard and platform, the student’s ability to write is not accurately assessed, which directly affects student achievement levels. In this instance, data regarding the effects of standards-based grading and student achievement levels in writing may not be an accurate reflection of the impact of standards-based learning and a student’s ability to write, but rather a reflection of the student’s inability to keyboard and/or manipulate the platform.

Students must also recall information from the provided text to accurately respond to a question or prompt, in addition to correctly navigating a testing platform, as well as the keyboard. The concern for educators is that students may spend too much time focusing on the skill of keyboarding instead of the content, which is why districts are implementing keyboarding
plans and structures early in a student’s educational journey. In a 2017 study by Mo and Troia, results found that students’ writing quality was directly impacted by frequency of writing across subject areas and for various purposes, as well as students’ ability to exhibit writing competency when writing on a computer was noted. The impact and correlation of students’ quality of writing and competency in using a computer is not an accurate reflection of student mastery. The need for keyboarding proficiency is supreme in districts across the state, especially when considering students’ need to synthesize information in response to a writing task coupled with the skill of mastering the keyboard to indicate knowledge of the given task. Students’ ability to write cannot be accurately assessed and reported using this level of assessment if students are not properly trained and practiced in a simulated testing environment on a regular basis. Although TNReady requires the student writing assessment be taken online in English I and English II regardless of a student’s ability to master keyboarding or the platform, the writing is scored against the state provided rubrics.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Through data collection of interviews, survey results, and the conversation from the focus group discussion, open, axial, and selective coding were used to identify and analyze themes. With each data collection procedure, analysis came in the form of reviewing audio recordings, journaling, and/or survey responses. The triangulation of data came from my use of each data collection procedure and analysis.

Survey results were collected and reviewed with the researcher journaling first impressions. The survey results offered teachers a place to anonymously comment and expanded the pool of participants to include teachers currently teaching English I or English II as well as teachers who have previously taught English I and/or English II. The results from the survey
helped establish themes and provided data relative to the data from the teacher participants in the interviews and the focus group. Interviews were selected through the survey by way of an additional response form that allowed teachers to volunteer their time to be interviewed. The survey was sent to all high school English teachers in grades 9-12 with a request for teachers having taught ELA I and/or ELA II during the 2017-2018 school year to participate and offer feedback. With this request, 13 teachers responded, and five teachers volunteered to participate in the interviews.

The interviews helped me identify teacher knowledge of standards-based instruction. This included a review of the teacher’s personal methods in grading student writing. During each interview, I journaled first impressions and recorded the interview. Before analyzing the data, the interviews were first transcribed. Through the review of the transcriptions, I made note of the language teachers used surrounding standards-based grading, competency-based learning, scoring student writing, and the emotion surrounding the topics. After the initial interviews, participants received follow up questions through email in an effort to solicit more detailed responses. This method was used to reduce the feeling of being evaluated and allowed participants time to reflect without the added pressure of me recording and taking notes during the one-on-one interview. Of the five interviewed, four participants responded.

The focus group consisted of any English I or English II teacher interested in discussing instructional strategies and methods in using standards-based grading to review student writing. I journaled first impressions and recorded the conversation. The conversation was then transcribed, and the researcher again noted the specific use of language surrounding standards-based grading, competency-based learning, and scoring student writing, as well as the emotion surrounding the topics. The 16 teachers that participated in the focus group included current ELA
I and/or ELA II teachers as well as teachers that taught ELA I and/or ELA II classes during the 2017-2018 school year.

Open, axial, and selective coding were used for analyzing interviews, survey results, and the conversations from a focus group. This included journaling of first impressions, audio recordings, and transcriptions. I began with open coding in the examination of data through the reading and identification of commonalities, where I initially labeled the data. I progressed to axial coding, where I then identified connections and relationships of the codes identified in open coding. Selective coding was subsequently utilized, and it consisted of identifying essential themes that led to the reexamination of data to selectively code information based on the identified themes. Overall associations between teachers that reported utilizing standards-based grading for writing instruction and the most pertinent data to the research reported in interviews, survey results, and the focus group were identified.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data Gathered
Interviews, Surveys, and Focus Group

Open Coding
Labeled Data to Create General Codes

Axial Coding
Related Codes from Open Coding

Selective Coding
Identified Core Code

Figure 3:2. Data analysis procedures.

Ethical Considerations Regarding Inclusion of Teacher Participants and Student Data
All school and teacher names have been protected to provide privacy. This was communicated through the informed consent letter (Winton, 2015). Furthermore, teachers participated during a non-traditional school day for interviews and during a system-wide in-service for the focus group to guard classroom instructional time. As an administrator to the group of educators participating in the study, it was noted that a certain consideration concerning preconceptions existed in that I had previous experiences with the teachers participating in the study, including evaluating instructional strategies regarding standards-based grading. The position I held in relation to the teachers may have affected the data collection in interviews and observations in unknown ways (Patton, 2015). Although I took no part in their evaluations at the time of the research, my role as a district administrator may have caused teachers to answer questions in a way they thought I may approve of instead of with information they wanted to share. To reduce researcher bias, trustworthiness techniques used included peer debriefing, triangulation, member checks, and reflexivity. The collection of multiple data sources aided in the conclusions and analysis of the data (Carlson, 2010).

Peer debriefing included consulting a colleague disinterested in the topic to support the creditability and confirmability of a review of the transcripts, the final report, and the review of the methodology. Peer debriefing also allowed for teacher self-reflection that fostered a deeper analysis of content (Odo, 2016). Member checks included the use of the participants to confirm accuracy to support the credibility, transferability, and dependability, and these checks were used by the participants in the data collection. Detailed descriptions of context supported the credibility and transferability in describing information and data in detail and were completed during the entire writing process. Reflexivity in journaling and reevaluating data collected in interviews and the focus group supported the confirmability in identifying my history and
knowledge of the content, as well as my position, which was identified in the first chapter and the third chapter.

**Summary**

The methodology of the study focused on identifying the effects of standards-based grading on student achievement on TNReady English I and English II state writing assessments through a qualitative case study. The analysis of data retrieved from interviews, survey results, and conversations from a focus group aimed to identify commonalities in pedagogical teaching practices that best supported student achievement in writing. While ethical considerations were made to protect and respect teachers’ anonymity, instruction and planning time, researcher bias was an additional consideration to review when analyzing the data. To reduce researcher bias, trustworthiness techniques included peer debriefing, triangulation, member checks, detailed descriptions of context, and reflexivity utilization. Data analysis procedures included the use of coding and journaling. The presentation of findings from the study is presented in the fourth chapter.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to research how competency-based learning utilizing a standards-based approach correlates with student achievement on the writing portion of the TNReady End-of-Course exam in English I and English II according to teachers’ perceptions. The methodology, as described in the third chapter, included the description of the qualitative case study, which identified the study participants, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, trustworthiness techniques, and data analysis procedures. The study was grounded by the following research questions: How does the use of standards-based grading to assess student writing in English I and English II relate with student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores according to teacher perceptions? How does standards-based grading influence pedagogical writing practices in English I and English II according to educators’ perceptions? How do educators’ work to create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement?

Research Process

The study incorporated an examination of multiple data points, including information from interviews, survey results, and a focus group after approval from the assistant superintendent of schools and IRB approval from Carson-Newman University. The interviews included five English I and/or English II teachers, the anonymous survey results were informed by 13 English I and/or English II teachers, and the focus group included 16 English I and/or English II teachers. The five interviews conducted were completed in one visit with follow up emails, the survey was open for three weeks, and the focus group occurred during one session. Open, axial, and selective coding were used for analyzing interviews, survey results, and the conversations from a focus group. Cognitive constructivism framed the study when examining...
educators’ perceptions of the influence of pedagogical writing practices and how standards-based grading affected student outcomes on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores in English I and English II.

**Data Collection**

Data for this study were derived from three different sources: interviews including follow-up emails, survey results, and a focus group. I coded all three data sources using open, axial, and selective coding for analyzing data. Data most pertinent to the research were used in the analysis. To reduce research bias, trustworthiness techniques used in the collection of data included peer debriefing, triangulation, member checks, and reflexivity.

