

AN INVESTIGATION OF STUDENT RESPONSE TO THE INCLUSION OF BEHAVIOR  
AS A COMPONENT OF GRADES IN COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Education Department

Carson-Newman University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Ryan L. Parker

August 2020

Copyright © 2020 by Ryan L. Parker



## **Dissertation Approval**

Student Name: Ryan L. Parker

Dissertation Title:

AN INVESTIGATION OF STUDENT RESPONSE TO THE INCLUSION OF BEHAVIOR  
AS A COMPONENT OF GRADES IN COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

This dissertation has been approved and accepted by the faculty of the Education Department, Carson-Newman University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education.

### Dissertation Committee:

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Steve A. Davidson

Methodologist Member: Dr. P. Mark Taylor

Content Member: Dr. Tony L. Dalton

Approved by the Dissertation Committee: July 20, 2020

## Abstract

High stakes testing and the adoption of Common Core State Standards led to a resurgence of standards-based grading and the wide-spread institution of re-test/re-take policies and no-zero or minimum grade policies in public education. These practices squelched student motivation, resulting in students who failed to engage in academic behaviors. This qualitative case study investigated student responses to the inclusion of a behavior component in computing student grades. Conducted in a competency-based classroom environment, the study revealed a generally positive attitude toward the practice. Participants reported feeling positively motivated to engage in academic behavior and to succeed academically. However, they also reported feeling distrustful of teachers' ability to judge behavior and equitably implement the practice. Based on the results, teachers implementing a grade-based system of behavior accountability need to focus on consistency of application and clarity of communication.

*Keywords:* academic behavior, autonomy, communication, competence, competency-based, consistency, grades, motivation, relatedness, responsibility, standards-based, student accountability

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my students. They reveal fresh insights about life and literature every year. They teach me about myself – the good, the bad, and the ugly – even when they are unaware that our roles have reversed. Sometimes I learn early enough in the school year to thank them. Usually, I do not. I am continuously honored and humbled that they allow me to participate in their lives.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the gentlemen who shepherded me through this process – Dr. Davidson, Dr. Taylor, and Dr. Dalton. They provided invaluable advice, feedback, commentary, and critique.

Thanks to my parents who instilled a respect for knowledge and learning in me as a child. Without their love, encouragement, and support, I would not have pursued this degree.

Thanks to my two beautiful girls, Jessica and Emily. The girls are out of the house now, but they bore the weight of many school years – late nights, late papers, and fits of rage.

I was inspired in an undergraduate philosophy class by a professor who said I had a "knack for academia." In a master's class, a professor once returned a paper of mine. He said I wrote at a doctoral level. After that professor's comment, I refused to take the garbage out for a week. Any time my wife mentioned taking out the garbage, I told her I couldn't be bothered to take out the garbage because I wrote at a doctoral level. About a week later, I received my GRE results. My score was exactly in the middle of average on the writing portion. Thus, I ended my garbage strike. I threatened to stop washing the dishes once I became a doctor. My wife agreed... but I don't think she meant it. Cristi, I love you. Thank you for loving me better for 35 years.

Table of Contents

Abstract ..... iv

Dedication ..... v

Acknowledgements ..... vi

Table of Contents ..... vii

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction ..... 1

    Background ..... 1

        Testing ..... 1

        Common Core ..... 2

        Emphasis on learning ..... 3

    Statement of the Problem ..... 4

    Purpose of the Study ..... 4

    Significance of the Study ..... 4

    Theoretical Foundation ..... 5

    Research Question ..... 6

    Limitation and Delimitations ..... 6

    Researcher Positionality Statement ..... 6

    Definitions of Terms ..... 7

        Academic rigor ..... 7

        Academic responsibility ..... 8

        Responsible learner ..... 8

    Organization ..... 8

    Summary ..... 8

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review .....	10
High Stakes Testing .....	10
Common Core State Standards .....	13
Standards-Based Reform .....	14
History.....	14
Components of SBR. ....	15
Standards-based grading (SBG).....	17
Influence on current practice. ....	24
Self-Determination Theory .....	27
Competency-Based Education .....	32
Academic Behavior.....	36
Summary .....	39
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology.....	42
Research Question .....	42
Research Approach .....	43
Population and Sample .....	43
Research Procedures .....	44
Ethical considerations. ....	44
Data collection. ....	44
Coding process.....	45
Data analysis process. ....	45
Summary .....	46

CHAPTER FOUR: Presentation of Findings .....	48
Context of the Study .....	48
Research Question .....	51
Participants.....	51
Data Collection Process .....	56
Data Analysis .....	57
Study Findings .....	58
Feelings of obligation. ....	62
Influence on motivation. ....	65
Focus on implementation.....	71
Summary .....	77
CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations .....	79
Research Question .....	80
Summary of Findings.....	80
Conclusions.....	81
Feelings of obligation. ....	81
Influence on motivation. ....	82
Focus on implementation.....	84
Implications.....	85
Recommendations.....	87
Summary .....	88
References.....	89

Appendix A: .....	97
Appendix B: .....	99
Appendix C: .....	101
Appendix D: .....	103
Appendix E: .....	105

## **List of Tables and Figures**

Table 2.1: Two Students' Scores on Ten Consecutive Assessments .....	18
Table 4.1: Potential Effect of Factoring Behavior into Students' Grades .....	50
Figure 4.1: Raw data sorting in levels of coding for theme #1.....	59
Figure 4.2: Raw data sorting in levels of coding for theme #2.....	60
Figure 4.3: Raw data sorting in levels of coding for theme #3.....	61

## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

With the adoption of Common Core Standards in Tennessee, the state began promoting a focus on academic rigor. The term became a regular buzz word in professional learning sessions across the United States during the Obama administration. In conjunction with a focus on rigor, popular educational trends engendered a focus on standards-based assessments and grading. Many schools in Tennessee and across the country (Balingit & George, 2016; Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2015; Minero, 2018; Walker, 2016) adopted policies to address standards-based assessments. These policy measures included some form of re-take/re-test policy, non-zero policies, minimum grade policies, reformed grade scales, etc. (Caneva, 2013; Cox, 2011; Jasinski, 2016; Walker, 2016). While the details in these policies differed, the results were the same – a decline in student responsibility.

### **Background**

In 2010, the state of Tennessee began implementing numerous educational policies in response to federal legislation. These policies included the accountability measures in high stakes testing, the implementation of Common Core type standards with a focus on academic rigor, and a move toward an emphasis on learning and away from grades.

**Testing.** Beginning with the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the subject of high stakes testing hijacked the conversation regarding public education. This emphasis on high stakes testing continued with Race to the Top (RTTT) and remained in the public education legislation entitled Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Because of education legislation at the federal level, high stakes tests played a major role in the effort to reform public education (Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2015; Saultz, White, Mceachin, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2017). Legislators laid the groundwork for high stakes testing in Tennessee with the passage of

the Tennessee Education Improvement Act in 1992. After this state legislation, teachers and principals received “value added” scores for teacher performance (Kupermintz, 2003). The stakes were raised for teachers when these scores began to affect teacher pay, practices, and promotion. For example, in the Shelby County School System, teacher pay was tied directly to scores on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVASS). In this system, all teachers received a base salary depending on their number of years in the system. Teachers earned raises based on their evaluation scores. For teachers in tested subjects, thirty-five percent of the evaluation score was based on TVASS scores (Shelby County Schools, n.d.).

The United States was not alone in its implementation of high stakes testing. In *Kill the Messenger: The War on Standardized Testing* (2017), Richard P. Phelps reported that “most other countries are increasing their use of standardized testing and high stakes” (p. 12). These tests were par for the course in other countries for over two decades. In a 1991 survey of one dozen European countries, the “average student” spent forty hours in “high stakes nationally standardized examinations . . . and over sixty hours in all kinds of standardized testing” (p. 13) during grade school and secondary school.

While individual states were accountable for the results of high stakes testing, the No Child Left Behind legislation “allowed individual states to set Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets based on the states’ performance standards and assessments” (Lee & Wu, 2017, p. 2). As a result, many states succeeded in reaching AYP but failed to increase performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Lee & Wu, 2017a).

**Common Core.** In response to this lack of increased performance on the NAEP test, the U.S. Department of Education created a four-billion-dollar grant program called Race to the Top (RTTT). To satisfy the requirements of the program and receive the grant money, many states

adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), created more rigorous tests to assess students on the standards, and tied teacher employment and pay to student performance on those tests (Weiss, 2015).

The state of Tennessee began implementing Common Core standards during the 2011-2012 school year. The standards were fully implemented in the 2013-2014 school year. The shift to Common Core standards signified a shift to a focus on academic rigor (Lauen & Gaddis, 2016). In 2016, the state of Tennessee replaced the CCSS with the Tennessee Academic Standards. With roots in the CCSS standards, the new Tennessee standards continued to emphasize academic rigor through complex text and academic language, textual evidence, and content-rich nonfiction (“Key Shifts in English Language Arts | Common Core State Standards Initiative” n.d.).

**Emphasis on learning.** Along with the increase in the stakes of student testing and the implementation of Common Core type standards, another education reform movement became policy in many school systems. In order to emphasize standards and student learning, many individual schools and whole school systems reformed grading practices. Traditional grading practices were the focus of debate for years. When school systems began emphasizing standards and learning, the debate coalesced around the purpose of grades. Educators debated whether grades should be summative or formative? In either case, reformers argued that grades must “provide a fair, undistorted and unbiased reporting of student academic progress and achievement” without being falsely “inflated, skewed or simply based on uneven standards applied in an uneven manner” (Carifio & Carey, 2013, p. 21). In short, the reformers argued that grades should be based on the academic performance of the student and not the behavioral

preference of the instructor. Thus, school districts instituted grading policies to ensure that student grades reflected academic knowledge and academic achievement.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The emphasis on standards and learning over grades resulted in classroom practices that demotivated students. These policies trained students to neglect studies, to neglect classwork, and to neglect assignments. Students worked the system and failed to adopt academically responsible stances toward learning (Balingit & George, 2016). In many school districts, students were able to complete schoolwork on their time and in their way. When the work was incorrect, they were able to try again and again. The result of these practices was a lack of proper academic demeanor toward learning.

### **Purpose of the Study**

A student cannot maintain rigorous academic standards without rigorous academic behavior standards. By allowing students to abdicate their academic responsibilities when implementing rigorous academic standards and standards-based assessments, teachers, schools, and school systems undermined student motivation and handicapped those students for the future. The purpose of this study was to investigate the response of students to the inclusion of an academic responsibility component as part of the academic grade.

### **Significance of the Study**

Research on teacher grading practices presented a mixed message. For example, Keni Cox (2011), an assistant professor for the Department of Educational Leadership in the College of Education at California State University, conducted a case study which showed teachers placing emphasis on student effort in grading practices. In contrast, Chen and Bonner (2017) found that “teachers’ reasons for grading judgments were strategic, analytical, and thoughtful,

not haphazard” (p. 18). Researchers and teachers have weighed in with opinions on academic rigor, standards-based grading, grading practices in general, and academic responsibility. However, as is common in educational research, the opinions of students were not widely reported (Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012; Nichols, 2008). The significance of this study was to introduce student voices into the conversation regarding academic rigor, standards-based grading, and academic responsibility.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical foundation of this study was the Self-Determination Theory of motivation (SDT). According to the theory, students need to feel competent in their academic pursuits, to feel autonomous in their decision making, and to feel a meaningful relationship with the material. When students were properly supported in these three areas, the result was students who “develop into independent, self-directed and lifelong learners” (McCombs, 2010). Proponents of SDT focused on the social and cultural factors that supported or undercut a person’s need for competency, autonomy, and relatedness (“Theory Overview,” 2019). When applied to an educational setting, the “cultural factors” included academic rigor, grading policies, and academic responsibility. When cultural factors support “the individual’s experience of . . . competence,” then the individual will respond with “enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity” (“Theory Overview,” 2019). In short, theorists maintained that a student needed to feel autonomous and competent. When those needs were met, then a student was more likely to develop academic independence, a sense of academic direction, and a sense of academic responsibility.

## **Research Question**

How will students respond to the practice of using academic behavior as a component in determining their quarter grade?

## **Limitation and Delimitations**

Before beginning this case study, the researcher thought the component of academic responsibility was a needed and missing component in many classrooms. The researcher believed that students could not fully meet rigorous academic expectations without the inclusion of rigorous academic responsibility expectations. The expectation was that students would agree. Thus, the study could be limited by researcher bias.

Delimitations of the study were the sample size and participant selection process. The sample size in this case study was eight students. Due to the small sample size, the variability in responses was difficult to explain. In addition, the participants were selected based on an average benchmark score as opposed to personal attributes. Thus, variability in responses were difficult to explain.

## **Researcher Positionality Statement**

The 2019-2020 school year marked the sixteenth year as a classroom teacher and the seventeenth year in public education for the researcher. Most of the researcher's career was in a high school setting. He began as a special education teacher and moved to language arts after five years. The researcher taught every grade and ability level in high school with the exception of the severely disabled. In addition to the core subjects of Algebra I and language arts, his teaching assignments included remedial reading, remedial math, journalism, and creative writing. In 2016, the researcher accepted a language arts position in a middle school. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher taught seventh and eighth-grade language arts and theatre. His tenure in

education began before testing became high stakes for teachers and before the adoption of CCSS. His experience both before and after high stakes testing and CCSS convinced him that the shift in responsibility from the shoulders of the students to the shoulders of the teachers was detrimental to students.

This responsibility shift was more evident in middle school. When the researcher moved to the middle school setting, he also moved to an affluent school district. More affluent students came with a higher level of parental involvement. The district facilitated this involvement with a parent portal to the gradebook. In this school system, parents checked their students' grades at will. In a school of 1250 students, parents accessed the gradebook portal almost 1000 times per day on average. When grades were poor, those parents frequently contacted teachers for explanations. Often, those parents failed to confer with their children to learn why a grade might be poor, how the student addressed the poor grade, or what instruction the teacher offered initially. Parents contacted teachers to find out what steps the teacher would take to rectify the problem of poor grades. Students were held accountable only after the teacher was held accountable.

The trend toward holding teachers accountable began with high stakes testing and was exacerbated by the adoption of CCSS and the debate over traditional grading practices. The attitude has grown beyond the world of public education to the culture at large. In the researcher's view, the shift of responsibility from the learner to the teacher detrimentally affected students in school and in life.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Academic rigor.** Academic rigor is “active engagement and critical thinking” (Lynch, 2018).

**Academic responsibility.** Academic responsibility is “accept[ing] responsibility for [one’s] own experiences and decisions” (Frost, 1989).

**Responsible learner.** Responsible learners are “independent, self-directed and lifelong learners” (McCombs, 2010).

## **Organization**

This research project was a case study documenting the response of eight students to the inclusion of an academic behavior component in determining their quarter grade. First, the researcher developed interview questions based on the literature review and classroom experiences. Then, the researcher chose students from four ELA classes – one standard class and three honors classes – based on an average performance as compared to classmates on a district benchmark assessment. Next, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews via video conference. After interviewing participants one-on-one, the researcher analyzed the results of the individual interviews for themes. Then, the researcher conducted a focus group via teleconference. Participants discussed answers to questions provided by the researcher. The questions were based on consistent themes determined from the initial interviews.

## **Summary**

In this dissertation, the researcher explored student responses to the inclusion of an academic behavior component in determining their grades. Chapter one provided important background information, stated the problem, purpose, and significance of the study, shared researcher assumptions and the research question, listed definitions of key terms and the limitations and delimitations of the study, and provided a summary. In chapter two, the researcher presented a comprehensive review of the literature which included origins and issues with high stakes testing, Common Core State Standards and academic rigor, the educational shift

to a focus on learning versus a focus on grades, student motivation through the framework of self-determination theory, and the importance of academic demeanor in student success. Chapter three provided an explanation of the methodology which included an explanation of why the researcher chose a case study, the types of data gathered, and details regarding the choice of participants. In chapter four, the researcher presented the data and included an explanation of the coding process. Chapter five offered the researcher's opinion of the implications of the study and suggestions for further research in the area.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review**

Beginning with the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB), initiatives aimed at improving public education resulted in a culture of high stakes testing, the adoption of Common Core State Standards, and the reformation of traditional grading practices. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed NCLB into law. The legislation required states to implement high stakes testing to demonstrate student achievement and academic growth for all students. To address issues with NCLB, the federal government developed Race to the Top (RTTT), a grant program. The majority of states adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to qualify for millions in grant money. The adoption of CCSS led researchers and educators to explore standards-based grading. Many school systems began to reform traditional grading policies as a result of the conversation and the research on standards-based grading.

These major movements in public education directly affected public school students. Teachers and researchers suggested that the perfect storm of high stakes testing, rigorous academic standards, and reformed grading practices served to demotivate students to achieve. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of motivation offered insights into what students needed for success in academics and in life. The practice of Competency-Based Education offered an instructional framework to meet those needs.

### **High Stakes Testing**

While the origin of high stakes testing stretches back into the 1840s in the United States, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation signed into law by President George W. Bush in January of 2002 (Nichols & Berliner, 2007) served to increase the focus on high stakes testing in public education. Previous federal legislation regarding public schools required only schools that received Title I funding to provide evidence of student achievement. The NCLB legislation

expanded the requirement for the provision of evidence of student achievement from Title I schools to all students in all schools receiving money from the federal government (Huddleston & Rockwell, 2015). The legislation required states to adopt accountability measures for students, teachers, administrators, schools, and school districts. Part of the required accountability measures was an evaluation system based on the results of students' performances on standardized tests administered once per year. If students' standardized test scores were low or if schools failed to show improvement from one year to the next, the federal system of accountability included penalties for students, teachers, administrators, schools, and school districts. For students, the penalties for low test scores were potentially life changing. Penalties for students included failing a course or a grade level, failing high school altogether, and failing to receive college scholarship money. Likewise, the penalties for teachers and administrators were potentially life changing as well. The penalties associated with low student scores or lack of growth affected teachers and administrators financially as scores were connected to bonus money. In extreme cases, scores were connected to continued employment. For schools and school districts, federal penalties for poor student test scores or lack of student growth included converting whole schools into public or private charter schools, paying for private tutoring for low performing students, transporting students to higher performing districts at the failing district's expense, and the closing of schools in the district (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Due to the various penalties associated with low test scores or lack of student growth, standardized tests were considered "high stakes" tests.

Though mandated by the federal government, the standardized tests were created and implemented by individual states based on academic content and achievement standards determined by each state (Ametepee, Tchinsala, & Agbeh, 2014). The only NCLB requirement

for states regarding the development of standardized tests was the utilization of “challenging, coherent, and rigorous” curriculum (Ametepee et al., 2014, p. 113) and the alignment of state assessments to the curriculum. To gauge progress, the federal government required states to meet a standard of annual yearly progress (AYP). This standard was also determined by each individual state (Hamlin & Peterson, 2018; Heise, 2017; Peterson, Barrows, & Gift, 2016).

Despite the good intention of raising academic achievement, researchers documented problems with the NCLB legislation. As states set their AYP goals and then failed to reach them, states lowered standards and narrowed curriculum (Ametepee et al., 2014). Danielle V. Dennis (2017), an associate professor of literacy studies in the College of Education at the University of South Florida, Tampa, cited three “major flaws” (p. 398) of NCLB. First, schools in low-income areas were underfunded. Thus, high-quality teachers avoided working in those schools for fear of penalties associated with underperforming schools. In addition to the lack of highly qualified teachers in these schools, the inequity in funding resulted in a lack of books and other materials, limiting student engagement in reading and writing. Finally, the requirements of NCLB resulted in a contraction of the scope of the curriculum in all schools. A curriculum highly focused on test performance resulted in constricted instructional approaches that failed to address how students learn. In 2010, the Obama administration introduced a grant program to address the issues with NCLB.

Race to the Top (RTTT) was a \$4.35 billion grant program for public schools. In association with NCLB waivers, states received grants for agreeing to adopt reforms such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In fact, the adoption of the CCSS by forty-six states was widely attributed to RTTT grants (Hamlin & Peterson, 2018). The adoption of CCSS addressed some of the flaws of NCLB. The academic rigor of CCSS eliminated the possibility of states

reducing standards and narrowing curriculum (Ametepee et al., 2014). While waivers associated with RTTT allowed states to opt out of NCLB requirements, the emphasis on testing remained. In fact, for states that adopted CCSS, the assessments were even more rigorous and test scores more high stakes than ever (Dennis, 2017).

The federal government provided a modicum of relief from high stakes testing with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. According to the legislation, states were once again responsible for establishing standards and developing tests to assess student achievement. While states were still required to report student achievement, federal consequences for failing to meet achievement standards were limited to schools in the bottom five percent of a state and to schools with graduation rates of less than 67% (Heise, 2017). Instead of lowering standards to pre-NCLB levels, most states continued to emphasize academic rigor and high academic standards (Hamlin & Peterson, 2018). In addition, the legislation caused states to double down on using student achievement measures as a major means of assessing teacher performance. Despite a minor reduction of the high stakes in testing for students, the emphasis on testing continued and the stakes for teachers remained as high as ever (Dennis, 2017).

### **Common Core State Standards**

One of the most impactful and long-lasting results of high stakes testing and RTTT was the adoption of CCSS. As previously discussed, the shortcomings of the NCLB legislation resulted in Obama's Race to the Top initiative which was largely responsible for the adoption of the CCSS across forty-six states. Despite the passage of ESSA, many states maintained a focus on rigorous standards for academic achievement. Researchers debated the effects of the adoption and implementation of CCSS (or similar standards based on CCSS) on student achievement.

In an analysis of state proficiency standards after the passage of ESSA, Hamlin & Peterson (2018) found that states maintained high standards as a result of adopting CCSS. By comparing the results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to the results of state-created tests, the researchers discovered that average state proficiency standards remained stagnant from 2005 to 2009. In the latter year, student proficiency numbers on state exams were 37 points higher than the percentage of students scoring proficient in math and reading on the NAEP. However, by the year 2015, the difference in percentage points for proficiency between state tests and NAEP had dropped to ten percent. Other research reported similar findings with regard to the difference in proficiency percentages between state tests and the NAEP (Lee & Wu, 2017; Peterson et al., 2016). By 2015, the average difference in proficiency scores on state tests and the NAEP was only eleven percentage points (Peterson et al., 2016).

Despite the increase of proficiency standards by states, some opponents of CCSS continued to decry their implementation. Student achievement rates did not rise with the rise in the rigor of state standards. Lee and Wu (2017) and Polleck and Jeffery (2017) found that rigorous state proficiency standards based on CCSS failed to equate to higher scores on the NAEP. Indeed, the implementation of CCSS style standards across the nation “has helped America race to the top for performance standards, but not for performance outcomes” (Lee & Wu, 2017b). While rigorous state standards closed the percentage gap between NAEP scores and state test scores, rigorous standards have not translated to an increase in NAEP test scores.

### **Standards-Based Reform**

**History.** One of the major shifts resulting from the focus on more rigorous standards like the CCSS was a renewed conversation regarding assessment practices and student grades. These

conversations were rooted in the decades old Standards-Based Reform (SBR) movement. The movement had been around since the late 80s or early 90s in the United States (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008; Hooper & Cowell, 2014; Massell & Perrault, 2014; Sharma, 2015), though Greer claimed the conversation regarding common standards dated back to 1892 (Greer, 2018). In any case, the modern incarnation of the conversation began with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (Hamilton et al., 2008).

**Components of SBR.** Throughout the history of the movement, the core principles of “rigorous, focused, academic content and performance expectations” (Massell & Perrault, 2014, p. 197) were consistent. Hamilton et al. (2008) specified three core components of Standards-Based Reform. They enumerated the components of SBR as 1) academic expectations for students, 2) aligned components within a system, and 3) student assessment. The expectations for academic achievement differed from traditional grading practices. Traditional assessments measured student achievement against classmates’ performances on the same assessment tool. In contrast, assessments in SBR measured student achievement against a set of predetermined standards (Greer, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2008; Hooper & Cowell, 2014; Sharma, 2015).

The second core component of SBR and one of the main areas researchers identified as an issue for successful standards-based reforms was alignment. Massell and Perrault (2014) argued that technical alignment, incentives alignment, and instructional alignment were paramount for the success of any standards-based reform attempt. Technical alignment referred to aligning classroom practices, teacher instruction, educational materials, and classroom, district, and state assessments with the standards (Hamilton et al., 2008). Even when standards were clear and focused, unique teachers interpreted those standards differently in thousands of classrooms across the country. In addition, teachers made value judgments regarding the

standards based on how well the state assessment aligned with the state standards. Thus, one of the challenges of SBR was attaining technical alignment, the alignment of instruction of the standards with the assessment of the standards (Sharma, 2015). Incentives alignment referred to the accountability component embedded in SBR movements. When accountability included punitive measures, the entities involved with SBR engaged in counterproductive practices. For example, teachers targeted certain student populations in order to raise their scores or states reduced cut scores to manufacture academic achievement or increase proficiency scores (Massell & Perrault, 2014).

Instructional alignment referred to changing pedagogy to address the more rigorous academic requirements at the core of SBR. Successfully aligning instruction and standards presented a major obstacle for the implementation of SBR. Massell and Perrault (2014) found that rigorous standards and high academic expectations were not enough. A successful implementation of SBR required two major shifts on the part of school districts. First, teachers needed to change educational practices to address the skills required by CCSS. While whole school districts successfully produced pacing guides and scope and sequence documents that aligned to the standards, many teachers were unable to address the depth of the requirements of CCSS in the classroom. In one survey, only 20% of teachers answered “very prepared” when asked if they were ready to teach the new CCSS (EPE Research Center, 2013, p. 11). In another study, researchers evaluated the teaching practices of 3,000 teachers using a variety of evaluation frameworks. They found that teachers rarely engaged in practices leading students to “analysis and problem-solving, . . . in meaning making and reasoning, or investigation/problem-based approach” (Massell & Perrault, 2014, p. 200).

The second major shift required to implement SBR successfully was a major financial investment in teachers' professional development. When states adopted CCSS, teachers received training on implementing the new standards. However, after three years of CCSS, 59% of teachers received three days or fewer of professional development regarding CCSS. This amount of training communicated the big picture but was insufficient for successful implementation (EPE Research Center, 2013). Teachers needed time to "prepare and organize instruction" beyond the typical one hour per week PLC meetings. Teachers needed a regular time to meet during the school year "to learn in a recursive and extended, collaborative way" (Massell & Perrault, 2014, p. 200). To provide the time required to implement SBR, school systems needed to alter spending practices on professional development. Properly funding these shifts required years of professional development. However, school systems implemented the reforms in months.

The third core component of SBR was student assessments. Proponents of SBR believed instruction should be shaped by assessments since mastery of the standards was the measurement of learning. Providing an accurate picture of student achievement in a standards-based system required a multitude of formative assessments that shaped instruction and led to a final quantitative, summative assessment (Hamilton et al., 2008). Because of the necessity of a summative assessment in standards-based education, the renewed emphasis on SBR has contributed to the argument of those in favor of high stakes testing.

**Standards-based grading (SBG).** The SBR movement focused on more than just assessments. Proponents included standards-based grading in the reform, citing advantages over traditional norm-referenced grading practices. In traditional grading practices, teachers used grades to communicate what material a student learned and how hard he worked to learn the

material. Grades were used to group students according to perceived ability or performance levels. Teachers also used grades as a “stick” or a “carrot” to motivate students (Hooper & Cowell, 2014). Proponents of SBR claimed that deriving a clear meaning from traditional grading practices was impossible. Since traditional grading practices were commonly based on norm-referenced scores, a score of 75% on an assessment could only be understood based on more information such as the average score on the assessment, the highest score on the assessment, and the lowest score on the assessment. Therefore, the meaning of a score of 75% changed depending on the other scores (Sharma, 2015). Hooper and Cowell (2014, p. 60) offered an example listing “two students’ scores on ten consecutive assessments” (see Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1**

*Two Students’ Scores on Ten Consecutive Assessments*

Assessment	Student #1	Student #2
1	0	64
2	0	64
3	80	64
4	80	64
5	80	64
6	80	64
7	80	64
8	80	64
9	80	64
10	80	64
Average:	64	64

In the example, each grade represented an assessment of one standard. Therefore, Student 2 mastered no standard at any level. Student 1 made average progress in mastering the standards assessed by assignments three through ten and has absolutely no mastery of the standards assessed by assignments one and two. Employing the traditional grading practice of averaging all scores to arrive at a summative grade, Student 1 would earn the same final grade as a Student 2 despite showing average progress toward mastery in eight out of ten standards.

In addition, studies of traditional grading practices have shown that grades often did not represent standards at all. Instead, grades indicated positive or negative behavior rather than a student's level of mastery (Hooper & Cowell, 2014). Another issue with traditional grading practices highlighted in Table 2.1 and indicated in the research was the damage from averaging a zero when using a 100-point scale. Carifio and Carey (2013) observed that passing grades in a traditional grade scale begin at 65 or 70. Thus, failing grades encompassed at least 64% of the scale. Meanwhile, grades considered excellent began anywhere between 90 and 95. The mathematical probability of earning a failing grade in traditional grading practices was far greater than earning an excellent grade. Sharma (2015) observed that traditional grading practices typically failed to communicate the answers to important questions such as the ones listed below:

- How many of the learning objectives (for a specific grade) have been achieved by the student?
- What concepts or procedures (say, mathematical or scientific) does the student know?
- What are the concepts or principles or operations in which the student is proficient?

- What are the concepts or procedures in which the student requires more support?
- Does the student tend to repeat a particular type of error?

What further steps should be taken that would lead the student to the next level on the developmental continua? (p. 12)

In addition to arguments against traditional grading practices, research into standards-based grading (SBG) practices suggested multiple, specific benefits for teachers and students. For teachers, these benefits ranged from improved planning to improved outcomes. For students, the benefits ranged from positive grades to changed mindsets.

***Benefits for teachers.*** From studies of high school teachers' perceptions regarding SBG to studies of college professors' implementation of a SBG system, four positives were reported by educators. First, SBG systems enhanced course design, allowing for better, more focused, "more purposeful planning, instruction, and assessment" (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 74). Teachers across multiple studies believed that these elements were positively affected by implementing SBG practices (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016; Toledo & Dubas, 2017). In addition, practitioners of SBG provided more effective feedback. Because the instruction and assessments were focused on the mastery of the standards, instructors reported that they were better able to differentiate feedback and target specific students and their specific shortcomings on the path to mastery (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Toledo & Dubas, 2017).

Another benefit of SBG cited by educators was clarity of communication. After implementing what amounted to a new system of assessing student work, teachers were able to communicate their expectations for students in clear, defined terms. The focus on standards in SBG provided instructors with specific, measurable goals to communicate to students (Buckmiller, Peters, & Kruse, 2017; Knight & Cooper, 2019).

A third benefit to teachers reported in the research was the correlation of student grades to standardized test scores. As a component of their study, Hochbein and Pollio (2016) noted a “positive but weak correlation between traditional grades and standardized test results” (p. 52). In other words, students in classes employing traditional grading practices who performed well and earned positive grades generally scored higher on standardized tests. However, an even stronger correlation “between grades and standardized test scores, including among minority and economically disadvantaged students” (p. 53) existed in classes employing a SBG system. Students in SBG classes earned higher grades in their courses and performed better on the standardized state test. The percentage of students in a SBG class that passed a standardized state test in Algebra more than doubled compared to the results from a class practicing the traditional grading model the previous year (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016).

*Negatives for teachers.* In addition to the positives reported by teachers in Knight and Cooper's 2019 study, educators also expressed negatives. First, teachers were forced to compromise between two different systems. Teachers typically implemented SBG in a percentage-based school system. One educator described the process as an attempt “to fit a square peg in a round hole” (p. 78). To implement SBG in the system, teachers were forced to convert the standards-based grade into a percentage grade. Most teachers believed the converted grades resulted in inaccurately higher grades than students would have earned in a traditional grading system. Ironically, parents complained about the system because they believed their students' grades were lower due to the implementation of SBG.