**Survey Results.** The first set of data came from anonymous surveys from 13 English I and/or English II teachers that also noted preferences and observations. Participants completed this survey using a Google Form. I sent the request to participate in the study via email, a reminder email was sent out one week later, and then an additional verbal request was made after the focus group meeting. This allowed for three weeks of survey participation. I sent the survey to 39 English teachers with a request for only English I and English II teachers from 2017-2018 to respond. This resulted in 13 teacher survey responses. The last question of the survey was a request for participation in further discussion through a one-on-one interview. Those interested in participating selected a link to direct them to another Google Form to keep the survey anonymous. There were five teachers willing to participate, and those five teachers were the teachers selected for the one-on-one interviews. Google Forms creates automatic pie-graphs based on survey responses for multiple choice questions. The first eight questions from the survey were multiple choice questions. I analyzed the data from the pie-graphs (see Appendix J) and included survey responses as appropriate.
Interviews. I conducted one-on-one interviews with five teachers and noted preferences and observations in using standards-based grading to guide writing instruction. I conducted all interviews during a school day in teachers’ classrooms. For the first and last interview, the teacher and I were the only individuals in the room. For interviews 2, 3, and 4, all teachers were in the same classroom; however, I completed interviews separately, and no teacher offered information during another teacher’s interview. The interview began with a brief synopsis of the intent of the interview, which included asking permission to audio record. The first five questions included many one-word responses while questions 6-11 allowed for deeper exploration and reflection on pedagogical practices in regard to standards-based grading and writing instruction. The interviews lasted anywhere between 4-11 minutes and each session ended with a review of the major statements made regarding standards-based grading and writing instruction. Once I finished transcribing interviews, I asked teachers to verify their responses to ensure accuracy in transcriptions. I also provided teachers the opportunity to make any modifications and/or changes to their statements.

After the initial round of interviews, I asked a few follow up questions to solicit more detailed answers because some of the participants may have believed the interview was more of an evaluation of their knowledge rather than an interest in their opinion for research. In my current role as a district-wide English language arts administrator for K-12, I consistently work with teachers to support planning and instruction that are standards-based and aligned to TNReady assessments. I did not want teachers to feel obligated to respond and/or feel forced to make comments in a quick fashion to appease my request and then feel regret, doubt, or worry about the statements recorded. Accordingly, I emailed additional questions to allow participants time to reflect without the pressure of me recording and taking notes. I created these questions
after the review of interview data and included the same participants. When soliciting responses through emails to the five original participants, I told teachers that their responses to the follow-up questions were optional and that they had no obligation to contribute any additional information. Four of the five teachers responded.

Focus Group. The third data source came from the focus group of 16 English I and/or English II teachers in which teacher reflections, interpretations, and inclinations in using standards-based writing instruction guided the discussion. I conducted the focus group discussion at the end of a regularly scheduled county-wide professional development session, which I also led. The topic for the professional development session centered on preparing students for TNReady in English I and English II. The focus group discussion questions were natural follow-up questions regarding teacher plans in preparing students for the TNReady writing assessment. The session began with a brief overview of the intent of the questions. I gave teachers the option to participate and asked them to sign letters of consent. The meeting was audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis. I asked one of the participants in the focus group to complete a member check for transcription accuracy.

Overview of Information from Data Sources. Through each of the three data sources, I gathered specific information that contributed to themes in the analysis of data. Survey results provided information regarding teachers’ use of the Tennessee Academic Standards to guide writing instruction along with their use of the Tennessee State Writing Rubric to score student writing during the 2017-2018 school year. The specific information gathered from the three data sources included advantages and disadvantages of standards-based grading as well as the influence of standards-based grading practices on the teaching of writing. Additionally, survey results indicated teacher preference in using standards-based or traditional grading practices,
standards-based training provided (if any), and teacher perceptions surrounding the correlation or non-correlation of standards-based grading practices and student achievement on the TNReady writing assessment in ELA I and/or ELA II.

Interviews provided additional detailed information regarding preferences in grading, standards-based training or lack thereof, advantages and/or disadvantages of standards-based grading in writing, correlations, influences on instructional practices, and ways in which teachers support learning using standards-based grading practices in writing. In addition to one-on-one interviews, follow-up questions emailed to the same participants provided detailed information about specific examples of the use of standards-based grading for recent assignments as well as teacher reflections on how standards-based grading helped student performance for both average and struggling students.

The focus group discussion provided information regarding teacher choice in grading by way of individual teacher choice or departmental decisions. Teachers in the focus group also shared preferences in scoring writing, be it using standards-based or traditional grading practices. Teachers discussed advantages and disadvantages of standards-based grading and correlations between in-class scores and student achievement on the TNReady writing assessment in ELA I and/or ELA II based on their own perceptions. Teachers also discussed strategies to support student growth in writing and the need for collaborative opportunities.

**Research Questions**

Several themes emerged after analyzing the interview data, the data from the survey results, and the focus group data through open, axial, and selective coding. In multiple readings of the transcripts and survey results, words that corresponded to the research questions were color coded as an initial general coding, I related codes from the open coding, then I evaluated
that data for core themes. As I monitored, reflected, and coded, it became evident that three major themes aligned to my research questions. The themes are identified and represented by the titles following each of the three research questions. I refer to interviewees by letter and focus group participants by number in the reporting of data.

1. How does the use of standards-based grading to assess student writing in English I and English II relate with student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores according to teacher perceptions?

“I think so.” In identifying the first theme based on data collected, one teacher stated “I think so” when asked if a correlation existed between student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores and her use of standards-based grading practices for in-class scores. This uncertainty was not hers alone. The majority of teacher interviewees indicated an uncertainty surrounding the correlation. They coupled this uncertainty with a belief that the two correlated based on their perceptions; however, multiple teachers reported that they were unable to identify the direct effects of standards-based instruction and grading in writing due to the reporting of scores by the Tennessee Department of Education. This overarching belief led to the first theme titled “I think so” in that it aptly revealed and captured the sentiment of many participants.

Reviewing the data from the interviews, survey results, and the focus group discussion regarding the correlation of standards-based grading on in-class scores and student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores according to teacher perceptions, multiple teachers expressed that there was a correlation; however, there was uncertainty due to the reporting of student scores. According to the survey, three teachers said “yes” they did correlate, seven teachers reported the two correlated “to some degree,” and two were “unsure.” Of the 13 teachers that participated in the study, only one teacher said he/she did not use standards-based
grading to teach writing in 2017-2018 (see Appendix J). While this data identified teacher belief in correlation, the interviews prompted discussions about the reasons why teachers felt the two correlated but also the uncertainty due to the state’s reporting of scores.

In addressing her reasoning for the correlation of standards-based grading and writing instruction, Teacher C responded, “I hope so. I think so based on overall scores, but it’s hard to tell because they [scores] are all lumped together.” She confirmed her students’ achievement scores were positive and that she used standards-based grading measures to teach writing. She was, however, disappointed that all her scores were “lumped together” because she was unable to accurately judge the effectiveness of her writing instruction. When evaluating student writing based on teacher-created rubrics, she found the use of rubrics to be successful. She stated that teacher-created rubrics are especially helpful for students to become familiar with teacher expectations. When questioning her students about the use of rubrics, several of her students stated that they “love” when their work is graded on a rubric because they see it as a checklist that allows them to scrutinize and analyze their work more closely.

Teacher B stated that correlating her use of standards-based writing instruction to student achievement was “hard to answer because you don’t ever really see what they make in writing on a whole because the score is all in one.” She continued, “It’s hard to judge.” With 16 years of teaching experience, Teacher B stipulated, however, that “students say they feel prepared” but that she “can’t tell by the scores.” She stated that “as the teacher, you have to know the standards in order to make sure they [students] are achieving, and I make sure they are aware of what’s expected before they start writing.” Regarding the creation of her own rubrics, Teacher B stated that “the use of the rubric and standards-based grading was successful.” She believed that using
standards-based grading in writing is more beneficial because writing is more objective than subjective and that the feedback given is more meaningful.