Other compromises occurred as teachers attempted to mesh SBG with traditional practices. In recording assessments as grades, instructors struggled with how to handle students with special needs and English language learners. For these students, teachers reported using

different standards of mastery, being more generous with grades, and accepting lower performance for the same grades (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016; Knight & Cooper, 2019).

Besides the compromises in implementing SBG in a percentage system, teachers also reported issues with behavior management. In the traditional grading system, teachers employed consequences for poor academic behaviors. For example, students lost points for late work, received zeros for missing or incomplete work, and failed for ethics violations such as plagiarism. In a SBG environment, teachers were forced to break old habits and discover “new ways to promote and enforce desirable behaviors” (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 81). Thus, in addition to the learning curve associated with implementing a new grading system, teachers also experienced a learning curve regarding behavior management.

***Benefits for students.*** While the positives of SBG for teachers arguable outweighs the negatives, researchers cited seven distinct benefits for students in SBG classes. First, SBG classrooms showed an increase in student scores on summative assessments. In their study of 64 undergraduate students in a SBG chemistry course, Toledo and Dubas (2017) reported increased performance on the final exam as compared to unit exams throughout the course. They theorized that the implementation of SBG resulted in an overall improvement in performance on the summative exam. In a study of 11 high schools that implemented SBG in algebra classes, Hochbein and Pollio (2016) compared the performance on standardized state tests of different students in the same subject and those same students in different subjects in 2011 and 2012. They recorded a marked increase in performance on the state standardized algebra test from one year to the next. In addition to increased performance on standardized tests, researchers also recorded increased grades for students in SBG classrooms (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016; Toledo & Dubas, 2017).

Another benefit to students was clearer communication in SBG classes. Students admitted to gaining a fuller understanding of teachers' expectations and the requirements for gaining knowledge. They recognized how meeting those expectations and gaining knowledge translated into positive educational outcomes in grades and in performance (Buckmiller et al., 2017; Knight & Cooper, 2019). In addition to clearer teacher-to-student communication, student-to-student communication about the course improved as well. In SBG classes, students "were better able to articulate what they were learning, provide feedback to peers, and ask more learning-centered questions (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 77).

The third benefit to students that originated from SBG classrooms was a more positive learning environment. Because students were asked to master standards and afforded multiple opportunities and various paths to reach mastery, they were less fearful of mistakes. Students realized that mistakes resulted in a growth of knowledge. With a system of reassessment in place, students were more comfortable in their efforts; they did not need to worry about the class passing them by (Buckmiller et al., 2017; Knight & Cooper, 2019).

In addition to a positive learning environment, research suggested that an SBG class was better suited to meet students' academic, emotional, and psychological needs. Since students are focused on mastering standards in a SBG system, teachers were able to analyze assessments to determine the specific academic needs of each student. Once specific needs were identified, "teachers developed interventions that focused specifically on the student's identified needs" (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016, p. 52). In other words, the focus on standards made differentiation easier for the teacher and more effective for students.

Teachers also reported that the SBG classroom was uniquely structured to meet students' innate need for "intellectual safety, belonging, and choice" (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 80).

Students' need for intellectual safety was met because of the emphasis on learning and progress rather than performance. Students' need for belonging was met because judgment and comparison are removed from an SBG classroom. Students progressed toward mastery of different standards at different speeds. If Student #1 mastered a particular standard before another student, Student #2 could master a different standard first. Students' need for choice was met because "showing evidence that you know [the standard was] all that matter[ed]" (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 81).

A fifth benefit for students in the SBG model was the development of a growth mindset. Teachers reported a change in conversations with students. They stopped asking about extra credit, about whether an assignment counted, and about how much an assignment counted. Instead, students began to engage teachers in conversation about specific elements they did not understand. Students became less bothered by mistakes and more interested in understanding teachers' feedback (Knight & Cooper, 2019).

Finally, researchers found that participation in a SBG classroom led to more student ownership of a course and the coursework. Students reported that the focus on standards caused increased awareness of what they should know, why they should know it, and how to achieve the goal of learning. They reported thinking about the standards and the content and evaluating their knowledge as a part of the course. In the SBG classroom, students realized that reading and understanding a teacher's feedback was the key to success. They recognized ownership of the material as opposed to other classes that required them to regurgitate facts (Buckmiller et al., 2017).

**Influence on current practice.** Despite the negatives of traditional grading practices and the positives associated with standards-based grading, many researchers and teachers argued

against standards-based reform. As a result of the emphasis on standards, schools and school systems across the country adopted practices to ensure that student grades reflected student progress on mastery of standards. The two most prolific practices adopted by educators were re-take or re-test policies and no-zero or minimum grade policies (Caneva, 2013; Cox, 2011; Jasinski, 2016; Walker, 2016).

***Re-take or re-test policies.*** While re-take or re-test policies differed across school systems, the basic premise was to allow students multiple opportunities to earn passing grades on assignments and assessments (Caneva, 2013; Cox, 2011; Jasinski, 2016; Walker, 2016). Proponents of re-take/re-test policies cited multiple benefits for students. First, advocates of the practice argued that re-take/re-test opportunities offered students hope. If a student failed to master a concept or score well on an assessment, the student knew that another opportunity was available. Another argument in favor of the practice was that re-test/re-take provided motivation. Again, the promise of another attempt after failing the first attempt inspired students to believe they could accomplish the task. A third benefit of implementing a re-test/re-take policy was that the practice ensured fairness. Advocates argued that students do not master concepts at the same pace. Some students needed more time than others to master any given concept. Thus, a re-test/re-take opportunity provided those students who required more time with an opportunity to show mastery. The fourth argument from proponents of re-test/re-take policies was that the practice aided in retention of material. In most instances, the policies required additional practice work from the student before a re-take was allowed. According to supporters of the policies, this additional practice resulted in students remembering and applying the material beyond the assessment date. Finally, advocates of re-take/re-test claimed that multiple opportunities on assessments produced a final grade that reflected actual progress

toward mastery of standards (Cox, 2011; Cutler, 2019; Scagell, 2017). Opponents of re-take/re-test policies argued that the practice resulted in decreased student motivation, did not reflect the real world, created a lackadaisical approach to course assignments, and provided opportunities for helicopter parents to demand re-takes whenever they disagreed with a grade (Cox, 2011; Palma, 2019; Scagell, 2017).

*No-zero or minimum grade policies.* Just like the re-test/re-take policies, no-zero or minimum grades varied widely across school systems. According to Minero (2018), schools that instituted a no-zero or minimum grade policy essentially removed the bottom half of a 100-point grade scale. In a typical no-zero policy, students who failed an assignment or test were given a minimum of 50 points for the work. Even students who submitted no work at all were given the 50 points since the policy stipulated no zeros. Carifio and Carey (2013) found other schools that practiced a macro policy of no zeros. In this implementation, the scores of students with overall grades of less than 50% were raised to a minimum of 50 points.

Proponents of no-zero policies argued in favor of the practice for four reasons. First, no-zero or minimum grade policies promoted learning. Instead of a student languishing at a failing grade level after a major assessment, advocates argued that the minimum grade assumed some learning rather than no learning. Thus, a student could move forward with a chance to learn the material and pass the course despite a low grade. The second argument in favor of no-zero or minimum grade practices was that the practice motivated students. Since one grade could not torpedo their overall performance in a course, students focused on earning a passing grade rather than giving up. Proponents of no-zero or minimum grade policies also argued that the practice mitigated the impact of negative factors from outside the school. Educators recognized that life events outside of school sometimes affected student performance negatively. With a no-zero or

minimum grade policy, students who experienced difficult life events through no fault of their own still had a chance to pass a course or grade level. Finally, advocates of no-zero or minimum grade policies argued that the practice reduced anxiety in students. Students who failed one major assignment or even an entire grading term could proceed without worry, safe in the knowledge that they still had a chance to earn a passing grade (Balingit & George, 2016; Carifio & Carey, 2013; Minero, 2018).

Opponents of no-zero or minimum grading policies argued that the practice removed the motivation to work hard. If a student knew he would earn a minimum score, then that student slacked off on the assignment. Opponents of the policy argued that no-zero or minimum grade policies provided multiple opportunities for students to slack off. In addition, these educators argued that the practice promoted students who had not mastered the content. In applying a no-zero or minimum grade policy, students could literally fail half the assessments in a given grading period and potentially pass the course. Finally, educators against no-zero or minimum grade policies argued that such practices failed to reflect real-world expectations. They maintained that in the real world, a person could not fail at a job half the time and remain employed (Balingit & George, 2016; Minero, 2018).

In summary, the arguments in favor of reformed grading policies were typically based on the ideals of equity, fairness, and student motivation. The arguments against these policies were typically based on the ideals of responsibility and student motivation. The common denominator in both arguments was the effect of the practice on student motivation.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan began developing the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) forty-five years ago. The two men studied “intrinsic motivation, defined as doing

something for its own sake, out of interest and enjoyment” (Gagné, 2014, p. 1) because they were unsatisfied with the behaviorists’ theory on intrinsic motivation. Over the course of forty-five years, SDT became one of the major theories of human motivation (Gagné, 2014).

Deci and Ryan, the developers of SDT, identified three human psychological needs. Those needs were autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Proponents of SDT believed that social context affected the fulfillment of these human psychological needs (Kusurkar, Croiset, & Ten Cate, 2011; McCombs, 2010; Wang, Liu, Kee, & Chian, 2019). When applied to education, the social context in question was the classroom. O’Brien (2018) found that when the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness was met in the classroom, students were positively motivated to perform. When those needs were hindered by the classroom environment, then students experienced a lack of motivation.

Researchers contributed to the application and study of SDT in the context of the classroom. They defined the three human psychological needs in the social context of the classroom. They proposed the human need for autonomy denoted a student’s ownership of learning and included a sense of enthusiasm and consent regarding the learning. For example, a student who voluntarily spent time and effort on coursework was considered autonomous. The psychological need for competence signified a student’s sense of academic efficacy in the social context of the classroom. For example, a student who met academic challenges as expected felt competent regarding coursework (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; O’Brien, 2018; Wang et al., 2019). The human need for relatedness referred to the need to feel connected, to feel like one belonged in a particular social context. In the social context of the classroom, the student/teacher relationship served as the basis for relatedness. Students needed to be trusted by the teacher and to feel trust for the teacher. Students needed to be valued by the teacher and to feel value for the

teacher. Students needed to be respected by the teacher and to feel respect for the teacher (Wang et al., 2019; O'Brien, 2018). If these three psychological needs were properly supported in learning situations, then students were “more likely to develop into independent, self-directed and lifelong learners” (McCombs, 2010). In short, the fulfillment of the three human psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness resulted in students who were motivated to learn.

In applying SDT to motivation in the social context of the classroom, experts recognized two major types of motivation – intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation caused a person to engage in activities due to personal interest. This engagement was self-determined rather than thrust upon the individual from an outside source (Kusurkar et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2019). Intrinsic motivation was “associated with deep learning [and] better performance . . . in comparison to extrinsic motivation” (Kusurkar et al., 2011, p. 978). Extrinsic motivation originated from an outside source, causing a person to engage in some activity for benefit (such as praise or pay) or due to pressure from others (Kusurkar et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2019).

Niemiec and Ryan (2009) and Wang et al. (2019) recognized four subtypes of extrinsic motivation: External regulation, introjection, identification, and integration. They proposed that these subtypes fell “along a continuum of internalization” (“Theory Overview,” 2019). In other words, some subtypes of extrinsic motivation were perceived by subjects as intrinsic motivation more so than other subtypes of extrinsic motivation. If a person felt like the motivation originated from within, the person internalized the motivation which resulted in the person feeling more autonomous in his actions (“Theory Overview,” 2019).

The first subtype of extrinsic motivation identified by researchers was external regulation. Typically short-lived, this type of extrinsic motivation lasted only long enough for a

person to avoid punishment or gain a short-term reward. For example, a student was said to experience external regulation during class while all students competed for a prize. However, when a student's opportunity for reward expired, his motivation to engage expired as well. Because the motivation lasted only as long as the potential for consequences, external regulation was the least likely type of extrinsic motivation for a person to internalize (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

The second type of extrinsic motivation was introjected regulation. When a person experienced introjected regulation, the person engaged in a particular behavior in order to satisfy an internal need. For example, a person behaved in a specific manner to avoid guilt or shame or to gain a sense of pride or accomplishment (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Wang et al., 2019). In the classroom, a student felt an internal need to avoid embarrassment at his lack of preparation. The student engaged with coursework for a brief period, playing along with the normal requirements of the classroom until the potential for embarrassment had subsided. Niemic and Ryan (2009) explained that people perceived external regulation and introjected regulation as forces controlling them from the outside. Because these types of extrinsic motivations were perceived as control from without, neither one was internalized. Since the individuals perceived external regulation and introjected regulation as motivation from outside of themselves, the psychological need for autonomy was not met.

The third type of extrinsic motivation was *identified regulation*. This type of motivation occurred when a person desired something rather than feeling obligated to do something (Wang et al., 2019). In identified regulation, the behavior occurred because a person identified a goal that was valuable or important to him. Thus, he acted in order to attain the goal. In a classroom, the students who identified a specific score on an exam or a specific grade for a quarter

experienced this type of extrinsic motivation. Though similar, this type of extrinsic motivation was considered different from intrinsic motivation since a person acted because of some outside goal instead of an innate attribute. Even so, the origin of identified regulation was perceived by the student as internal which resulted in a feeling of autonomy (Wang et al., 2019).

The final type of extrinsic motivation was integrated regulation. When a person engaged in behavior to attain some short-term goal which was necessary for attainment of a long-term goal, the person was extrinsically motivated. In the instance of integrated regulation, neither the short nor long term goals violated the person's value system or previous interests (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). A person experiencing this type of extrinsic motivation internalized the experience, meeting the person's need for autonomy (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Wang et al., 2019).

Tapping into a student's intrinsic motivation or providing easily internalized extrinsic motivation held important implications for the classroom. Wang et al. (2019) asserted that meeting the three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness increased intrinsic motivation, resulting in student engagement "without the presence of external reward or constraint" (p. 2). In short, teachers controlled intrinsic motivation through their classroom practices, academic practices, and relationships with students. Niemic and Ryan (2009) studied teachers that supported and cultivated student autonomy. Their students experienced an increase in intrinsic motivation and fulfillment of their need for competency when compared to students whose teachers were more controlling. In a specific example, students in an art class with a controlling teacher who neither supported nor cultivated student autonomy produced paintings that were less creative than the paintings of their counterparts in a more autonomous environment. Studies of student motivation conducted in Germany, Great Britain, Canada, and

South Korea in classes of varying subjects and with multiple grade levels have produced similar findings (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

McCombs (2010) stated that student motivation naturally declined as children progressed through school, specifically in times of transition such as elementary to middle school. At the same time motivation was declining, the ability of students to adjust depended primarily on their intrinsic motivation. Niemic and Ryan (2009) emphasized the importance of understanding SDT and taking advantage of “students’ natural tendencies to learn” (p. 134). Seeking to meet students’ needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness was “perhaps the greatest resource educators can tap” (p. 134). Research into Competency-Based Education revealed a means of tapping the resource of student motivation and addressing issues with standards-based grading reforms.

### **Competency-Based Education**

Though Ryan and Cox (2017) traced Competency-Based Education (CBE) back to the 1960s, Le, Wolfe, and Steinberg (2014) asserted that the origins of the practice dated back to the early 1900s, gaining popularity in the late sixties. The movement was related to the standards movement and encouraged by the federal government during the RTTT era (Le et al., 2014). In fact, proponents of CCSS often suggested that CBE was the most effective means to “encourage consistency in developing, teaching to, and assessing competencies” (Le et al., 2014, p. 20) represented by the CCSS. Competency-Based Education and high quality, rigorous academic standards were inextricably woven together.

Despite the favorable pairing of CCSS and CBE, experts and practitioners struggled to define CBE because of the variety of models used in implementing the practice. Different schools emphasized different components depending on the students being served and the

educational goals for those students (Haynes et al., 2016; Ryan & Cox, 2017). In some instances, the emphases were on two ends of a broad spectrum. In a report on CBE, Le et al. (2014) discovered that one school implemented a version of CBE in which group learning was heavily emphasized while another school implemented a version focusing on individual differentiation. Steele, Lewis, Santibanez, Faxon-Mills, and Rudnick (2014) conducted a study of competency-based education practices in two school districts and one intermediary organization working with a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. Their research indicated that each entity emphasized different aspects of competency-based education. One district focused on flexible pacing and evaluations. Another district focused on student choice. The intermediary organization focused on student choice and evaluations. In a study of schools identified as practicing CBE, Haynes et al. (2016) found a lack of implementation of practices typically associated with CBE. Some of the schools in the study simply raised academic rigor and academic responsibility expectations with the goal of mastery of standards without implementing any other CBE practices (Haynes et al., 2016). Thus, CBE remained difficult to define because of the lack of consistency in implementation.

No matter how practitioners implemented CBE or what elements were emphasized, experts agreed on certain specific elements. First, experts concurred that all CBE models should emphasize mastery of specific standards typically referred to as learning targets, learning objectives, or competencies. The next element of any CBE model agreed upon by experts was frequent, meaningful, positive assessment aligned to the standards. The third component was pacing so that students worked toward mastery of the standards at their own pace rather than working on a specified schedule that assumed mastery at predetermined times. The next component that experts insisted upon was individualized instruction and assessment. This

component was directly linked to the pacing component since students mastered standards at different times (Haynes et al., 2016; Le et al., 2014; Sturgis, 2016). Finally, CBE models universally emphasized student responsibility in academic pursuits (Haynes et al., 2016; Le et al., 2014; Ryan & Cox, 2017; Sturgis, 2016).

When these core elements of CBE were present, research indicated positive academic results (Haynes et al., 2016; Le et al., 2014). In the study of ELA and math students conducted by Haynes et al. (2016), students showed positive changes in their capacity to learn the material when certain CBE components were explicitly implemented. For example, when teachers expressly and effectively communicated clear learning targets, students experienced a positive change in learning capacity when compared to students who did not receive clear learning targets. In addition, when teachers offered instruction using different formats, students experienced an increased capacity for learning the material. In the math classes, students who were given extended time to complete assignments, the opportunity to re-take an assessment, or the chance to re-do an assignment in order to achieve mastery experienced a change in attitude. They were more confident in their ability to perform academically. These positive associations between student performance and CBE provided credibility to the standards-based grading argument.

Perhaps even more importantly, multiple researchers found that CBE practices were positively associated with intrinsic motivation. Le et al. (2014) concluded that CBE classrooms that emphasized personalization, clear learning targets, a range of learning opportunities, and personal choice produced motivated and engaged students. In SDT terms, emphasizing these practices enabled teachers to meet students' needs for autonomy and relatedness. Once these needs were met, intrinsic motivation for learning coursework resulted in a satisfaction of the

need for competency. In the Haynes et al. (2016) study, the emphasis on mastery of clear learning targets in order to advance in the course and the implementation of nontraditional assessments was “associated with favorable changes in intrinsic motivation” (p. 5). Likewise, the implementation of personalized pacing (extra time, extra assessment opportunities) was also associated with positive changes in intrinsic motivation. In contrast, Sturgis (2016) noted that traditional grading systems relied on extrinsic motivation for results in the classroom. In a classroom where the teacher employed a traditional grading model, grades were based on tests and assignments. At times, points were awarded for good behavior. Students who failed to perform well on tests or assignments, missed school, or possessed a lax work ethic were demotivated and unengaged. Sturgis (2016) concluded that the CBE classroom produced intrinsic motivation in students through differentiated instruction, communication of specific learning targets, and formative assessments.

Multiple experts agreed that the benefit of increasing intrinsic motivation through CBE practices addressed another hallmark of CBE – student responsibility (Haynes et al., 2016; Le et al., 2014; Ryan & Cox, 2017; Sturgis, 2016). Unfortunately, Ryan and Cox (2017) found that research into the concept of student responsibility employed a variety of terms referring to student responsibility. In addition, the references were often vague and inconsistent. Sturgis (2016) reported on one school that defined the concept of responsibility more explicitly. To promote critical thinking, New Haven Academy in Connecticut emphasized six “Habits of the Mind.” These habits were asking questions, finding evidence, making connections, recognizing perspectives, considering alternatives, and explaining relevance. The school recognized that engaging successfully in these thinking skills required student responsibility. Thus, in conjunction with the six “Habits of the Mind,” New Haven Academy promoted three areas of

responsibility that captured the habits of work that students needed for academic success. These areas consisted of “completing homework, participating in class activities, and meeting assessment deadlines” (Sturgis, 2016, p. 54). Though student responsibility was a major tenet of CBE, practitioners rejected the inclusion of a behavior component in assessing mastery of standards much like proponents of SBR. Even in the New Haven Academy example where the school emphasized student responsibility as a means of achieving academically, school leaders rejected behavior components as part of grades and eliminated Ds and Fs when they reformed the school’s grading practices (Sturgis, 2016). However, other research indicated that some measure of accountability for student behavior was necessary.

### **Academic Behavior**

In discussing students’ roles in learning, Moswela (2014) contended that a student’s poor academic performance was often attributable to a student’s poor behavior choices. He cited those poor behavior choices as failure to work independently and frittering time away time on non-academic activities (Moswela, 2014). He concluded that students must avoid these damaging behaviors to succeed academically. In short, students were responsible for their own academic success and should accept a “share of the blame” for “poor academic achievement” (Moswela, 2014, p. 51).

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Moswela’s sentiment, experts agreed that certain behaviors were critical for academic success (Farrington et al., 2012). Researchers typically referred to these behaviors as noncognitive factors (Cannata, Haynes, & Smith, 2017; Farrington et al., 2012). These factors were the key to academic success and included “grit, growth mindset, perseverance, [and] sustained persistence” (Cannata et al., 2017, p. 30). Fortunately, a host of research indicated that these noncognitive factors could be developed (Cannata et al.,

2017; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Gutman & Schoon, 2013). More specifically, Farrington et al. (2012) found that academic behavior, academic perseverance, and academic mindsets were malleable. Not all the factors cited by Farrington were behaviors, but students expressed the factors through behavior. For example, psychologists classified perseverance as a part of a person's inherent nature. In other words, perseverance was defined as a fixed trait. Some psychologists suggested that perseverance was a component of the fixed personality trait of conscientiousness. However, research strongly suggested that a person could be taught to persevere even if the trait was not inherent in his nature. Thus, a person could be taught to act conscientiously. If noncognitive factors that contributed to a student's academic success could be developed, then developing specific behaviors held enormous implications regarding student performance. For example, Hakimi, Hejazi, and Lavasani (2011) found that "personality traits accounted for 48 percent of variance in academic achievement" (p. 842). Of that 48 percent, the trait of conscientiousness accounted for 39 percent. Therefore, teaching students to act conscientiously could result in considerable gains in academic achievement.

Indeed, the implications of teaching academic behaviors held even more import given the findings regarding academic rigor and the focus on standards. Farrington et al. (2012) claimed a dearth of evidence that increasing the academic rigor of standards and coursework caused student success. In fact, these researchers cited evidence pointing to class grades, overall GPA, and class rankings as better predictors of high school and college performance versus scores on standardized tests or rigorous coursework. The explanation for these findings was the idea that grades included some measurement of academic behaviors. The concerns of CBE and SBR proponents notwithstanding, research into teachers' grading practices repeatedly revealed that student grades often reflect positive behaviors such as studying, attending school, working hard,

managing time wisely, practicing self-control, and persisting with a task. Most teachers understood that academic behavior mattered, that academic behavior produced academic success. In fact, Farrington et al. (2012) reported that students who learned and practiced positive academic behaviors in the early grades and continued those behaviors in the middle and high school levels were successful at the college level.

In a study of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade ELA, science, and math students in the Fort Worth Independent School District, Cannata et al. (2017) offered an excellent example of teaching academic behavior. Lakeside High School adopted a focus on student responsibility and a motto for students of “Effort Required.” Specific practices included requiring students to keep an assignment log with due dates, a Lakeside Code for student conduct, mandatory attendance for tutoring, explaining academic material upon a teacher’s request, and meeting with the intervention committee. Administration empowered all classroom teachers by allowing them to fail students. Principals and teachers at Lakeside agreed that student failure was typically due to lack of effort. One teacher reported a boost in grades from Fs to As when students realized that the threat of failure was serious.

The interventions enacted by Lakeside teachers for struggling students were wildly successful. For example, the Lakeside Code emphasized academic behavior instead of relating a list of forbidden behaviors or a typical code of conduct. The Lakeside Code called for students to be in school on time, be prepared, take advantage of tutoring, be responsible for assignments due to absences, explain coursework, and monitor their own progress. Teachers held students accountable for following the code and students reported feeling the consequences for violating the Lakeside Code (Cannata et al., 2017).

Many of the consequences of the Code involved student support. For example, students with failing grades were required to attend mandatory tutoring called Learning Time. At Lakeside, any grade below a B was considered a failing grade. Thus, students who were previously satisfied with Cs or Ds were required to attend tutoring sessions. Consequently, student grades increased (Cannata et al., 2017).

Another component of Lakeside's Code was the Intervention Committee. The Code required students who failed to achieve the standards of academic behavior to meet with the Intervention Committee. The job of the committee was to individualize a plan for the struggling student's success. The Committee reviewed the Code of academic behavior and formulated a specific, actionable plan for each student. Teachers of students referred to the Committee reported an increase in homework completion, higher test scores, and noticeable progress toward mastery of the course content. Lakeside High School focused on academic behaviors, placing a value on student responsibility. While Cannata et al. (2017) admitted the results of their study could not be used to prove causation, Lakeside High School was one of the higher value added schools in the Fort Worth Independent School District after instituting a focus on academic behavior.

## **Summary**

The passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation issued in the era of the high stakes testing culture. One of the issues with the legislation was establishing consistent, rigorous academic standards and assessing them accurately. When states failed to show improvement due to these issues, the Obama administration introduced the Race to the Top grant program. This program caused many states to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Adoption of these standards led to student proficiency scores that were more closely aligned to the results of

the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). However, achievement rates on the NAEP did not increase.

The focus on more rigorous academic standards like CCSS had consequences. First, the adoption of rigorous standards led to a resurgence of interest in Standards-Based Reforms (SBR). The basic tenet of this reform movement was that students' progress was measured against clearly established academic standards of performance rather than the traditional norm-referenced assessments. The discussion of reforming assessments led to a move toward standards-based grading in the classroom. Proponents of standards-based grading argued that the grades reflected actual content knowledge. They insisted that standards-based grading provided equity for students, ensured fairness in grading, and motivated students to succeed. Opponents of standards-based grading argued that the practice transferred responsibility for student behavior to the teacher. They insisted that the practice squelched student motivation to succeed. Since both arguments cited student motivation, the question of what motivates students was considered.

Self-determination Theory (SDT) provided potential answers to the question of student motivation. Advocates of the theory posited that all human beings possess psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Meeting these needs depended largely on social context. When these needs were met, a person was positively motivated to succeed. In the classroom context, teachers helped meet these needs in students and created positively motivated students. An educational practice that met the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness was Competency-Based Education (CBE).

Competency-Based Education was similar to Standards-Based Reform. In both models, teachers and school systems assessed student learning against clearly communicated

competencies. Practitioners of CBE witnessed positive academic results because the proper application of CBE met students' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Proponents of CBE focused on student responsibility but rejected including behavior in any grading policy or practice. However, academic behavior and grades were closely connected. Noncognitive skills such as perseverance were associated with positive academic performance. These noncognitive skills were often innate, but they could be developed so that students' psychological needs were met.

## **CHAPTER THREE: Methodology**

This qualitative study was inspired by the confluence of major events in public education occurring from 2005 to the present day. Due to the emphasis on high stakes testing for all students and the adoption of rigorous academic standards of performance, stakeholders in public education focused on standards-based assessments and grading practices in an attempt to raise student achievement. Common popular practices included re-test/re-take and no-zero or minimum grade policies. Public schools instituted these practices despite research on human motivation and traditional grading practices suggesting that educators should focus on teaching academic behavior to increase student motivation and engagement.

Educators often knew little about how students perceived education policies in general and school-level practices in particular (Ryan & Cox, 2017). The intent of this study was to investigate the response of students to the inclusion of academic behavior as a component in calculating quarterly grades.

A qualitative approach provided the most effective means of exploring the world of middle school students. The study focused on the meaning for students regarding the implementation of a specific educational practice. A full understanding of students' responses required understanding their thoughts and feelings. The design of this qualitative study generated the type of data that must be communicated through a rich and comprehensive narrative (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2014).

### **Research Question**

How will students respond to the practice of using academic behavior as a component in determining their quarter grade?

## **Research Approach**

This qualitative study was conducted using a case study method focusing on one aspect of a competency-based education ELA class of eighth-grade students. By using the case study method, results derived from the study were rich in detail and broad in scope. In case studies, researchers generalized from the specific results to broadly applicable theories (Ary et al., 2014). A case study provided the opportunity to gather detailed, meaningful, and multilayered data from eight subjects in a short period. The data included the students' thoughts and opinions as well as student artifacts. In addition, a case study represented a chance to contribute to the paucity of literature (Ryan & Cox, 2017) regarding student impressions of classroom practices.

## **Population and Sample**

The population for this study was eighth-grade students in a competency-based ELA classroom from a somewhat affluent suburban school district. The student body was culturally diverse with 18% African American, 19% Asian, 3% multi-racial, 6% Hispanic, and 54% Caucasian. In the 2018-2019 school year, the school registered 27 different home languages. The sample for the study consisted of six students enrolled in honors English and two students enrolled in a standard English class. Two students, one male and one female, were chosen from four different classes. Participants were selected based on average performances on district wide benchmark assessments as compared with their eighth-grade classmates in order to study "typical" eighth-grade students.

All aspects of the study occurred in a virtual setting. Individual interviews were conducted via videoconferencing applications. Focus groups were conducted via a conference call application.

The school system and the Institutional Review Board approved the study before the subjects were chosen. Participants were given code names when the content of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed. The interviews were recorded on video and the focus group was recorded on audio, but only the researcher and participants had access to this material. Participants in peer debriefing were given the transcribed data to preserve anonymity of the participants.

### **Research Procedures**

**Ethical considerations.** Before choosing the participants, a representative of the school system approved the study. Once permission was procured, a proposal for the study was submitted to and approved by the Carson-Newman Institutional Review Board. Participants were chosen and contacted along with their parents since the students were minors. Parents were asked for permission for their students to participate. Students were asked to participate. Once permission and agreement were granted, the interviews were conducted.

**Data collection.** The study included three sources of data. Individual interviews were conducted with students regarding attitudes and responses toward the inclusion of a behavior component in the computation of quarterly grades. Interview questions were derived from the instructor's classroom observations and the relevant research from the literature review. All interviews occurred after the end of the third quarter of the school year. Students did not return to school after the third quarter due to the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, individual interviews were conducted via a video conference application. In addition to the one-on-one interviews, a focus group was conducted via teleconference with all eight participants. The group began with a discussion of the questions from the interviews. The focus group provided another point of comparison regarding the ideas, opinions, and thoughts that emerged in the

interviews. Artifacts were collected to provide yet another point of comparison for themes determined from the interviews and the focus group. These artifacts included student performance data on three benchmark assessments, participants' quarterly course grades, participants' quarterly academic demeanor scores along with explanations for the academic demeanor scores, and any email correspondence with their teacher throughout the year.

Students chose interview times from options provided to them. The video interviews were recorded through the video application and transcribed into a Word document afterward. The focus group was conducted two weeks after the final individual interview. The session was recorded through the teleconference application and transcribed later. Student benchmark performance, grades, and academic demeanor scores with explanations were documented at the end of the third quarter grading period.