Teacher A stated she was not sure if the correlation existed “yet” because it is only her second year teaching in Tennessee. She thought there was a correlation with her use of standards-based grading practices in class and student achievement in her junior class, but with her freshmen, she said she was not sure. She stated, “I will have to wait to see what this year looks like. I wonder if it has to do with maturity.”

Teacher D, a teacher with three years of teaching experience and a master’s degree, stated that she “didn’t know how to view the individual writing scores, but last year, I had good scores. I am not sure how much of that came from writing vs. other things.” As a newer teacher that has received no training on standards-based grading, Teacher D stated, “I feel like I might have done more traditional grading, but as I am learning about standards-based grading, I realize that works better and am trying to use that more.” Teacher D also said that she really had minimal opportunities to implement standards-based grading in the current semester but that she plans on implementing the use of rubrics to score student writing in her upcoming writing assignments.

Teacher E, with 19 years of experience in teaching and also a master’s degree, reiterated that she too thought standards-based grading correlated with student achievement by stating, “I am sure it reinforces what the state is doing when they grade their essays.” She elaborated by detailing that in the past there was a focus on a particular type of writing, which made it easier to note the influence of standards-based grading and student achievement. When teaching writing, Teacher E aligned her instruction to ensure she taught the state’s definition of the writing type, which correlates to the state provided rubrics, so that her use of standards-based grading practices reflect the rigor and demand of the state’s writing rubrics.
Teacher Participant 5 from the focus group stated that she could certainly see a correlation in argumentative and expository writing when using standards-based grading practices. She stated that the growth in student writing in her classroom translated into the scores because she and her students “followed the rubric and the standards in writing.” She also attributed this translation of student scores in the classroom to scores on TNReady to teamwork among students and teachers. She was also sure that her use of standards-based grading practices attributed to her students’ achievement even though the scores were not categorized into or reported in subparts.

2. How does standards-based grading influence pedagogical writing practices in English I and English II according to educators’ perceptions?

**Setting an example.** The majority of teacher responses indicated using standards-based grading rubrics to set an example for student work. Teacher responses varied in how they described using writing rubrics as an example for student writing, but it was evident teachers implemented these measures for reference checks, guides, possibilities in writing, and in piecing student writing together. With the distinct indication of teachers using standards-based grading writing rubrics to score student writing, the theme of “setting an example” emerged.

Multiple teachers conveyed the need to review the state writing rubrics to set an example of expectations. Teacher C stated that she “typically takes a rubric and goes over it while having them write on one specific part of the rubric.” She further explained that students would write to understand that one part, and she would only take a grade for that one part. She compared it to a puzzle piece, noting, “We master one piece at a time and try to piece it together in the end.” While she stated that she uses the Tennessee State Writing Rubrics, she stated that she also adjusted rubrics to meet the needs of her students and instruction. Teacher C has been teaching
ELA I for five years, and with very little training utilizing standards-based grading to teach writing, she has embraced the use of standards-based grading and finds that using this method establishes expectations where students have “a clear guide on what they need to focus on and what path they need to take.” Although Teacher C stated the expectations in standards-based grading are more difficult for lower level students because of the language in rubrics, her teaching style incorporates decoding, and she expressed that standards-based grading is the “way to go because they [students] have a plan.”

Teacher A, a Nationally Board Certified teacher with 26 years of teaching experience, stated that she chose to teach using standards-based grading methods “because the kids know what areas are lacking in development or focus, and it’s helpful to me because kids can flesh out their writing.” Through her National Board Certification training, Teacher A was trained on the specifics of using standards-based grading, and her learning continued through numerous NCTE conference sessions using rubrics and her training in writing across the curriculum. She said that her first experience with standards-based grading was through this certification process and that the use of standards-based grading was “truly a professional and personal life-changing event.” She further explained, “To change my philosophy based upon this style of grading helped me to work toward continuous improvement rather than an end mark.” With standards-based grading methods setting an example for her own pedagogical practices, Teacher A stated, “Rubrics really help me validate my grade, which is why I lean towards them.” She continued her reasoning in using standards-based grading as a means to provide the “same expectations for every child.” She stipulated, “Not all [students] come in with the same background or education. Some kids are natural writers, others struggle. When we put rubrics in front of them, they can see specific expectations to grow in their writing.”
Teacher A explained what she meant by “kids can flesh out their writing.” While a rubric is intended to offer the same expectation for every child, there is more to using a rubric. Teacher A works with students on their writing by likening writing to a skeleton. She stated that she “explains any type of writing is like the bones and then students flesh it out.” She shares with students that in “writing you have a license to lie; the whole idea in writing is that you have an opportunity to make anyone believe whatever you want.” She continued, “Kids wonder ‘did that really happen,’ and this is where I start instruction and introduce the rubric.” She reviews expectations by sharing with students “here is what a three looks like and this is how you can move.” She stated that she uses “ones and twos as non-examples” to share with students that “basically it just hasn’t been fleshed out yet.” She stated, “This helps the students quite a bit.” Teacher A also likes to use portfolios and allows students choice in writing and in what is graded. She said that this method allows her to get to know her students and “delve into work in a non-threatening manner.”

According to Teacher B, “students can examine the rubric and see what they need to include in order to achieve the score. You see the benchmarks first and that then guides them to see what they can achieve.” As an advocate of teaching writing using the standards-based grading approach, she continued by saying that “it’s something that they can go back and fix, whereas with traditional grading, they just get a grade.” Additionally, she stated that with “standards-based grading, students can easily go back and see what they need to get a score, and they can self-assess and change if they need or want to.” Her idea of using standards-based grading practices in writing specifically helps overachieving students in that they know exactly what is expected because they have the specifics in the rubric to determine progress toward a certain score. She said, “It kind of reigns them in.” For struggling students, she feels that rubrics
are just as beneficial in that the rubric guides students to find a goal point and make revisions based on the details at each level. For all students, she reiterated the importance of “going over the rubric before students start so they know their expectations.” During the focus group, teachers discussed the use of a “student-friendly” rubric. While the state writing rubric is detailed and identifies the different achievement levels, the specifics frequently overwhelm students, according to Teacher Participant 5. She also said that stating expectations in student-friendly terms makes scoring writing on the rubric more understandable for students.

Teacher D stipulated that rubrics offer “better feedback for the kids because they can see exactly what they did, and it will increase intrinsic motivation because they can see how they can jump up on the rubric. It makes them willing to try more because they know why they got that grade and what they can do to improve.” Teacher D has given more attention to rubrics. She “has students self-evaluate and peer grade based on the rubrics rather than just assigning writing arbitrary score values.” Although she is progressing toward scoring students using a standards-based approach, she said she “sometimes gets stuck in the more traditional way” because that is what she knows best.

According to the survey of 13 English I and/or English II teachers, one teacher stated that he/she focused instruction on specifics in the rubric so that students understood the details within each domain of the rubric. Another teacher indicated that “standards-based grading does not necessarily alter my differentiated approach with various writing levels and abilities; however, it does structure my lessons with the idea that my students must ‘check all of the boxes’ before turning in their writing.”

3. How do educators’ work to create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement?
**I do, we do, you do.** In addition to setting an example, the majority of teachers indicated teaching writing using some method of modeling where the teacher modeled writing, the students and teachers worked on writing together, and then students independently practiced writing using the standards-based scoring rubric. While the theme of “setting an example” provided a rubric to review, the theme of “**I do, we do, you do**” moved instruction from review to implementation. Teachers had specific methods regarding this approach, but it was obvious that teachers taught writing using a similar approach to promote student growth in writing. This similar approach led to the theme of “I do, we do, you do.”