**Coding process.** After all data were collected, open coding was utilized to determine comparison points and “develop major or core categories” (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson & Walker, 2013, p. 494). Next, axial coding was used to sort the categories into the major prevailing themes. Finally, a selective coding process was used “to develop proposition[s] or hypotheses based” (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson & Walker, 2013, p. 494) on the themes in order to illustrate relationships.

**Data analysis process.** Data were analyzed for recurring themes or patterns in students' responses to one-on-one interview questions, students' responses in a group conversation, and the collected artifacts. The idea was to search for themes or patterns and interpret the meaning of those themes and patterns as they pertained to academic behavior and student motivation. The theoretical framework of the study focused on students' motivation to become responsible for their learning. The data coding provided a way of determining the state of student motivation

and acceptance of academic responsibility. The conceptual framework was the instructional model of competency-based education. The collection and codifying of data provided insight into how honors and standard ELA students responded to the inclusion of a behavior component in determining their quarter grade. In addition, the data provided a basis for a discussion of the implications of students' responses in the area of academic responsibility.

To ensure credibility and confirmability, the data and the interpretation were shared with another educator for peer debriefing. The educator concurred with the interpretation based on the raw data. Member checks were also employed to address credibility concerns. During the data collection process, individual participants reviewed responses to interviews and focus group discussions for accuracy and meaning. Participants were asked to “clear up miscommunication, identify inaccuracies, and help obtain additional useful data” (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson & Walker, 2013, p. 533) before the data was interpreted. Furthermore, the practice of reflectivity was used to address concerns about credibility, along with confirmability and transferability. Interviews and focus groups were all recorded to ensure the use of direct quotes and accurate context description. A weekly journal of thought processes provided opportunity for reflection and guarded against bias. Finally, an audit trail established dependability for the study. The research journal, audio recordings, video recordings, and digital copies of collected artifacts have been preserved.

## **Summary**

This qualitative case study was designed to determine student responses to the inclusion of a behavior component in computing student grades in order to generate discussion about grading practices, student motivation, and academic behaviors. The conceptual framework was the Competency-Based Evaluation model of classroom instruction. Interviews, focus groups,

and the collection of artifacts provided the raw data for interpretation. Data collection occurred over four weeks. After the data was collected, an open coding system was used to divide the data into thematic elements. Then axial and selective coding were used to further group data into overarching themes. Interpretation of data was performed through the theoretical framework of the Self-Determination Theory of Motivation. The interpretation focused on how student performance might be affected by including academic behaviors as components in student grades in order to increase student motivation and engagement.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: Presentation of Findings**

After the passage of No Child Left Behind, federal, state, and local bodies governing education generated more and more policies based on educational research. These policies resulted in specific changes to practices in the classroom. Accountability measures for high stakes testing produced a focus on state testing. The adoption of Common Core type state standards resulted in a focus on academic rigor. Driven by the standards movement, many districts adopted an emphasis on learning versus grades. As a result, districts forced certain grading practices on teachers such as no-zero and minimum grade policies. The result was a dearth of focus on student responsibility. As teachers assumed more responsibility for student achievement, students naturally abdicated their personal responsibility, serving to handicap students for the future.

While numerous studies were conducted on teachers' reactions to these policies and procedures (Buckmiller, Peters, & Kruse, 2017; Hochbein & Pollio, 2016; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Toledo & Dubas, 2017), the amount of researcher on students' opinions was lacking. Students' perceptions of education policies in general and school-level practices in particular were often overlooked in educational research (Ryan & Cox, 2017). The purpose of this study was to investigate the response of students to the inclusion of an academic behavior component as part of the quarterly grade.

### **Context of the Study**

All participants in this study were enrolled in a competency-based, eighth-grade English course. In their competency-based classroom, students worked toward mastering competencies during the quarter. Competencies consisted of broad ideas with multiple steps to achieve mastery. For example, writing an argumentative essay was a competency in quarter three.

Mastering an argumentative essay required students to master distinct writing skills. Those skills included, but were not limited to, the composition of a thesis statement, proper essay organization and formatting, clear communication, conventions of English, integration and analysis of evidence, and the composition of an introduction and conclusion paragraph.

Students were allowed to work at their own pace to master the competencies for a quarter. If a student failed to achieve mastery on the first attempt at an argumentative essay, they were allowed to rewrite or revise the essay as often as they chose up to the final week in the quarter. The instructor tracked progress and shared the results in the form of written feedback, verbal feedback, and a number between one and five. A five indicated mastery of a particular competency while a one indicated that the student was just beginning the work.

Academic behaviors were assessed every quarter as a competency. Teachers in competency-based courses referred to the academic behavior competency as *academic demeanor*. For example, in language arts, the first quarter competencies that students were charged with mastering were text analysis, in-text citations, determining a central idea, character analysis, narrative writing, and academic demeanor. While the academic competencies changed each quarter, the academic demeanor competency remained static. The academic demeanor competency encompassed six behaviors that the instructors determined were vital to a student's academic success. The assessment of mastery was based on a student's academic behavior. Students lost points toward mastery for the reasons listed below:

- Lack of effort
- Lack of preparation
- Late or missing assignments
- Off-task behavior

- Failure to follow directions
- Cheating

At the beginning of each quarter, students were given a mastery score of five in the academic demeanor competency. Points were deducted during the quarter when students demonstrated any of the behaviors listed above. During the first quarter, a typical deduction consisted of one-half of a point. The teacher adjusted the practice in the second and third quarters so that a typical deduction consisted of one-quarter of a point. To compute the final grade for the quarter, the scores from all competencies were added together and divided by the number of total competencies for the quarter. Academic demeanor competency scores were factored into the academic grade at the same weight as the scores earned for the other competencies. The resulting number was converted to a grade for the quarter using a teacher-created conversion chart (see Appendix A). When behavior was factored in as a part of the academic grade, different results were possible as illustrated in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1**

*Potential Effect of Factoring Behavior into Students' Grades*

Competency	Student #1	Student #2	Student #3
Text analysis	3	3	3
Text citations	3.5	3.5	3.5
Determining a central idea	4.5	4.5	4.5
Character analysis	4	4	4
Narrative writing	4.25	4.25	4.25
Academic demeanor	3.5	4	4.5
<b>Total Score</b>	<b>22.75</b>	<b>23.25</b>	<b>23.75</b>
<b>Divided by Total # of Competencies</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3.9</b>
<b>Final Grade</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>89</b>

## **Research Question**

How will students respond to the practice of using academic behavior as a component in determining their quarter grade?

## **Participants**

Four male and four female participants were chosen from eighth-grade, competency-based ELA classrooms based on benchmark assessment scores. Three males and three females were enrolled in eighth-grade honors English. One male and one female were enrolled in eighth-grade standard English. Each participant completed three-quarters of the school year in the competency-based classroom. Students did not return to the classroom for the fourth quarter due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Participant 1 was a male student in honors ELA. An affable and quiet student, he fit in well with classmates. Participant 1 seemed to perform at a high academic level with minimal effort. He scored final grades of 97, 95, and 93 in quarters one through three, respectively. His academic demeanor numbers were similarly positive for quarters one and two. With points deducted for late or missing assignments, this participant scored a 4.5 out of 5 in quarter one. In quarter two, this student lost only one-quarter of a point for failure to follow directions, scoring a 4.75 in academic demeanor. His grade and academic demeanor scores dipped significantly in the third quarter. During this quarter, all students in standard and honors ELA were assigned ongoing web-based language and convention activities. The instructor expected specific activities to be completed based on a series of weekly due dates. Participant 1 lost 1.25 points by failing to meet five different due dates. In the quarter in which Participant 1 scored the lowest in academic demeanor, he also scored the lowest grade. The student's score on the quarter one benchmark assessment was the highest score of all the participants. His scores for benchmarks

two and three were the second-highest scores among all participants' scores. The second quarter benchmark assessment produced his lowest score. Half of all participants increased scores on the second benchmark.

Participant 2 was a male student in standard ELA. This student was a class clown of sorts. However, his behavior did not interfere with his studies or disrupt the classroom environment. He scored final grades of 88, 89, and 88 in quarters one through three, respectively. His academic demeanor numbers were excellent in all three quarters. This student earned a 5 out of 5 points in quarter one. He lost only one-quarter of a point for off-task behavior during the second quarter for a score of 4.75. Like all but two other participants, he scored the lowest points in academic demeanor for quarter three. This participant lost three-quarters of a point for failing to submit the web-based language and convention activities on three separate occasions. Thus, he scored a 4.25 for academic demeanor in the third quarter. In the quarter in which Participant 2 scored the lowest in academic demeanor, he also scored the lowest quarterly grade. The student's score on the quarter one benchmark assessment was the third-lowest score of all the participants. Unlike half of the other participants, his score on benchmark 2 increased. Only three other participants scored higher on the third benchmark. His third benchmark score decreased so that his score was again the third lowest among all participant scores. In summary, Participant 2 maintained a solid grade average and high academic demeanor scores throughout all three quarters despite a disappointing drop on the final benchmark.

Participant 3 was a female student in honors ELA. She was a no-nonsense student who behaved like a much older student. Participant 3 paid close attention in class, listened well, and enthusiastically participated in class discussions. She scored final grades of 96, 95, and 95 in

quarters one through three, respectively. Her academic demeanor numbers were excellent in all three quarters. This student earned a 4.5 out of 5 points in quarters one and two. She lost one-half of a point in quarter one for a late submission and one-half point in quarter 2 for failure to follow directions. Her academic demeanor score was perfect for the third quarter. Unlike most of her classmates, Participant 3 performed best in the academic demeanor competency for quarter three. Her worst scoring quarter for academic demeanor was also her lowest quarterly grade. The student's score on the quarter one benchmark assessment was in the average range as compared to other participants. Like most of her peers, she scored an even lower score on the second benchmark. Though she gained some points from the second benchmark, the third benchmark score was lower than the first which placed her among the average scores again.

Participant 4 was a male student in honors ELA. He was often inattentive and daydreaming. Participant 4 scored final grades of 89, 86, and 87 in quarters one through three, respectively. In the first quarter, his academic demeanor numbers were among the bottom three out of all participants after losing a full point for submitting assignments late. He improved slightly in the second quarter to a 4.25 out of 5 after losing points for failing to follow directions and off-task behavior. In quarter three, Participant 4 posted the worst academic demeanor score of all participants in any quarter. He lost points for off-task behavior, lack of effort, failure to follow directions, and multiple late submissions. Unlike his fellow participants in the study, Participant 4's lowest academic demeanor score did not correspond with his lowest quarterly grade. The student's score on the quarter one benchmark assessment was in the average range as compared to other participants. For the two subsequent benchmark assessments, his scores increased each time. Only one participant scored higher than Participant 4 on the third benchmark.

Participant 5 was a female student in honors ELA who fit in well with classmates. At times, she appeared distracted or unfocused. She scored final grades of 88, 87, and 81 in quarters one through three, respectively. Her academic demeanor numbers reflected a similar trajectory except for quarter two. In the first quarter, Participant 5 lost points for late submissions to earn an academic demeanor score of 3.5 out of 5. She rebounded in quarter two with a 4.5 out of 5 after losing only one-half a point for failure to follow directions. Her infractions remained the same in quarter three as in the first two quarters, but she lost 1.75 points total. All but one-quarter of the points lost were due to submitting the web-based language and convention assignments late. Her academic demeanor score in the third quarter was the second lowest academic demeanor score among all participants in any quarter. In the quarter in which Participant 5 scored the lowest in academic demeanor, she also scored the lowest quarterly grade. The student's score on the quarter one benchmark assessment was average compared to all other participants. In the second quarter, her benchmark score tied for the lowest score, significantly lower than her first benchmark score. Half of all participants increased scores on the second benchmark. The student showed improvement on benchmark three but did not reach the level of the first benchmark score. Only three participants scored lower on the final benchmark.

Participant 6 was a female student in standard ELA. She was friendly and loquacious without causing a disruption. This student often needed reassurance about directions, due dates, and academic performance. Participant 6 scored final grades of 84, 82, and 79 in quarters one through three, respectively. Like five of the other participants, her grades declined throughout the year. Her academic demeanor numbers followed suit, declining in every quarter. With points deducted for late or missing assignments, this participant scored a 4.5 out of 5 in quarter one. In quarter two, this student lost points for failing to follow directions, late submissions, and

a lack of effort to score a 4.25 out of 5. When all students were assigned ongoing web-based language and convention activities during quarter three, Participant 6 failed to submit assignments on time on five different occasions, scoring an academic demeanor total of 3.75 out of 5. In the quarter in which Participant 6 scored the lowest in academic demeanor, she also scored the lowest quarterly grade. The student's score on the quarter one benchmark assessment was the lowest score of all the participants. Her performance on the second benchmark was the third lowest of all scores. On the final benchmark, Participant 6 again scored the lowest score among all participant scores and her lowest score.

Participant 7 was a female student in honors ELA. She was conscientious, hard-working, and sweet to her classmates. She scored final grades of 98, 90, and 95 in quarters one through three, respectively. Her academic demeanor numbers were excellent in all three quarters. In quarters one and two, she lost zero points in academic demeanor. This student only lost one-half of a point in quarter three for a late submission and failing to follow directions. Unlike most of her classmates, her lowest quarterly grade and lowest academic demeanor score did not occur in the same quarter. The student's score on the quarter one benchmark assessment was the second-lowest score on the assessment as compared to other participants. Along with Participant 7, this student gained points on the two subsequent benchmark tests and recorded the highest overall score on the third benchmark.

Participant 8 was a male student in honors ELA. His sister was enrolled in the same instructor's class the previous year. Thus, he was somewhat familiar with the teacher. Participant 8 scored final grades of 85, 81, and 94 in quarters one through three, respectively. In the first two quarters, his academic demeanor numbers were 4 out of 5. He lost points for late submissions in quarter one and cheating, lack of effort, and lack of preparation in quarter two.

Participant 8 scored above a 5 in academic demeanor for quarter three by completing extra credit. This student's lowest quarterly grade corresponded with his lowest academic demeanor score. The student's score on the quarter one benchmark assessment was in the average range as compared to other participants. For the two subsequent benchmark assessments, his scores declined. Along with half of all participants, this student's benchmark score from quarter one was his best score for the year.

### **Data Collection Process**

Individual interviews consisting of open-ended questions (see Appendix B) were conducted with each student via video conference and subsequently transcribed. Each interview lasted 45 minutes to one hour. Conducting and transcribing the one-on-one interviews took approximately three weeks to complete. The open-ended nature of the questions facilitated clarification and follow up discussion. One-on-one interviews were used to uncover themes in the students' responses regarding their opinion of factoring behavior into quarterly grades.

After the individual interviews were conducted, participants engaged in a two-hour focus group discussion via teleconference. The discussion and subsequent transcription took two days. The moderator concentrated on the questions from the individual interviews pertaining to the specific practice of losing points and the questions from the individual interviews regarding students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The focus group was used to clarify and expand themes discovered in the one-on-one interviews.

Artifacts (see Appendices C, D, and E) were collected from the instructor's records for the year. For each participant, four artifacts were collected for each quarter. This data included the student's overall grade, the score in academic demeanor, the reasons for losing points in academic demeanor, and the score on the benchmark assessment. In addition, any email

correspondence between the instructor and the students or the students' parents were preserved for reference. Data from the artifacts were used to compare the actions of the participants to the answers of the participants in the interviews and the focus group in order to provide points of comparison and contrast between what students said and what students did.

Four trustworthiness techniques were utilized to ensure fidelity in data collection. First, member checks were conducted by emailing participants a copy of their interview transcripts. They were asked to correct any content errors and add any content to the document. All participants were emailed a copy of the focus group transcript and asked to correct any content errors and add any content to the document. Finally, after the interviews and focus group were analyzed for themes, each member was emailed a list of the themes to evaluate. Again, participants were asked to add to or correct the content.

Another trustworthiness technique was peer debriefing. This technique was utilized during data analysis. The researcher and a peer evaluated and analyzed the data separately and compared findings. They shared the common themes found by both teachers and discussed the merits of singular themes.

The third trustworthiness technique was a rich, detailed description of the findings. This description provided a basis for interpretation and further study.