A modeled approach to writing that included peer editing and independent writing was common among teachers. Teacher C expressed the importance of the writing process, including her modeling, students working together through peer grading, and students working to craft their own work. Her method of peer grading includes “expert groups” where papers are rotated around the classroom. She stated, “A lot of kids are looking at the same papers and will maybe get ideas from others’ writings.” She stated students “note strengths and weaknesses” and apply this learning to their own writing.

Teacher B also encourages the use of the peer editing system using a rubric. She said that students “edit based on the rubric, grade their own writing based on the rubric, and then compare their grade to my grade.” It becomes a “cycle of self-assessment where they are able to see what’s lacking or what they need to add and/or fix.” She additionally stated, “Using a rubric and self-assessment are huge for students because they realize a lot of kids come in and think they wrote the best paper, but when they look at the rubric, they think maybe I should have added this or moved that.”
Teacher E also embraces the use of peer editing for student growth in writing. Teacher E uses the rubrics to teach writing and stated that with characteristics for each score “you can show kids how adding transitional words takes their writing up a notch.” She also plans and models essays together with her students. She said that teaching writing using a modeled approach allows students the opportunity to make changes and learn why certain changes improve their writing. Through the modeled writing, Teacher E relates any planning and/or modifications by consistently referring students to the state writing rubric to ensure any changes in writing correspond to the details in the rubric.

While incorporating standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement, Teacher A had students complete a “passion project” in place of a “research project;” although, the students really were researching. She modeled an example of her own writing concerning a passion of her own and shared with students her methods in constructing her writing, including reviewing articles, websites, and other resources to gather enough information to inform her readers. Her personal example allowed students the “opportunity to do something all about them.” She stated that this project “makes the kids understand that it doesn’t have to be a bound research paper to be a research paper.” She continued by stating that this project “is very powerful to the kids because they realize what they did through this project was research without labeling it research.” With this project, Teacher A noted that there “is so much technology that offers a lot of styles of writing where students can create writing using different methods and teachers can grade on focus and development.” Additionally, Teacher A uses her personal writing to help her students develop their own writing through the use of a rubric. This also aids in peer editing. Teacher A used a website for peer editing where students may anonymously provide feedback to their peers by answering questions on a rubric. She said this is helpful in
growing students into their writing. Her students responded to this process in a positive manner and stated that the process of peer editing and scoring on a rubric provides a “how-to” guide. One student in particular noted that he was able to independently meet the expectations of the assignment when provided a set of goals.

Teachers from the survey detailed various ways they create opportunities for students to improve writing and ultimately positively impact student achievement through the “I do, we do, you do” approach. Several teachers stated modeling followed by “practice and peer review” was a method that offered student ownership in writing. One teacher said that while students tend to have the same “go-to” group for feedback, his/her strategy includes students giving anonymous feedback on their peers’ writing. He/she also detailed that while it takes time for students to understand the meaning of quality feedback, once they have mastered the rubric, students begin engaging in valuable feedback that drives writing.

Teacher Participant 3 in the focus group prompts her students frequently, but she does not necessarily grade everything they write. Instead, she grades for one or two specific components. Teacher Participant 4 agreed and stated, “It is a lot to teach and grade because the workload is so intense. To make sure they are doing it right, there has to be a focus.” Teacher Participant 2 indicated that she selects focus points from the rubric and explains what that type of writing looks like and how students can improve their writing based on the specifics of the rubric.

According to Teacher Participant 3, the use of the rubric to identify specifics in writing offers students an opportunity to grow. She stated, “When I was in school, I got a grade and that grade said something about me like ‘I rocked,’ or ‘I sucked.’” With rubrics, she continued, students know exactly why they received a certain grade, and they can work to improve their writing based on the specifics in the rubric. Another teacher from the survey said that he/she typically
shows examples of “each of the proficiency levels: Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic.” This modeled approach along with “feedback from the teacher is what will guide students’ writing from a low level of proficiency to a higher level of proficiency.”

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<tr>
<th>Theme 1: “I think so.”</th>
<th>Open</th>
<th>Axial</th>
<th>Selective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I hope so, I think so based on overall scores, but it’s hard to tell because they (scores) are all lumped together. Teacher C Part 1</td>
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<td>Hard to judge but teachers indicate some sort of correlation</td>
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<td>That is hard to answer because you don’t ever really see what they make in writing on a whole, because the score is all in one. It’s hard to judge or answer the question, the students say they feel prepared but I can’t tell by the scores. Teacher B Part 1</td>
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<td>I am not sure yet, only second year teaching in Tennessee. I thought so with my juniors, my freshmen I am not sure, they didn’t do as well as I hoped they would do. I will have to wait to see what this year looks like, I wonder if it has to do with maturity. Teacher A Part 1</td>
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<td>I am sure it reinforces what the state is doing when they grade their essays. I don’t think they remember what they wrote and sometimes the kids think it’s a crapshoot and it used to be a focus writing per grade and it was easier, we practice all writing types but all writing is really persuasive. I set it up like the state sets it up, some on paper, most on google docs because that helps them be it’s digital for the state. Teacher E Part 1</td>
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<td>I use standards based grading for most of my writing assignments by using the state rubrics. This helps me to get to know the kids and allows us to delve into the work of peers in a non-threatening manner. Typically, I use my own writing/stories and help the kids to develop their own and then analyze the components using the rubric - does the introduction adequately (3) or effectively (4) engage the reader? Much of this is done through reading and discussion the first 8 weeks and then (hopefully) applied to their writing. Teacher A Part 2</td>
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<td>Yes, in argumentative and expository, growth between 9 and 10. Writing is incredible because we are following the rubric and the standards and the writing is growing, and teamwork. Teacher Participant 5 Part 1</td>
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<td>As the teacher you have to know the standards in order to make sure they are achieving the standards, but I make sure they are aware of what’s expected before they start writing. Teacher B Part 1</td>
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<td>I feel like might have done more traditional grading, but as I am learning about standards-based grading I realize that works better and trying to use that more. Teacher D Part 1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just finished using SBG for grading essays with a teacher made rubric for my Honors English I students. The use of the rubric and SBG was successful for this assignment. I feel like using SBG for writing is more beneficial because of writing being more objective than subjective. Students can demonstrate their knowledge in multiple ways. I also think that giving feedback on writing is easier and more meaningful. Teacher B Part 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4:1, displayed above.* Data sorted with open, axial, and selective coding for research question one: How does the use of standards-based grading to assess student writing in English I
and English II relate with student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores according to teacher perceptions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2: Setting an example.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Advantages: better feedback for students, less emphasis on number grades could lead to students becoming more intrinsically motivated, more accurate measures of achievement. Survey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards-based grading does not necessarily alter my differentiated approach with various writing levels and abilities, however, it does structure my lessons with the idea that my students must “check” all of the “boxes.” Survey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 plus 1 traits of writing, that’s where I got the idea that rubrics would make sense, that was the first time I realized you could grade portions and focus on a specific trait. Teacher E Part 1</td>
<td>Rubrics provide levels that help students identify how to improve writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubrics designed to the specific paper. Teacher Participant 1</td>
<td>Standards-based grading provides students with set criteria that aids in student achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, with modifications depending on what else we are covering in class or whatever I want them to focus on. Teacher C Part 1</td>
<td>Look at specifics in a rubric instead of the whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I still use traditional grading practices, but I do it within the rubric. Teacher Participant 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We use the rubric to grade writing when it comes to getting ready for the test, combine normal grading with rubric scoring, grade work with the rubric and each teacher. I go over the rubric with kids so they know what the state is looking for; when they say use transition, this is how they work, this is how you move from a two to a three, they can see someone else’s and realize I can do that. Teacher Participant 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have my kids writing all the time, and kids are taking college prep class and that she hadn’t helped them the kids wouldn’t be as successful, may not grade for grammar, but may look for one specific thing about 60 feedback 40 non feedback. Teacher Participant 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find that I focus my instruction upon the development/focus on ideas and organization rather than language and conventions. Survey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I focus more on focus and organization, plus development, more than grammar. Survey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student friendly rubrics focused on 1 to 3 things in the standard are more understandable for students. Teacher Participant 5</td>
<td>Student friendly rubrics aid in comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing for the state assessment is not the same as college, it does not prepare them, if the goal is to get them into college they should know how to do both the state rubric doesn’t cover it, would be nice to have a student friendly version with a 1-4 the only option makes them think, average the two to get the overall grade, kids think yeah I can’t do that. Teacher Participant 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2, displayed above. Data sorted with open, axial, and selective coding for research question two: How does standards-based grading influence pedagogical writing practices in English I and English II according to educators’ perceptions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 3: I do, we do, you do.</th>
<th>Peer work and modeling prior to independent work helps students move forward in their writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>as far as new we use peer editing system with a rubric, edit based on the rubric, students will grade their own based on the rubric and compare to my grade, cycle of self-assessment where they are able to see what’s lacking or what they need to add and fix. I feel like using a rubric and self-monitoring is huge for students be they realize a lot of kids come in and think they wrote the best paper but when they look at the rubric they think maybe I should have added this or moved that. Teacher E Part 1</td>
<td>Students benefit from a model, peer editing, and then independent work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer edits, peer grade is something I would like to try, they can anonymously interact with kids writing, I used to do more of showing work on overhead projector. Teacher E Part 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look at sample and anchor papers and how the rubric applies, we use a peer grade where kids can anonymously interact with the papers, take the name off the paper and it gives them the opportunity to see strengths and weaknesses, it’s a safe option, friendly critique. Teacher Participant 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Students work to correct their own writing based on rubrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Editing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-writing Activities- diagrams, webs, videos, brainstorming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read, Write, Think</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students tend to have the same “go-to” group for feedback so I used peergrade.io to allow for students to anonymously give feedback to each other. It took a couple times for the kids to really engage in giving quality feedback rather than just reviewing to get ‘X’ number of critiques completed. Survey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We use the rubric to grade writing when it comes to getting ready for the test, combine normal grading with rubric scoring, grade work with the rubric and each teacher, I let them score themselves. Teacher Participant 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as far as new we use peer editing system with a rubric, edit based on the rubric, students will grade their own based on the rubric and compare to my grade, cycle of self-assessment where they are able to see what’s lacking or what they need to add and fix. I feel like using a rubric and self-monitoring is huge for students be they realize a lot of kids come in and think they wrote the best paper but when they look at the rubric they think maybe I should have added this or moved that. Teacher E Part 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The kids have just finished their first narrative piece. I’ve deconstructed the state rubric for the kids to use for peer editing with peergrade.io. They will anonymously provide feedback for at least two students by answering 4 questions - 2 on a scale about the introduction and development and 2 open-ended soliciting positive feedback and constructive feedback. The author then receives the feedback and has to make choices when editing and revising. Final draft is due for my eyes late next week. In the past, this has been very helpful. Teacher A Part 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4:3, displayed above. Data sorted with open, axial, and selective coding for research question three: How do educators work to create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement?

Summary

With attention to the three research questions, three major themes emerged from the triangulation of data. Survey results, teacher interviews, and focus group data informed the creation of themes. This occurred through open, axial, and selective coding. Through the evaluation of each of the three data sources, a comprehensive understanding of teacher perceptions regarding standards-based grading and correlations to student achievement converged. In scrutinizing the relationship of standards-based grading practices to student achievement on the TNReady End-of-Course Exam for English I and/or English II, teachers indicated that they correlated but were unsure of the direct correlations due to the state’s method of reporting students’ writing scores. When directly asked of the correlation, one teacher commented, “I think so.” Teachers reported having overall high scores but were unsure how much of their overall score attributed to student achievement in writing. Regarding to standards-based grading practices influencing teachers’ pedagogical practices, “setting an example” was a theme that overlapped and connected the correlation of standards-based grading practices to student achievement in all areas of writing instruction according to teacher perceptions. “I do, we do, you do” was identified as a modeled approach that incorporated teacher led models, peer edits, and individual student writing to promote new ways of knowing and learning in the English I and English II classroom.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter includes an overview of the problem and a discussion of the findings from Chapter 4. In addition, a review of the methodology and explanation of the study participants are included. Recommendations for further research in studying the perceptions between standards-based grading and student achievement on end-of-course writing exams are detailed, and a concluding section finalizes the chapter.

Overview of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to identify relationships between standards-based grading in teaching writing to student achievement on the ELA I and ELA II TNReady writing assessments according to teacher perceptions. While educational reforms highlight the intent of standards in relation to student learning, reporting measures surrounding student achievement in writing on summative tests are not as well defined (Espin et al., 2008; Haptonstall, 2010; Knight, 2018; Reeves, 2004; Scarlett, 2018; Townsley & Varga, 2018; Welsh et al., 2013). Educational initiatives focusing on students’ ability to master a standard based on growth support competency-based learning through standards-based grading which utilizes specific levels of knowledge, yet the correlation to student achievement on end-of-course assessments to this method of grading are not as obvious (Paeplow, 2011; Scarlett, 2018).

Standards-based grading measures provide educators with learning objectives and growth measures that indicate specifics in a student’s level of mastery for a given skill or task. Traditionally, teachers have awarded students with a number and/or letter grade indicating mastery of a specific task. This number and/or letter grade, however, does not provide a clear insight into students’ mastery of a given standard. A number and/or letter grade coupled with learning objectives and growth measures offer a more accurate assessment of a student’s level of
understanding and mastery and provides educators, parents, guardians, and students with the tools to set measurable goals for student achievement by offering a well-defined learning outcome that is measured on the specifics of the standards (Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller, & Townsley, 2017; Scarlett, 2018).

Although competency-based learning utilizing a standards-based grading approach is researched, including Brookhart et al.'s (2016) recent addition to research, there is a distinct lack of information regarding the correlation of standards-based grading to student achievement on state writing assessments (Scarlett, 2018). Additionally, there is a lack of information regarding pedagogical practices utilizing standards-based grading to assess student writing to positively impact student achievement on end-of-course exams. This lack of identifiable research places educators in a position to question the validity of standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement in writing.

In moving forward and supporting teachers with these initiatives, research evidencing correlations between standards-based grading and student achievement on end-of-course writing exams is necessary to create and build teacher support. In addition, teachers should have pedagogical writing practices that support these transitions as well as strategies that positively affect student achievement. Based on literature supporting the three research questions surrounding the correlation and use of standards-based grading to student achievement and the data collected from teachers, the need to support teachers is apparent. Research is sparse regarding the correlation of standards-based grading and student achievement, and through data collected from teachers, the need to support professional learning is evident. To provide teacher support, the findings that follow include: teacher perceptions of how standards-based grading influences pedagogical writing practices, how teachers create new ways of knowing and learning
utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement, and any identified correlations of standards-based grading and student achievement on the writing portion of TNReady according to teacher perceptions.

**Review of Methodology**

This study was conducted to support standards-based grading initiatives by showing a direct comparison of standards-based grading and student achievement on the TNReady writing assessment in English I and English II in a rural, Appalachian school district. Teachers were asked to participate in the study through either a survey, a one-on-one interview, and/or as a participant in a focus group. Ethical considerations included respect of anonymity, instruction, and teacher planning. Moreover, trustworthiness techniques to reduce researcher bias were used to include member checks. In addition, open, axial, and selective coding were used to identify themes evidenced in the data. Through selective coding, data revealed specifics in relation to the research questions. While all data collected was coded, only the data that pertained to the study was included in the research. Themes were easily identified and categorized into relevant themes using this process, and all themes corresponded to the research questions.