Finally, all video interviews, transcripts, communication with participants, and artifacts were kept to provide an audit trail.

## **Data Analysis**

After collecting artifacts, conducting individual interviews, and holding a focus group discussion, data were sorted through open coding to identify areas where students expressed similar ideas regarding the practice of including behavior as a factor in computing academic

grades. Once these areas of repetition were identified, axial coding was used to group these repeated ideas into broad categories of meaning. Finally, selective coding was used to narrow the broad categories into three common themes that emerged from the data analysis.

### **Study Findings**

An analysis of the data revealed an overall positive student response to the practice of using academic behavior as a component in determining quarter grades. Three themes emerged. The first theme was the feeling of obligation expressed by the participants. Students often responded to the practice by noting their personal responsibility for behavior and academic effort. In addition, they interpreted the practice of counting behavior towards a grade as beneficial to students even when consequences were unfavorable. The second theme was how the practice influenced student motivation. This response to the question of motivation was mostly positive, with some reservations in the area of relationship to teachers. Finally, a third theme that emerged was the number of student ideas related to implementing the practice of counting behavior towards academic grades. In summary, participants responded to the inclusion of behavior as a factor in grading by expressing feelings of obligation, noting the influence on motivation, and focusing on implementation. The raw data, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding for each theme are presented in Figures 4.1 through 4.3.

**Figure 4.1**

*Coding process for theme #1*

Raw data	Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
<p>“It’s on the student, not the teacher.”</p> <p>“It’s important to have that mind set.”</p> <p>“should count toward the grade”</p> <p>“That’s your fault.”</p>	<p>Practice is fair</p> <p>Practice is reasonable</p> <p>Some behaviors are wrong</p> <p>System of reward</p>	<p>Accepting consequences</p>	
<p>“They were procrastinating.”</p> <p>“You should…”</p> <p>“They were supposed to be doing…”</p> <p>“You’re not gonna achieve well.”</p>	<p>Positive opportunity to practice responsible behavior</p> <p>Students control behavior</p> <p>Failure associated with failing to act responsibly</p>	<p>Accepting responsibility</p>	<p>Feelings of obligation</p>
<p>“Lets you know where you’re at … per your ability.”</p> <p>“Overall, it has a positive effect.”</p> <p>“encourages students”</p> <p>“helped me not be as talkative”</p>	<p>Equals academic success</p> <p>Accountability</p> <p>Positive effect on grades</p> <p>Positive motivation</p>	<p>Recognizing benefits</p>	
<p>“You’re more in control when it comes to that effort.”</p> <p>“It’s important to give your full effort [to] achieve your potential.”</p> <p>“You would try harder.”</p>	<p>Students control effort</p> <p>Students value effort</p> <p>Effort equals achievement</p>	<p>Focusing on effort</p>	

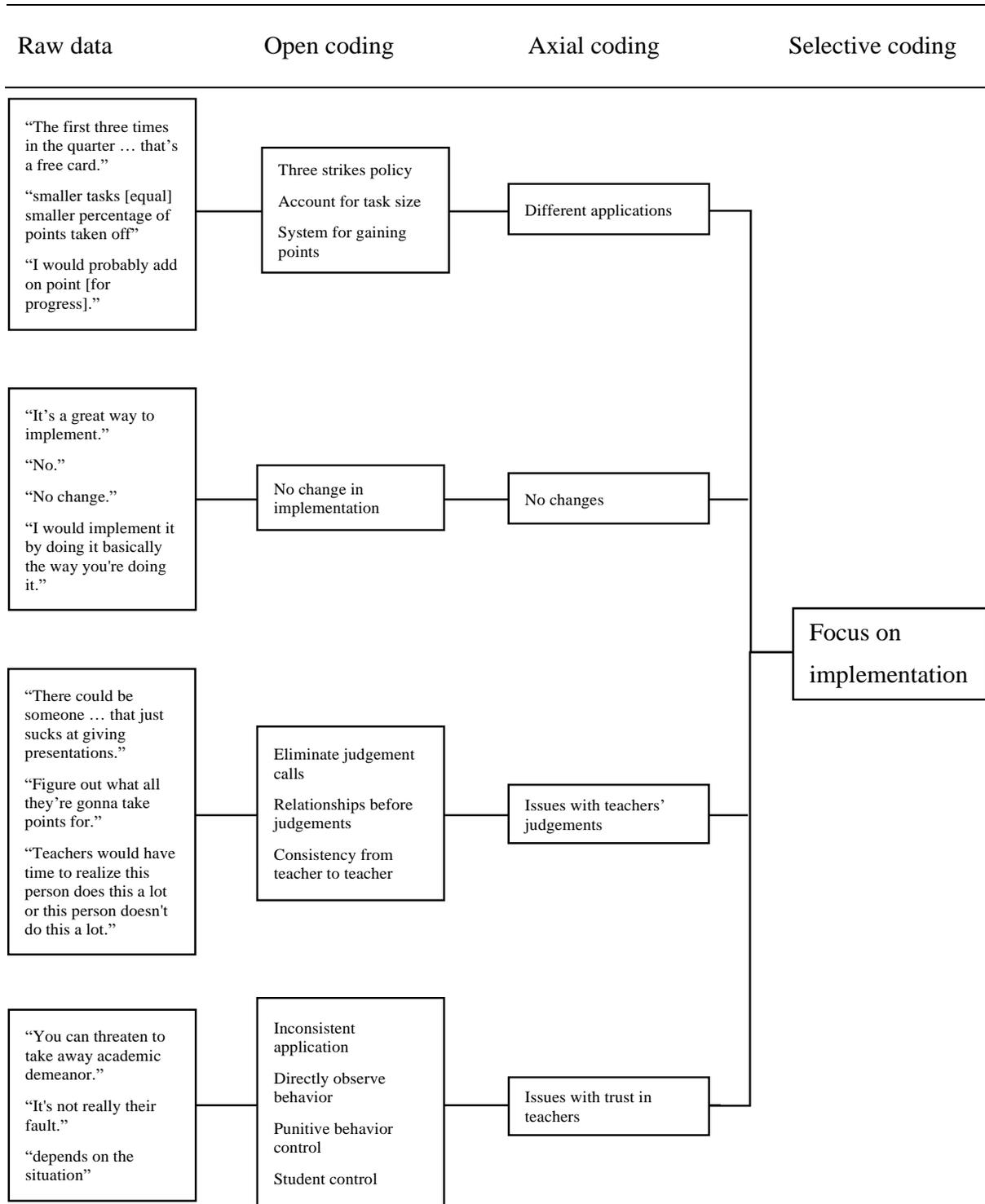
**Figure 4.2**

*Coding process for theme #2*

Raw data	Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
<p>“More control...”</p> <p>“I get to decide the amount of effort I put it into it.”</p> <p>“directly based on things I do”</p> <p>“Your teachers aren't babysitting you anymore.”</p>	<p>Students control actions</p> <p>Aids in self-control</p>	<p>Feelings of autonomy</p>	
<p>“Teaches you what you need to fix...”</p> <p>“It's based on whether you do the things ... and that makes me feel capable.”</p> <p>“It helps me understand that I might have the ... ability to do well ... but if my [behavior] isn't up to standards, then I don't have the overall demeanor of a good student.”</p>	<p>Constructive criticism</p> <p>Reward for effort</p> <p>Understanding ability vs. behavior</p>	<p>Feelings of competency</p>	<p><b>Influence on Motivation</b></p>
<p>“It lets you know that [teachers are] doing it to help me.”</p> <p>“Teachers can really turn it into a really annoying thing.”</p> <p>“Nobody ... likes a strict teacher.”</p>	<p>Teachers care</p> <p>Student mindset</p> <p>Behavior control</p>	<p>Feelings of relatedness</p>	

**Figure 4.3**

*Coding process for theme #3*



**Feelings of obligation.** In response to questions about including behavior as a factor in their grades, many students expressed a sense of responsibility regarding their academic performance and their behavior. In their competency-based classrooms, students could lose academic demeanor points for failing to put forth effort, lack of preparation, turning assignments in late or not at all, off-task behavior, failure to follow directions, and cheating. When asked about these different reasons in the interviews and in the focus group, every participant noted personal responsibility in answer to at least one reason.

For example, when asked about losing points for off-task behavior, Participant 7 stated that losing points was “necessary . . . if you're not doing what you're supposed to do.” Participants 3, 5, and 8 responded in a similar manner regarding off-task behavior. Participant 3 noted that off-task behavior was the “fault” of the individual student. Participant 5 justified deducting points for off-task behavior because students “were supposed to be doing something” in class. Six of the eight participants echoed this idea of responsibility for the behavior of following directions and preparation.

Participants 5 and 7 offered suggestions for a different process for deducting points for failure to follow directions but agreed with the reason in principle based on the idea of individual responsibility. Participants 2 and 8 offered suggestions for a different process for deducting points for lack of preparation since circumstances are not always under a student’s control. However, both agreed with the practice in general based on the idea of individual responsibility.

When asked about losing points for cheating, all respondents agreed that cheating was “wrong” or that students “deserved” to lose points.

For the behavior of submitting assignments on time, five of the eight participants agreed that students were responsible for completing and submitting assignments on time. Participant 5

summed up the feeling of the majority by stating that “it's your responsibility to submit those and do them, but if you don't there should be a consequence for not doing them.” Participants 2 and 7 agreed with the practice, noting that point deductions were “fair” and “necessary,” respectively. Participant 1 dissented with the group. This student felt like deducting points for late work was a form of punitive behavior control.

For each category of behavior for which students could lose points, at least one participant agreed with the loss of points based on student responsibility. During the focus group discussion on student responsibility, Participant 8 noted, “It is the student's responsibility for basically almost everything that he does in the classroom.” Participant 6 added, “Teachers are there to teach us and prepare us for TN Ready and everything, but not there to babysit us.”

In addition to accepting responsibility, participants recognized the importance of effort. Participant 5 defined the key to academic success as “more of what you do . . . rather than how you do.” When asked if behavior should be a factor in student grades in every class, Participant 8 focused directly on student effort, responding that “it should be in all classes because . . . you would try harder.” Participant 4 agreed with the emphasis on effort, observing that “it's important to give your full effort at all times so that you can achieve your potential.” In answer to various interview questions, all other participants tied the concept of responsibility to student effort by expressing the belief that students are solely responsible for their individual effort toward academic success. However, during the interviews and the focus group, Participants 2, 3, and 7 expressed issues with the implementation of a system for deducting points for lack of effort. Overall, the sense of responsibility and the importance of effort served to highlight the positive benefits of counting behavior as part of the grade.

Except for Participant 1, all students expressed positive reactions to the practice of counting behavior as part of a student's grade based on the perceived benefits of such a practice. Students noted several benefits in a system of grading that counted behavior as a part of the grade. Participant 6 described the potential of losing points based on behavior as "a wake-up call" to change behavior that negatively impacts the grade. The idea that losing points based on behavior served as a positive motivator for students to achieve academically was echoed by Participants 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8. According to Participant 2, the practice of deducting points for negative behavior "helped me stay more focused and not be as talkative." Participant 3 described the practice of including behavior as part of an academic grade as a learning opportunity for students to improve themselves. Participant 1 recognized zero benefits in factoring behavior into the academic grade. In response to multiple questions and during the focus group, he defined the practice as a form of punitive behavior control.

As a group, participants accepted the consequences of deducting points for behavior in positive terms as well. Over half the participants described the deduction of points for poor behavior as "reasonable," "fair," or "necessary." Participant 4 considered the deduction of points a positive form of discipline. Participant 8 described several of the reasons for deducting points as a "fair consequence for unacceptable behavior." Participant 1 agreed with the group that consequences for poor behavior were fair. However, he disagreed with the practice of counting off points for poor behavior. Instead, Participant 1 felt the natural consequence of a poor grade was a fair and sufficient consequence for poor behavior.

The collected artifacts supported the feelings of obligation. Six participants lost less than one point in academic demeanor during the first quarter. All point deductions during the first quarter were limited to the category of late or missing assignments. Participants 2 and 7 lost no

points in academic demeanor during the first quarter. The second quarter was an improvement for all participants. None of the students lost more than one point in academic demeanor during the second quarter. Participants rarely lost points in more than two of the categories of behavior. Out of eight participants, only two participants lost points in three different categories of behavior in any one quarter. Also, students typically lost points in a category only once during a quarter. Though more prevalent in the first two quarters, these trends suggested that students took the behavior expectations seriously.

**Influence on motivation.** According to the Self-determination Theory of Motivation, classroom teachers must meet three psychological needs to motivate students to succeed. First, students need to feel autonomous in their decision making. They need to feel like they are in control of their education. The second psychological need is the need to feel competent. Students need to feel like they possess the ability to accomplish academics tasks. Finally, students need to feel a meaningful relationship with the teacher. They need to feel like they can trust the teacher, that the teacher has their best interests at heart. When students were supported properly in these three areas, they developed academic independence, a sense of academic direction, and a sense of academic responsibility (“Theory Overview,” 2019).

In response to questions about including behavior as a factor in their grades, seven out of eight participants agreed that the practice increased their sense of autonomy regarding their education. The reasons for these feelings varied. In the interviews, participants were asked, “How does including academic demeanor as a competency affect how you feel about your ability to control your own education?” In response, Participants 3 and 8 described the practice in terms of positive motivation. Participant 6 agreed with the positive nature of the practice but provided a different reason. When questioned about how counting behavior in grades influenced her

feeling of autonomy, she expressed happiness that “teachers are giving us a chance to . . . control our own education.” In response to the question regarding the feelings of autonomy, Participants 2, 3, 5, and 7 related the question to their sense of responsibility as the reason for feeling more autonomous. These participants equated autonomy to their ability and obligation to control their actions. Participant 5 believed the inclusion of behavior as a grade afforded the opportunity “to decide the amount of effort” expended on schoolwork. Participant 4 cited the practice as an aid in self-control because “if you get [points] taken off [for behavior], that means that you didn’t have the best control of your ability to learn and the whole idea . . . is to help you control what you’re doing.” During the focus group, participants were asked if counting behavior as part of an academic grade diminished their sense of control. All but Participant 1 agreed that the practice provided more control, not less. In his dissent, Participant 1 expressed frustration “that slick screwing off in class can affect your grade.” He believed that poor behavior should be addressed with “a detention . . . not affect your grades.”

The data from the artifacts provided an example of student autonomy. By the third quarter, participants had experienced two grading periods in which behavior was factored into the academic grade. Thus, participants knew the system and the stakes. However, six out of eight participants registered the lowest scores in academic demeanor in the third quarter. Five of those students scored their lowest grade in the third quarter. During this quarter, the instructor assigned a series of web-based assignments with due dates. Seven participants lost points for failing to submit these assignments on time.

While the overwhelming majority described including behavior as a factor in their grades as a positive influence on feelings of autonomy, the results regarding the influence on feelings of competency were mixed. In the interviews, all participants were asked, “How does having

academic demeanor as a competency affect how you feel about your academic ability in general?” Initially, Participant 1 said that the practice had no effect. When pressed for further detail, he expressed a negative view with a specific example. Participant 1 explained that when “you're doing good on tests, but you're getting lower grades for [failure to follow directions], it sometimes can make you feel like you can't do as much.” Participants 2, 3, 4, and 6 echoed this concern about the potential for a negative effect on their grades. They related the negative effect on academic grades to negative feelings about their ability to succeed academically. Participant 6 admitted that the possibility of losing points for behavior induced feelings of anxiety and undercut her confidence. She stated that she often felt “kind of, like, nervous about it.” Participant 4 explained how point deductions for behavior could affect one’s feelings of competency. She viewed the practice as a way to “understand that I might have the smarts or the ability to do well in the class.” However, she pointed out the negative aspect of that understanding by noting “if my academic demeanor isn’t up to standards, then I don’t have the overall demeanor of a good student” which was “not a good way to go about learning.”