**Population**

Participants were chosen based on their experience in teaching English I and/or English II courses within the last two school years. Additionally, participants were chosen based on their willingness and availability to contribute to the study. Teachers ranged in years of experience and degrees, and all teachers taught English I and/or English II during the 2017-2018 school year on a block schedule. Block schedules were broken up into fall and spring semesters, with each semester containing approximately 90 instructional days in four class periods for students in English I and/or English II. While teachers instructed for three of the four periods, not all three
classes were English I and/or English II classes. This included 13 teacher participants in a survey, five teachers for one-on-one interviews, and 16 teachers in a focus group. Teachers were given the Tennessee state writing rubrics prior to the study; however, there was no specific training teachers attended to implement the provided rubrics nor was there any discussion and/or collaboration of standards-based grading as an evaluation method for student writing prior to the study.

**Discussion of Findings**

For this qualitative study, I surveyed current ELA I and ELA II teachers with a request for teachers that taught ELA I and/or ELA II during the 2017-2018 school year to respond. In the survey, I asked for volunteers to participate in one-on-one interviews, of which five teachers agreed to do. My third data source came from a focus group discussion with 16 ELA I and/or ELA II teachers. After collecting the data, I utilized open, axial, and selective coding to identify evident patterns and eventually themes. From this analysis of data, three themes emerged. Additional information was collected; however, the data most pertinent to the research was used in the identification of themes. Regarding the three research questions, data emerged that provided insight into teacher perceptions surrounding the correlation of standards-based grading and student achievement on the TNReady End-of-Course exam in English I and/or English II. This section includes a brief discussion of the findings and possible implications of those findings.

**I think so.** Most teacher responses indicated that there was a correlation between standards-based grading scores in class and student achievement on the TNReady End-of-Course exam; however, identifying the direct impact of standards-based instructional practices on students’ writing was difficult to decipher due to the state’s reporting of student scores. One
teacher commented “I think so” when directly asked of the correlation, which accurately summed up the sentiment of most teachers and titled the first theme. While it may have appeared that teacher participants shared information they thought I would expect to hear as a curriculum administrator, they notably admitted a weakness in reading data. Even with this uncertainty, the majority were confident that student scores in class correlated with end-of-course achievement scores. In Hochbein and Pollio’s (2016) research, results revealed that students receiving standards-based grading exhibited clear correlations between grades and end-of-term assessments, which supports teacher perceptions in this study.

**Implications.** Traditional grading measures report student achievement in a number and/or letter grade (Cureton, 1971; Layne, 2018) while competency-based learning includes standards-based grading centered on the ability of a student to show mastery of a skill or task (Brookhart, 2013; Gibbs, Andres, & Barnes, 2016; Paeplow, 2011; Scarlett, 2018). With standards-based grading at the center of student writing scores on the TNReady End-of-Course exam, it is imperative for teachers to have the results of student achievement to inform instruction. Additionally, recent initiatives incentivize learning to support standards-based instruction with student outcomes directly impacting elements such as accountability (Darrow, 2016; *Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee*, 2017). Accordingly, the need to review data as released by the state must occur in order to affect instructional practices and identify any correlations between instruction and accountability. While this may be germane to the population included in the study, teacher perceptions indicated otherwise. Although state testing blueprints and rubrics were provided prior to testing (TNReady, 2018), most teachers had no specific data to analyze for the purpose of identifying best practices in teaching writing. According to Knight’s (2018) study, however, teachers reported an increased use of assessment
data to inform differentiated instruction, more rigorous assessments, and a clearer communication of expectations with student specific feedback. While the research is sparse, I would think that teachers who are willing to utilize state assessment data to influence their teaching should be provided with the data necessary to properly analyze outcomes as in Knight’s (2018) study.

**Setting an example.** Data included how standards-based grading influenced pedagogical writing practices. Pedagogical practices regarding standards-based grading included “setting an example,” which most teachers shared as an integral practice in teaching writing using a standards-based approach and proved to be an additional theme. Hochbein and Pollio (2016) reported that teachers improved instruction with standards-based grading due to the focus on standards as an example to model. Additionally, Winton’s (2015) study determined that standards-based grading provided clarity and direction as an example for student work.

**Implications.** Giving students an example in student writing based on a rubric provides elements that support growth (Winton, 2015). According to Marzano (2016), standards-based grading makes note of the essentials in the standard. When standards are outlined in a rubric and translated into an example of writing, students benefit from and reference their personal schema regarding writing against set criteria. Additionally, example or model student work provides students with opportunities to demonstrate understanding through comparison of set criteria (Townsley, 2018). Identifying set criteria through a rubric also supports student motivation because students feel supported in the growth process (Bell, Mladenovic, & Price, 2013; Peters et al., 2017).

**I do, we do, you do.** The third and final theme, “I do, we do, you do,” summarized the way most teachers created new ways of knowing and learning when teaching writing. This
practice included teacher-led models, peer edits, and individual student writing to positively impact student achievement through a gradual release of responsibility. With this strategy, teachers first modeled writing, then guided students through their writing, and finally allowed students to independently practice writing. Knight’s (2018) study revealed that planning, instruction, assessment, and individualized instruction were more purposeful under the standards-based grading approach which included a clearer communication of expectations through modeling—a subset of “I do, we do, you do.” Teachers in Knight’s (2018) study created new ways of learning for their students and a new way of teaching for themselves using standards-based grading that translated into both student and teacher growth.

**Implications.** Educators create opportunities for students to experience growth in learning using tools that guide students to set measurable goals which, subsequently, increases student motivation (Hendry et al., 2012; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Identifying a set example as a model for student writing and then following that practice with teacher support guides students on a path to mastering a standard independently, which ultimately leads to positive correlations in student motivation, a key element in student achievement. In a study by Hendry, Armstrong, and Bromberger (2012), students reported that they relied on exemplars more for understanding and as a guide to teacher expectations in writing. This same study reported that students found the exemplars beneficial as a modeled guide to writing and reported higher performance levels from students that understood the standards within the exemplars. Ashe, Nixon, Robbins, and Scott (2018) stated that once teachers understood the standards, they were able to focus instruction on mastery toward the standard and create an environment for student growth by setting an example for student mastery. With an environment of growth in place, students’ self-efficacy and motivation for learning and mastering a standard are evident.
Layne (2018) reported that standards-based grading practices directly impacted students’ self-efficacy and that motivation and self-efficacy are determining factors in student performance on state assessments.

**Limitations**

Cognitive constructivism influenced findings because it provided a path for examining teachers’ support and students’ attainment of new learning and knowledge based on prior knowledge and previous experiences. Additionally, utilizing cognitive constructivism allowed for the understanding of how both teachers’ support and students’ attainment of new learning and knowledge translated into student achievement. Resulting research data indicated that teacher perceptions were influenced by their prior knowledge and previous experiences in working with standards-based grading in writing to influence student achievement. There were, however, limitations in using cognitive constructivism as the theoretical framework because through the interviews and the focus group discussions, teachers seemed influenced by their peers to either share in agreement or refrain from the discussion for fear of judgement or lack of understanding and were not inclined to share new knowledge based on their own schema. Additionally, teacher perceptions may have been based on other teacher knowledge rather than his/her own prior knowledge or previous experiences. In gathering data from interviews and through the focus group, an additional theory emerged. Because of the evidence of modeling as a key element of the themes, social cognitive theory may have been a more powerful explanatory model than cognitive constructivism. Employing the social cognitive theory may have further clarified the framework for gathering research.

**Recommendations for Teachers, Administrators, and School Districts**
**Teacher Training on Reading Data.** With teachers sharing that they were unable to accurately identify the influence of their standards-based instructional practices on student achievement in writing on the TNReady End-of-Course exam, a need to support teachers in analyzing and reading data is apparent. While the Tennessee Department of Education reports overall scores in student achievement, the state also provides standards analysis reports that identify student mastery on given standards, as well as detailed reports that correlate with the state’s writing rubrics and student performance in alignment with the specific categories identified on the rubric. Most teachers indicated that they were unfamiliar with any report that allowed them to pinpoint student achievement on the written portion of TNReady. Given this information, teachers should be exposed to any report identifying student achievement as it directly relates to pedagogical practices in teaching English language arts in general and should also be provided the training needed to interpret such reports.