Despite the answers about how factoring behavior into the grade negatively influences a student’s feelings of competency, Participants 2, 3, 4, and 6 also expressed a positive influence on their feelings of competency. All of these participants viewed the practice as a positive motivator due to the potential positive effect on grades. This particular observation was the complete opposite of the negative response given above. Participants 2, 3, 4, and 6 addressed this apparent contradiction by explaining that they considered the practice a positive motivation to behave appropriately. Students associated positive marks for behavior with positive overall grades. Positive grades boosted their confidence in their academic ability. Data from the collected artifacts supported this relationship. Participants scored their highest quarterly grade

when their academic demeanor score was a 4.5 out of 5 or higher in six out of eight examples. Another reason for a positive influence on feelings of competency was cited by Participants 2, 3, and 4. These students agreed that deducting points for poor behavior was a tool for constructive criticism. According to Participant 3, students felt more competent after receiving constructive criticism because “it teaches you what you need to fix.” Participant 5 referred to the focus on effort to explain how deducting academic points for behavior positively influenced his feelings of competency. He felt “capable” because the practice is “based on whether you do the things or not” rather than “how you did on it.” Participant 6 also offered a broader answer for increased feelings of competency. This student felt like the practice provided another piece of feedback that “lets you know where you’re at” and confirmed her ability to succeed academically. Participant 7 did not relate the practice to feelings of competency at all. Participant 8 never understood the question. He answered the question and the follow-up questions by explaining how the point system worked. Though the opinions regarding how counting behavior towards a grade influences feelings of competency were mixed, the majority of opinions were positive. During the focus group, Participant 4 summed up the opinion of the majority: “My behavioral grade does not make me feel bad about how my academic grades turn out.”

In response to questions about including behavior as a factor in their grades, participants’ opinions regarding teacher/student relationships were mostly negative, with five of eight participants expressing negative views. In the interviews, all participants were asked, “How does having academic demeanor as a competency affect how you feel about your relationship with your teacher?” Participant 1 reported feeling annoyed with teachers “when you have to try and keep from getting points taken off for little things like having your iPad on your desk or not putting numbers on the paper.” This annoyance made the student “less inclined to do all the

extra stuff . . . that is not really graded or checked” in order to avoid “nitpicky” requirements from teachers. He also described the practice of deducting points as one where teachers “constantly threaten us” with the possibility of losing points.

Participant 2 felt that the practice of deducting points for behavior did not affect his relationship with teachers. However, this student recognized and described the real possibility that deducting points could detrimentally affect teacher/student relationships. He posed a hypothetical example in which “one of my friends . . . got points taken off for being off-task” when another student lost no points. The student who lost points could “say it’s not fair” and “think you have something against them.”

When discussing the same issue in the focus group, Participant 2 suggested that most students lack the maturity “to sit down and think they actually did something wrong.” Instead, those students who lose points would “immediately draw the conclusion that the teacher's being biased” which would negatively affect the teacher/student relationship. Participant 3 agreed that students who lost academic points for behavior could perceive bias on the part of the teacher. In the focus group, this student agreed with Participant 2 regarding the hypothetical situation but reported that losing academic points for behavior did not personally impact her relationship with teachers.

Participant 5 also focused on teacher behavior in answering the question “How does having academic demeanor as a competency affect how you feel about your relationship with your teacher?” In the interview, this student pointed to the teacher as the responsible party for a positive relationship. If a teacher implemented a policy of counting behavior in an academic grade and applied the policy in an overly strict manner, then students would feel like the teacher was “not as friendly.” This perception would damage the teacher/student relationship because

“nobody really likes a strict teacher.” During the focus group discussion, Participant 5 expressed the opposite view, reverting to the position that students were responsible for their behavior. When asked “If a teacher was super particular and took points off for . . . little, minor things . . . would that affect your relationship?” the student said she did not believe “that behavior being included in your [grade] affects, like, your relationships with your teachers” because “if you think about like how you were acting . . . there's a reason that your academic demeanor went down.”

Participant 8 expressed the belief that factoring behavior into an academic grade promoted a positive attitude toward class. However, this student also expressed issues with trusting teachers to apply the practice equitably. Participant 8 expressed the importance of teacher-to-student communication to ensure a positive teacher/student relationship. Without direct, specific communication, students may believe they lost points because they were “on the bad side of the teacher or the teacher just doesn't like you that much.” This participant described a second scenario of a “good student” who lost one or two points. He believed this situation was an example of a teacher who disliked a student.

Participants 4 and 7 reported no effect in answer to this question in the interviews and the focus group. Their answers were adamant. Email correspondence with Participant 4 and his mother supported this answer. Because of poor conduct that fell outside of academic behavior, the instructor contacted this student's parents multiple times during the year. The final contact was at the end of the third quarter. Participant 4 scored a 2.75 out of 5 in the academic demeanor competency during the third quarter. This score was the lowest score of all participants in any quarter. The student lost points for off-task behavior, lack of effort, failure to follow directions, and submitting assignments late on five different occasions. Despite these issues, other emails

between the student and the instructor showed affable exchanges, including shared jokes. The focus group occurred after the third quarter concluded. Even after the conduct issues, Participant 4 reiterated his opinion during the focus group that students “bear the responsibility,” and the teacher’s job is to “give them the consequence.”

Concerning teacher/student relationships, only Participant 6 expressed a positive view of the practice of counting behavior towards grades. When talking about losing points for behavior, this student thought the practice showed that teachers “care about me” and that teachers were “looking out for everyone.”

**Focus on implementation.** The eight participants in this study were enrolled in an eighth grade, competency-based language arts class. In a competency-based classroom, students worked toward mastery of five to eight competencies per quarter. In every quarter, academic demeanor was a competency. To achieve mastery in the competency, students were expected to put forth 100% effort on all assignments, be prepared for class daily, submit assignments on time, follow all directions accurately, stay on task at all times, and refrain from cheating. Unlike academic competencies in which students earned their way to mastery, all students received full points in the competency at the beginning of every quarter. Points were deducted when students failed to adhere to the standards of behavior listed above. Once students lost points in academic demeanor, they could not earn those points back.

In response to questions about implementing this system of including behavior as a factor in their grades, participants expressed numerous ideas. Some believed the system needed no change at all. Others offered suggestions about the application of the system overall or suggestions about applications in specific areas. Several students expressed a lack of faith in teachers’ ability to accurately judge students’ adherence to the behavior requirements. Half of

the participants expressed major issues in trusting teachers to implement the system consistently, fairly, and accurately.

In the interviews, Participants 4, 5, 7, and 8 agreed with the current implementation of the system. Participant 4 described the current model as a “fresh start” every quarter. However, in response to questions about the reasons for deducting points, Participants 7 and 8 answered with suggestions regarding changes in the application of the deduction system.

In addition to Participants 7 and 8, three other students offered suggestions regarding the application of a system of counting behavior toward grades. Participant 3 suggested changing the number of points deducted to correspond with the size of a particular task. For example, teachers in competency-based math classes evaluated discrete skills individually, whereas the teacher in a language arts class evaluated multiple discrete skills in the context of an essay. Participant 3 felt like classes that required a high number of small tasks should “get a smaller percentage of points taken off” academic demeanor. In a class that evaluated skills in the context of larger projects, the student felt like “they should take off more points in behavior and turning things in on time” because students were afforded a longer time frame to complete the tasks. Participant 6 suggested a model wherein students could gain points after losing them. According to this participant, students who improved academic behaviors after losing points “should be rewarded” in the same way that students who improved academically were rewarded.

Participants 7 and 8 mentioned changes in application for specific reasons for losing points. In responding to the question about losing points for lack of effort, Participant 7 agreed in principle but qualified the answer. This student disagreed with deducting points for lack of effort if the assignment or activity was not counted toward an academic grade. For example, students were assigned a presentation project in the last week of school before the Christmas

break. This project was academic but did not count toward academic grades. Some students lost academic demeanor points on the presentation for their lack of effort. Participant 7 disagreed with this application of the system. In responding to the question about losing points for failing to follow directions, Participant 7 again agreed in principle but qualified this answer as well. The student disagreed with deducting points for “nit-picky” directions. For example, one of the competency-based teachers required students to place their names in a specific spot on their papers. When students failed to follow this direction, they lost points in academic demeanor. Participant 7 thought deducting these points was unreasonable. Participant 8 took exception to the practice of deducting academic demeanor points for lack of preparation. This dissent was based on examples of circumstances highlighting students’ lack of control over their situation. The participant listed examples such as the loss of power, losing an iPad, breaking an iPad, or parents failing to purchase school supplies. During the focus group, Participant 7 agreed that teachers should not deduct points for lack of preparation for small infractions or in situations that were out of a student’s control. When this idea was discussed in the focus group, Participants 1, 2, 3, and 6 quickly agreed. Participant 1 took the idea further by suggesting that point deductions for any reason should always be “situational.” Participants 2, 3, and 6 agreed, adding that teachers should judge each situation individually and deduct points only when a student was clearly responsible for the infraction.

Participant 2 suggested the most radical change in application for a system of counting behavior as a part of the academic grade. This student proposed a “three strikes” rule. The suggestion was based on the same logic employed by Participant 7 regarding small infractions. Because some infractions were more serious than others, Participant 2 suggested a system of strikes for small infractions. In this plan, points would be deducted only after a student received

three strikes. This idea generated a large amount of discussion in the focus group. Participant 3 disagreed with the three-strikes proposal, explaining that “certain types of people . . . will take advantage . . . and just kind of waste them.” This student believed that employing immediate point deductions for behavior infractions would create “more of a sense of urgency” in students. Participant 5 agreed because the immediate loss of points helped the student “stay on track.” This student admitted that she would take advantage of such a system. Her admission was echoed by Participant 4, 6, 7, and 8.

While students suggested relatively minor changes to the system of counting behavior in academic grades (except for the three-strikes rule), five participants expressed major doubts regarding their teachers’ ability to accurately judge a deduction of points for lack of preparation, failure to follow directions, off-task behavior, and lack of effort. As previously mentioned, Participants 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 believed that teachers should only deduct points if the lack of preparation was entirely the fault of the student. Participant 8 took the idea a step further. This student believed that teachers should only deduct points for lack of preparation if “the teacher actually sees what’s happening, sees what the problem is.” When asked directly if a teacher could employ experience to judge whether a presentation was poor due to a lack of preparation on the part of the student, Participant 8 insisted that the teacher needed evidence to make such a judgment. The student listed missing work as an example of evidence that proved a lack of preparation.

Another area that students expressed doubt about teachers’ judgments was losing points for a failure to follow directions. Participant 5 agreed with losing points for this behavior in principle but said the classroom teacher should seek advice from a peer instead of making a judgment call. In explaining the position, the student used the previous example of the teacher

who expected students to place their names in a specific spot on their pages. Participant 5 felt like that teacher “should, like, talk to another teacher to see if they should” deduct points for that particular infraction. The student allowed no room for individual teacher’s needs or systems when giving directions. Participant 5 felt that directions should be standardized.

In addition to a lack of faith in teachers’ judgments regarding a student’s lack of preparation, Participant 8 felt a teacher needed concrete evidence to deduct points for off-task behavior as well. He suggested that a teacher needed to “see that they're just playing video games.” Without direct evidence of off-task behavior, this student believed a teacher might judge behavior as off-task when students “just get stuck or it doesn't seem like they did any work.”

In answer to questions about losing points for lack of effort, Participants 2, 3 and 8 expressed concerns with teachers’ judgments. Participant 2 was adamant in his disagreement with deducting points for lack of effort, saying, “I don't think a teacher can determine lack of effort.” When asked if a teacher could judge a poor classroom presentation as a result of a lack of effort on the part of the presenter, Participant 2 replied, “I don’t think it can be judged accurately.” Participant 8 elaborated using the example of a student presentation, explaining that some students “might be introverts and they don't like being up in front of other people . . . [so] it might seem that they don't know what they're talking about.” Participant 3 rejected the idea of deducting points for lack of effort. This student also used the presentation example to explain. Participant 3 felt the teacher could not judge the difference between presentations by “someone . . . that just sucks at giving presentations” versus a student who was “just not ready to do it” versus a student who was “scared or something.” This participant acknowledged that a teacher’s

ability to accurately judge a lack of effort would improve after forming relationships with students.

Participant 2 indicated a concern with teachers' ability to accurately judge behaviors even while agreeing with point deductions for late or missing assignments. This student's reason for agreeing was that no judgment was necessary to deduct these points. Participant 2 stated that "a teacher can easily see the assignment's not in there and it's due today." Finally, Participant 6 expressed the strongest reservation regarding teacher judgment. When the student was asked if behavior should be included as a component in academic grades in every class, this student replied with an adamant "No." Pressed for a reason, Participant 6 believed that some teachers' judgments would make the practice "more strict than is actually fair."

When discussing how to implement a system for factoring behavior into academic grades, seven participants out of eight expressed some measure of distrust in their teachers. Three of these expressions were implied. For example, Participant 1 never explicitly said he mistrusted teachers. However, this student implied mistrust by consistently referring to point deductions in terms of punitive behavior control. Participant 1 defined the practice as a means "to make sure that we actually do stuff." He described deducting points as means of student control because teachers could "threaten to take away academic demeanor" or as a means of punishment where a teacher could "take away part of our grade if we're not behaving in class and stuff." These phrases imply a mistrust in teachers' motives. Participant 6 implied mistrust when asked if all classes should include behavior in computing the academic grade. This student was not in favor of the practice in all classes due to inconsistent application by different teachers. Participant 8 felt the practice was unfair because students possess different learning styles.

Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7 stated their distrust more directly during the focus group discussion. Participant 2 believed teachers would show “a little bias” toward “their own favorites.” Participant 4 suggested that bias led teachers to excuse the poor behavior of some students while deducting points for the infractions of other students. Participants 1, 3, and 7 readily agreed. Participant 1 lamented that “not all teachers are going to be fair” in factoring behavior into the academic grade.

### **Summary**

In this study, eight middle school students were asked to share their opinion about a grading system that included behavior as a component of their academic grade. After gathering responses to questions in an interview, comments during a focus group discussion, and various artifacts, open, axial, and selective coding was utilized to determine three themes that emerged from the data. The first theme was the feeling of obligation expressed by the participants. Students considered themselves responsible for academic achievement and positive behavior. They expressed confidence in their ability to control their own efforts. Students felt obligated to take advantage of the benefits of the system and described the consequences as fair.

The second theme that emerged from the data was how the practice influenced student motivation in three areas. Students reported the most positive influence in the area of autonomy. They felt like they were in control of their behavior, which provided a feeling of control overall. In the area of competency, participants reported mixed feelings. At times, counting behavior as a factor in their grade instilled more confidence in their academic ability. At other times, students expressed doubt, worry, and anxiety about their ability based on the potential deduction of points for poor behavior. The response to the question of teacher/student relationships was similarly mixed. Two students believed the practice had no effect on their relationships with teachers.

One student responded in an entirely positive manner, believing the practice improved teacher/student relationships. Most participants reported adverse effects on the teacher/student relationship based on the potential for negative grades, lack of faith in teachers' judgments, and lack of trust in teachers.

Finally, the third theme that emerged was the focus on implementing the practice of counting behavior towards academic grades. Students offered suggestions for revising the practice. The suggestions were primarily based on the goal of increasing fair application and considering the circumstances beyond a student's control. The suggestions on implementation revealed an issue regarding faith in the judgment of teachers as well as a blatant distrust of teachers.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

As a result of education policies and practices beginning with high stakes testing and continuing with broadly accepted practices such as re-take/re-test and no-zero or minimum grades, the concepts of student responsibility and academic behavior were relegated to the sidelines. These policies trained students to neglect academic pursuits, to put off assignments because they were allowed to complete them at a later time. The result was a nation of students who worked the system and failed to adopt an academically responsible stance toward learning (Balingit & George, 2016).