**Standards-Based Grading Professional Development.** Professional development regarding standards-based grading should be provided through teacher preparatory programs and continued through district and school-wide efforts. Just as traditional grading varies by teachers, standards-based grading offers variabilities in reporting student achievement. Most teachers indicated that they had no formal training on utilizing standards-based grading and assumed processes and procedures as they understood them to benefit their instruction and student performance. One teacher, however, was not as confident in using standards-based grading measures and indicated that she needed support through professional development to utilize such practices. Whether a veteran teacher or one new to the profession, offering professional development in using standards-based instruction and grading to positively impact student achievement is a necessary component of the implementation process. Professional development
opportunities should be provided by the state, the district, and should also be embedded in teacher preparatory programs. Teachers should understand the purpose in competency-based learning using a standards-based grading approach to develop personal pedagogical practices based on a trained understanding. Although teachers may vary instructional practices, providing professional development builds teacher capacity and creates a consistency in learning.

**Pilot Training of Standards-Based Grading through Video Tutorials.** In keeping with the mindset of setting an example for others to follow, providing teachers with video tutorials on how to score student writing on a rubric would support standards-based grading on an ongoing basis. This would also provide clear and concrete examples for those teachers who are hesitant to score student writing against a standards-based rubric.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

While most teacher perceptions of the correlations of standards-based grading practices in class and student achievement on the writing portion of TNReady End-of-Course exam in English I and/or English II were positive, additional research studying the impact of standards-based grading and the correlation to student achievement on end-of-course exams in additional grades, subject areas, and states may provide further insight into correlations. A specific investigation surrounding implementation processes used to positively influence student achievement as well as teacher training and the influence of such training in instruction may additionally offer insight into teacher preparatory processes, planning, and support in implementing competency-based learning through a standards-based grading approach. Additionally, a more conclusive finding regarding the correlation of standards-based grading in class and student achievement on end-of-course exams may emerge with additional achievement data provided in various grades, subject areas, and/or through other state assessment reports.
**Longitudinal.** This study focused on the results of standards-based instruction and grading during the 2017-2018 school year. Identifying the impact of standards-based grading and the influence of this type of instruction on student achievement in writing on end-of-course exams over a longer period would provide data that contributes to the sparse body of research regarding the relationship of the two. Additional data may also offer a more definitive correlation of standards-based grading in class and student achievement on the writing portion of end-of-course exams.

**Quantitative Evaluation of Student Achievement.** With specific data available on reports provided by the Tennessee Department of Education, a quantitative evaluation of the levels of student mastery in relation to writing would also identify relationships between standards-based grading and student achievement on the writing portion of TNReady in English I and/or English II. This would be prefaced with teacher training regarding reading student achievement reports provided by the state.

**Concluding Remarks**

This case study examined the relationship of standards-based grading scores in class to student achievement on the writing subpart of the TNReady End-of-Course exam in English I and English II based on teacher perceptions. This included an examination of teacher perceptions regarding influences of standards-based grading on pedagogical practices in addition to ways teachers created new ways of knowing and learning to positively impact student achievement. In scrutinizing this case study through the constructivist approach to learning and according to teacher perceptions, students were able to build their own schema through either accommodation or assimilation via multiple avenues of learning. This included initial processes of teacher modeling followed by peer work with individual student understanding and growth in writing
through the course of a semester of which supported teacher perceptions of the correlation of standards-based grading practices in class and positive student achievement on the culminating state assessment. Results from the study showed that there were correlations of standards-based grading practices and student achievement on the TNReady End-of-Course exam in English I and English II based on teacher perceptions. Additional results indicated that using rubrics to score student writing set examples for students to follow and positively impacted student writing. Through teacher modeling, peer editing, and independent work, students were also able to successfully improve writing throughout the semester, and this ultimately translated into positive student achievement on the end-of-course writing exam.
References


https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/documents/TN_ESSA_State_Plan_Approved.pdf


Layne, J. (2018). The impact of standards-based grading on student achievement and self-
efficacy in middle school ELA classes (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Carson-Newman University, TN.


McIntosh, J., & Milam, M. (2016). Competitive debate as competency-based learning: Civic engagement and next-generation assessment in the era of the common core learning


Appendix A

IRB Approval

From: IRB
Sent: Tuesday, December 11, 2018 12:08 PM
To: Brian Sohn
Subject: RE: Application for IRB Approval

This request has been approved – please send me a copy of the district approval once you receive it – thanks,

In His service,

Gregory A. Casalenuovo, PhD, APRN, FNP-BC, FNP-C
Professor of Nursing
Associate Director, Honors Program
Carson-Newman University
C-N Box 71883
Jefferson City, TN 37760

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Prayer: If I forget the true meaning of Christmas, Jesus please remind me it is all about you!
Dear Assistant Superintendent of Schools,

I am currently in the dissertation phase of my educational doctorate and am seeking teacher input for my case study concerning standards-based instruction in teaching writing in English I and English II. The focus of my case study is to answer the following three questions:

1. How does the use of standards-based grading to assess student writing in English I and English II relate with student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores according to teacher perceptions?
2. How does standards-based grading influence pedagogical writing practices in English I and English II according to educators’ perceptions?
3. How do educators’ work to create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement?

The input I am seeking includes approximately seven teachers’ contributions in a one-on-one interview during one of their regularly scheduled planning periods as well as their contributions in a focus group during a regularly scheduled professional development session. The professional development session scheduled includes a review of assessments regarding standards alignment and teacher practices in assessing students using the Tennessee Academic Standards. The focus group questions would encompass how teachers assess student writing using standards-based grading. I would additionally like to send a survey to all English I and English II teachers in our district and collect anonymous responses. During the interviews and focus group, conversations will be audio recorded, and I will also journal information and other reflections. All identifying information regarding teachers and school names will be kept
confidential, and if approved, I will also email principals concerning teacher participation. I appreciate your consideration as I research ways to support teachers in teaching writing using a standards-based approach.

Regards,

Lori Hill

Carson-Newman University Doctoral Student
Appendix C

Interview and Focus Group Email

Good afternoon, colleagues.

I am currently in the dissertation phase of my educational doctorate and am seeking your input for my case study concerning standards-based instruction in teaching writing in English I and English II. The input I am seeking includes your contributions in a one-on-one interview during one of your planning periods as well as your contributions in a focus group during a regularly scheduled professional development session. I will additionally send a survey to all English I and English II teachers in our district and collect anonymous responses. During the interviews and focus group, conversations will be audio recorded, and I will also journal information and other reflections. Your anonymity is of upmost importance, and I will take every step needed to protect your privacy. I appreciate your consideration as I research ways to support teachers in teaching writing using a standards-based approach.

Regards,

Lori Hill

Carson-Newman University Doctoral Student
Appendix D
Survey Email and Questions

Good afternoon, colleagues.

I am currently in the dissertation phase of my educational doctorate and am seeking your input for my case study concerning standards-based instruction in teaching writing in English I and English II. The input I am seeking includes your contributions to the following survey. There are eight multiple choice questions and three open-ended questions. All responses collected are anonymous. I would very much appreciate your participation in this survey as I research ways to support teachers in teaching writing using a standards-based approach.

Regards,

Lori Hill
Carson-Newman Doctoral Student

1. How many years have you been teaching?
   - 0-3, 4-6, 7-10, 11 or more

2. What is the highest degree you have earned in education?
   - Bachelors, Masters, Masters Plus, Educational Specialist, Educational Doctorate, Other

3. Do you teach or have you taught ELA I, ELA II, or both?
   - ELA I, ELA II, ELA I and ELA II

4. Do you use the Tennessee Academic Standards to guide writing instruction?
   - Yes, No

5. Do you use the Tennessee State Writing Rubrics to score student writing?
   - Yes, No
6. Do you prefer standards-based grading (scoring student work based on criteria set forth in a standard) or traditional grading practices (scoring student work on teacher set criteria)?
   - Standards-based Grading, Traditional Grading, Undecided

7. What type of training, if any, have you had regarding competency-based learning using a standards-based grading approach?
   - District Professional In-Service Opportunity, School Professional In-Service Opportunity, State-Wide Training, Other

8. If you use standards-based grading practices, does your use of standards-based grading practices correlate with TNReady End-of-course exam scores?
   - Yes, No, Unsure

9. What do you perceive are advantages and/or disadvantages in standards-based grading?
   - Open-Ended

10. If you use standards-based grading practices, how do standards-based grading practices influence your teaching of writing?
    - Open-Ended

11. If you use standards-based grading practices, how do you or what do you do to create opportunities for students to learn and positively influence their writing?
    - Open-Ended
Appendix E
Informational Email to Principals

Dear Principal,

I am currently in the dissertation phase of my educational doctorate and am seeking teacher input for my case study concerning standards-based instruction in teaching writing in English I and English II. The focus of my case study is to answer the following three questions:

1. How does the use of standards-based grading to assess student writing in English I and English II relate with student achievement on TNReady End-of-Course writing scores according to teacher perceptions?
2. How does standards-based grading influence pedagogical writing practices in English I and English II according to educators’ perceptions?
3. How do educators’ work to create new ways of knowing and learning utilizing standards-based grading to positively affect student achievement?

The input I am seeking includes approximately seven teachers’ contributions in a one-on-one interview during one of their regularly scheduled planning periods as well as their contributions in a focus group during a regularly scheduled professional development session. I will additionally send a survey to all English I and English II teachers in our district and collect anonymous responses. Teacher A and Teacher B from your school have agreed to participate in this case study. All identifying information regarding teachers and school names will be kept confidential, and I will make every attempt not to disrupt the educational process. I appreciate your teachers’ willingness to participate as I research ways to support teachers in teaching writing using a standards-based approach.

Regards,
Lori Hill

Carson-Newman University Doctoral Student
Appendix F

Consent Form to Participate in Case Study

Dear Tennessee Educator,

I am currently in the dissertation phase of my educational doctorate and am seeking teacher input for my case study concerning standards-based instruction in teaching writing in English I and English II. I will be collecting data through interviews, survey responses, and conversations from a focus group all of which surround standards-based instructional practices. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and there is no consequence for not participating. If you do choose to participate, all identifying information regarding teachers and school names will be kept confidential. Thank you for your consideration and/or participation as I research ways to support teachers in teaching writing using a standards-based approach.

Regards,

Lori Hill

Carson-Newman University Doctoral Student
Appendix G

Teacher Interview Questions

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. What is the highest degree you have earned in education?
3. Do you teach or have taught ELA I, ELA II, or both?
4. Do you use the Tennessee Academic Standards to guide writing instruction?
5. Do you use the Tennessee State Writing Rubrics to score student writing?
6. Do you prefer standards-based grading or traditional grading practices?
7. What type of training have you had in regard to competency-based learning using a standards-based grading approach?
8. What do you perceive are advantages and/or disadvantages in standards-based grading?
9. If you use standards-based grading practices, does your use of standards-based grading practices correlate with student achievement in writing on the TNReady End-of-course exam?
10. If you use standards-based grading practices, how do standards-based grading practices influence your teaching of writing?
11. If you use standards-based grading practices, how do you create new ways of knowing and learning for students using standards-based grading practices to positively influence student achievement in writing?
Appendix H
Focus Group Questions

1. Does your department choose to use the Tennessee Academic Standards to guide writing instruction or does each teacher decide how they score writing?

2. Would you prefer your school to have a universal method for scoring student writing? Why or why not?

3. What do you use to score student writing? Will you please share your artifacts with the group?

4. Do you prefer standards-based grading or traditional grading practices when scoring student writing?

5. In reviewing the state writing rubrics, what do you perceive are advantages and/or disadvantages in scoring student writing?

6. Do you see a correlation in student writing scores throughout the year using the method you use and TNReady End-of-course scores?

7. If you do not typically use a set of criteria as outlined through the standards, would you be willing to do so if you were supported through collaborative meetings like this or other professional development opportunities?

8. What strategies do you use to support student growth in writing in your alignment to Tennessee State Academic Standards?
Appendix I
Survey Email Reminder and Survey

Good afternoon, colleagues.

I recently sent you a request to participate in a survey regarding standards-based instruction in teaching writing in English I and English II. If you have already participated in the survey, I very much appreciate your time and input. If you have not, I ask you to reconsider offering your input as I research ways to better support teaching writing using a standards-based approach. There are eight multiple choice questions and three open-ended questions, and all responses collected are anonymous. Thank you again for your time and consideration!

Regards,

Lori Hill
Carson-Newman Doctoral Student

1. How many years have you been teaching?
   - 0-3, 4-6, 7-10, 11 or more

2. What is the highest degree you have earned in education?
   - Bachelors, Masters, Masters Plus, Educational Specialist, Educational Doctorate, Other

3. Do you teach or have you taught ELA I, ELA II, or both?
   - ELA I, ELA II, ELA I and ELA II

4. Do you use the Tennessee Academic Standards to guide writing instruction?
   - Yes, No

5. Do you use the Tennessee State Writing Rubrics to score student writing?
   - Yes, No
6. Do you prefer standards-based grading or traditional grading practices?
   - Standards-based Grading, Traditional Grading, Undecided

7. What type of training, if any, have you had regarding competency-based learning using a standards-based grading approach?
   - District Professional In-Service Opportunity, School Professional In-Service Opportunity, State-Wide Training, Other

8. If you use standards-based grading practices, does your use of standards-based grading practices correlate with student achievement in writing on the TNReady End-of-course exam?
   - Yes, No, Unsure

9. What do you perceive are advantages and/or disadvantages in standards-based grading?
   - Open-Ended

10. If you use standards-based grading practices, how do standards-based grading practices influence your teaching of writing?
    - Open-Ended

11. If you use standards-based grading practices, how do you create new ways of knowing and learning for students using standards-based grading practices to positively influence student achievement in writing?
    - Open-Ended
Appendix J

Pie Graphs of Questions 1 through 8 on Survey Results

1. How many years have you been teaching?
   13 responses

   - 0-3: 69.2%
   - 4-6: 15.4%
   - 7-10: 7.7%
   - 11 or more: 7.7%

2. What is the highest degree you have earned in education?
   13 responses

   - Bachelors: 38.5%
   - Masters: 46.2%
   - Masters Plus: 7.7%
   - Educational Specialist: 7.7%
   - Educational Doctorate: 7.7%

3. Did you teach ELA I, ELA II, or both during the 2017-2018 school year?
   13 responses

   - ELA I: 61.5%
   - ELA II: 30.8%
   - ELA I and ELA II: 7.7%
4. Did you use the Tennessee Academic Standards to guide writing instruction during the 2017-2018 school year?
13 responses

- Yes: 69.2%
- No: 30.8%

5. Did you use the Tennessee State Writing Rubrics to score student writing during the 2017-2018 school year?
13 responses

- Yes: 53.8%
- No: 38.5%

6. Did you prefer standards-based grading (scoring student work based on criteria set forth in a standard) or traditional grading practices (scoring student work on teacher set criteria) during the 2017-2018 school year?
13 responses

- Standards-based Grading: 69.2%
- Traditional Grading: 23.1%
- A Combination of Standards-based Grading and Traditional Grading: 7.7%
7. What type of training, if any, have you had regarding competency-based learning using a standards-based grading approach?

- District-wide Professional Development Opportunity: 15.4%
- School-level Professional Development Opportunity: 15.4%
- Tennessee Department of Education Training: 7.7%
- Teacher Preparatory Program: 23.1%
- Self-taught: 38.5%
- No Organized Training: 7.7%
- A combination of professional develop... 13 responses

8. If you used standards-based grading practices during the 2017-2018 school year, did your use of standards-based grading correlate with the 2017-2018 TNReady End of Course exam scores?

- Yes: 53.8%
- No: 15.4%
- Unsure: 7.7%
- To Some Degree: 23.1%
- I Did Not Use Standards-based Grading to Teach Writing in 2017-2018: 7.7%

13 responses