At the same time that schools across the country adopted and implemented rigorous academic standards and standards-based assessments, the change in focus from grades to learning resulted in more lenient expectations regarding students' academic behavior. To provide every opportunity for students to excel, school systems allowed students to abdicate their academic responsibilities. In contrast, classroom teachers understood that academic behavior mattered. They understood that certain behaviors such as studying, attending school, putting forth effort, managing time wisely, practicing self-control, and persisting with a task were the keys to academic success. Research showed that when students learned positive academic behaviors in the early grades and continued those behaviors in the middle and high school levels, they enjoyed academic success at the college level (Farrington et al., 2012). In the environment of re-test/re-take and no-zero or minimum grades, teachers could not maintain rigorous academic standards because they could not enforce expectations of rigorous academic behavior. Since students were responsible for their academic success, they needed to accept a "share of the blame" for "poor academic achievement" (Moswela, 2014, p. 51). Re-test/re-take and no-zero or

minimum grades allowed students to abandon their responsibilities. In addition, these policies and the resulting practices undermined student motivation.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the response of students to the inclusion of an academic responsibility component as part of the academic grade. Using a case study method, the researcher focused on academic demeanor in a competency-based education ELA class of eighth-grade students. This method provided results that were rich in detail and broad in scope in order to generalize from the specific results to theory (Ary et al., 2014). Data in the form of responses to interviews, responses during a focus group discussion, and artifacts were collected from the eight students. The interviews and the focus group elicited general opinions about the practice of factoring behavior into grades as well as students' opinions on the effect of the practice on their motivation to succeed. Students volunteered suggestions on the implementation of a system for counting behaviors in computing the final grades.

### **Research Question**

How will students respond to using an academic behavior component in determining their quarter grade?

### **Summary of Findings**

Students responded positively to the concept of including a behavior component to determine academic grades. Participants reported a feeling of personal responsibility to succeed academically. They recognized that certain behaviors contributed positively to academic success. Participants also recognized the importance of personal effort in contributing to their academic success and reported mostly beneficial consequences from including behavior in their grades. They accepted negative consequences as fair and reasonable.

Student responses to the effect of factoring behaviors into academic grades on their feeling of motivation were mixed. Participants reported feeling empowered by the practice. They believed they were in control of their behavior which gave them more control of the practice and the final results. However, about half the participants reported negative feelings about their academic ability at times due to the practice of counting behavior as a grade. Only one participant reported feeling that the practice contributed positively to teacher/student relationships.

No matter what their opinions of the practice in general or regarding the effect on motivation, students offered several suggestions for implementing a system of grading in which behavior was factored into an academic grade. Suggestions ranged from specific suggestions for specific behaviors to systems like a three strikes rule. In their responses regarding implementation, two disturbing concepts emerged. Students expressed a lack of confidence in teachers' judgments and a lack of trust in their ability to fairly implement the practice.

## **Conclusions**

The findings of this study revealed three themes regarding students' reactions to counting behavior in an academic grade. The first theme was that students possess strong feelings of obligation toward their coursework. The second theme was the mixed response to the influence on student motivation when behavior was factored into academic grades. Finally, the third theme was the focus on implementation that revealed students' issues with classroom teachers.

**Feelings of obligation.** These responses were somewhat shocking given that these students have been trained for years to relinquish responsibility. However, the responses that indicated feelings of obligation proceeded from a logical progression of thought. First, students felt personally responsible for their behavior. Based on that sense of responsibility, students

recognized the power of their efforts in achieving success in the area of academic behavior. As a result, they were more cognizant of their behavior and focused their efforts to engage in specific academic behaviors. Once they engaged in these behaviors, students realized the direct benefits on their academic achievement. Based on this experience, they readily associated certain behaviors as key in achieving academic success. By accepting the benefits of positive behavior, students entered into an unwritten social contract which caused them to accept both the positive and the negative consequences of their behavior.

Moswela (2014) found that students' poor behaviors resulted in poor academic performance. When students were able to see that the opposite proposition was true – that positive behaviors resulted in positive academic performance – they felt some sense of obligation to behave positively despite a typical classroom experience in which teachers provide second, third, fourth, and, sometimes, unlimited chances. For their entire educational lives, today's students have operated in a system that allowed re-takes and flexible due dates without consequence. Despite growing up in a system with virtually no accountability for poor academic behavior, students still felt obligated to succeed, still recognized their efforts as critical to that success, still realized the benefits of positive academic behavior, and still accepted the consequences as fair and reasonable. Because students had their best interests at heart, they understood that grades reflected behavior and that academic behavior precipitated success (Farrington et al., 2012).

**Influence on motivation.** Positive student motivation required that students feel autonomous, feel competent, and feel a sense of positive relationship. The conclusions regarding the influence on student motivation of factoring behavior into academic grades were mixed. In general, the practice seemed to produce a sense of autonomy in students. However, a large

portion of students struggled with self-doubt and confidence in such a system. Most students reported a negative teacher/student relationship in a system of point deductions controlled by the teacher.

Given certain conditions, students felt a strong sense of autonomy in a system where behaviors were counted in academic grades. First, students equated positive behavior with academic success. Second, they recognized that they were in control of their behaviors. If these two conditions held, then students felt a sense of autonomy in the classroom. Even though the instructor made the decisions about deducting points, students believed in their autonomy because they controlled their behavior. A system of behavior accountability administered by a teacher can still be a system in which students feel positively motivated to perform due to their sense of control.

Unfortunately, accountability measures involving academic point deductions for behavior did not completely support students' confidence in their ability. Even when students believed they were fully in control of their actions, the prospect of losing control and subsequently losing points undermined academic confidence. Research indicated that a certain level of anxiety motivated student effort, but the balance was precarious at best (Hakimi, Hejazi, & Lavasani, 2011). The tenuous nature of student feelings of competency should be carefully considered in developing a system of accountability in which behavior is factored into grades.

Of even more concern in developing a behavior-equals-grades type of accountability system was the issue of positive teacher/student relationships. Today's students have benefitted from re-take/re-test policies and no-zero or minimum grade policies instituted across the nation in order to shift the focus from grades to learning. Proponents of re-take/re-test policies insisted that the practice provided students with a sense of hope, a positive motivation, a sense of

fairness, and positive academic results (Cox, 2011; Cutler, 2019; Scagell, 2017). Proponents of no-zero or minimum grade policies insisted that the practice promoted learning, motivated students, mitigated negative factors beyond the student's control, and reduced anxiety (Balingit & George, 2016; Carifio & Carey, 2013; Minero, 2018). After years of engaging in practices that provided such positive benefits, one would expect positive teacher/student relationships to rule the day even when employing a system of counting behavior as a part of students' grades. Instead, the practices produced students and parents who blamed teachers for students' failures. In a system of counting behavior as grades along with re-test/re-take and no-zero or minimum grade policies, students blamed teachers for point deductions because the practices in today's classrooms served to remove consequences and allow students to slack off academically (Balingit & George, 2016; Minero, 2018).

**Focus on implementation.** Without careful planning and design, students responded to the practice of counting behavior towards grades with a lack of faith in teachers' ability to accurately judge behavior and a distrust in teachers' fair application of the system. This response came as no surprise. For years, teachers sacrificed their better judgment to mandated practices of re-test/re-take. For years, teachers showed students they could not be trusted by employing grading schemes and no-zero policies that amount to tweaking the numbers. Students recognized their responsibility, the importance of their efforts, and the fairness of consequences. They also recognized practices that failed to reflect the real world of personal responsibility, effort, and consequences. Students understood that in the real world, second chances were rare. Students understood that in the real world, a person could not fail repeatedly and continue to maintain employment. Students understood that the policies adopted by educators in an attempt to focus on learning failed to reflect the real world (Balingit & George, 2016; Minero, 2018). As a result,

students questioned teachers' judgments. In addition, students recognized the inherent lack of fairness in these policies. The student who slacked off enjoyed multiple opportunities and achieved the same grade as the student who studied hard and passed on the first attempt. As a result, students lacked trust in their teachers.

### **Implications**

The trend in public education of increased focus on academic rigor and the emphasis on learning over grades directly affected classroom practices. Teachers adopted or were forced to adopt practices such as re-take/re-test policies and no-zero or minimum grade policies. The goal of these practices was to increase student learning and academic achievement. However, many educators insisted that these types of classroom practices were detrimental to students. They argued that re-take/re-test and no-zero or minimum grade policies have a variety of negative effects. For example, teachers insisted the policies decreased student motivation, did not reflect the real world, and created a lackadaisical approach to academics (Cox, 2011; Palma, 2019; Scagell, 2017). They recognized the inherent unfairness of promoting students who have not mastered the content. In addition, as these unfairly promoted students progressed through grade levels, the problem worsened because they did not possess knowledge on which to build (Balingit & George, 2016; Minero, 2018). When these types of policies were implemented, students simply worked the system and failed to adopt an academically responsible stance toward learning (Balingit & George, 2016).

The results of this study suggested that students recognized a problem with an "either/or" situation. Students understood that the choice was not academic rigor or academic responsibility. They recognized that teachers could focus on both learning and academic behaviors. Furthermore, students willingly accepted such an environment. They acknowledged

“both/and” practices as fair and reflective of the real world. In the classroom, teachers can achieve the best of all worlds. Students can fully meet both rigorous academic expectations and rigorous responsibility expectations.

The keys to a successful system were consistency and communication. Practices that factor behaviors into academic grades should be implemented and executed consistently. First, teachers should be consistent within their classrooms, guarding against preferential treatment and hasty judgments. Second, if the policy was school-wide, the teachers implementing the policy should do so in the same way. Teachers should decide on what behaviors constitute academic behaviors, the consequences for engaging or failing to engage in those behaviors, and how to factor those consequences into an academic grade. Requirements for students should be consistent from math class to English class to science class to social studies class.

The second key for implementing a system in which behaviors are factored into academic grades was communication. Without open and honest communication, students will continue to mistrust their instructors. Teachers must explain the reasoning behind the focus on learning and the practices involved. For example, teachers must move beyond an explanation of how a re-test/re-take policy works; they must also communicate why the policy exists and how the policy benefits students. They must explain the concept of academic responsibility. Students will quickly grasp the benefits, but teachers must communicate further. They must communicate the reasoning for each specific expectation.

When a system of accountability for behavior was instituted, students rose to the level of expectations. They understood the nature of cause and effect, the idea of natural consequences, and the need to impose consequences in order to achieve desired results. Instead of balking at an obligation or blaming the instructor, students appreciated the need for a certain level of

behavioral expectations. They intuitively grasped the connection between behavior and academic success.

## **Recommendations**

One of the major delimitations of this study was the small sample size. For this study, only eight students were questioned about their view on including behavior as a component in an academic grade. For a more complete picture on students' reactions to this practice, subsequent studies should increase the sample size to a whole class, multiple classes in the same school, or even multiple classes from multiple schools. Broadening the sample size to include a variety of schools, school systems, and socio-economic backgrounds could significantly change the results and provide more data regarding student opinions.

Another recommendation for future study is a mixed-method study. Student responses to interviews and discussions in a focus group can be informative. A survey focused on determining the relationship between what students say and what students do would be enlightening. The results could be quantified and plotted in order to determine the extent of the relationship. Another quantitative component could be data regarding actual student performance contrasted with student academic demeanor scores. This study only suggested a relationship between the two. However, a larger sample size would generate enough data to graph.

Even if the study was conducted with a larger sample size and mixed methodology, a skilled, experienced researcher should conduct the interviews. In this study, the person conducting the interviews sometimes failed to ask clear, simple questions. Because of a lack of experience, the interviewer interrupted participants to clarify a question instead of allowing

participants to respond freely. In addition, the interviewer presented his understanding of vague answers and allowed participants to agree.

Finally, interviews and the focus group should occur in person. The COVID-19 pandemic hampered the data collection phase of this study. The participants stayed home due to school and business shutdowns, and the interviews suffered as a result. Videos were often unclear or blurry or erratic. Thus, facial expressions and other body language were not interpreted or included in the researcher's descriptions or interpretations. The focus group was conducted via teleconference. The discussion moderator could not see if the participants were focused and attentive. On several occasions, students participating in the discussion seemed disengaged and distracted. In-person interviews and an in-person focus group would provide more information and guard against student distraction.

### **Summary**

In responding to the practice of factoring behavior into an academic grade, students were generally positive. They believed the practice was a reflection of the real world in which people are responsible for their actions. They recognized that actions have consequences and felt that counting behavior in an academic grade was generally fair. Participants reported a sense of control over their education. However, at times the practice made them question their academic ability, and they associated the practice with a negative teacher/student relationship. While participants offered several suggestions about how to implement the system, the suggestions were based on a lack of confidence in teachers' judgments and a lack of trust in their teachers.

## References

- Ametepee, L. K., Tchinsala, Y., & Agbeh, A. O. (2014). The No Child Left Behind Act, the Common Core State Standards, and the school curriculum. *Review of Higher Education & Self-Learning*, 7(25), 111–119.
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Irvine, C. K. S., & Walker, D. A. (2014). *Introduction to research in education*. Retrieved from <https://bookshelf.vitalsource.com/#/books/9781285499734/cfi/46!4/4@0.00:31.8>
- Balingit, M., & George, D. S. (2016). Is it becoming too hard to fail? Schools are shifting toward no-zero grading policies. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/is-it-becoming-too-hard-to-fail-schools-are-shifting-toward-no-zero-grading-policies/2016/07/05/3c464f5e-3cb0-11e6-80bc-d06711fd2125\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/is-it-becoming-too-hard-to-fail-schools-are-shifting-toward-no-zero-grading-policies/2016/07/05/3c464f5e-3cb0-11e6-80bc-d06711fd2125_story.html)
- Buckmiller, T., Peters, R., & Kruse, J. (2017). Questioning points and percentages: Standards-based grading (SBG) in higher education. *College Teaching*, 65(4), 151–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2017.1302919>
- Caneva, G. (2013, October). For students' sake, say no to 'No-Zero Policy' on grading. *Chicago Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.chicagoreporter.com/students-sake-say-no-no-zero-policy-grading/>
- Cannata, M., Haynes, K. T., & Smith, T. M. (2017). Understanding practice of effective high schools: The role of academic press and support [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/marisacannata/files/2013/10/Understanding-practice-of-effective-high-schools-SOAR.pdf>

- Carifio, James, & Carey, T. (2013). The arguments and data in favor of minimum grading. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 25(4), 19–30.
- Chen, P. P., & Bonner, S. M. (2017). Teachers' beliefs about grading practices and a constructivist approach to teaching. *Educational Assessment*, 22(1), 18–34.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10627197.2016.1271703>
- Cox, K. (2011). Putting classroom grading on the table: A reform in progress. *American Secondary Education*, Vol. 40, pp. 67–87. <https://doi.org/10.2307/23100415>
- Croft, S. J., Roberts, M. A., & Stenhouse, V. L. (2015). The perfect storm of education reform: High-stakes testing and teacher evaluation. *Social Justice*, 42(1), 70–92. Retrieved from [http://www.socialjusticejournal.org/archive/139\\_42\\_1/139\\_05\\_Croft\\_Roberts\\_Stenhouse.pdf](http://www.socialjusticejournal.org/archive/139_42_1/139_05_Croft_Roberts_Stenhouse.pdf)
- Cutler, D. (2019). A teacher's policy for letting students retake tests and assignments | Edutopia. Retrieved August 4, 2019, from Edutopia website: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/tips-allowing-test-retakes>
- Dennis, D. V. (2017). Learning from the past: What ESSA has the chance to get right. *Reading Teacher*, 70(4), 395–400. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1538>
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
- Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T. S., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2012). Teaching adolescents to become learners: The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review. *Chicago:University of*

- Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research*, (June), 1–106.
- Frost, S. H. (1989). Academic responsibility: Can it be taught? *NACADA Journal*, 9(2), 17–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.12930/0271-9517-9.2.17>
- Gagne, M. (Ed.). (2014). *The Oxford handbook of work engagement, motivation, and self-determination theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Greer, W. (2018). *The 50 year history of the common core*. 100–118.
- Gutman, L., & Schoon, I. (2013). The impact of non-cognitive skills on outcomes for young people. *Education Endowment Foundation*, (November), 1–57.
- Hakimi, S., Hejazi, E., & Lavasani, M. G. (2011). The relationships between personality traits and students' academic achievement. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 29, 836–845. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.11.312>
- Hamilton, L. S., Stecher, B. M., & Yuan, K. (2008). Standards-based reform in the United States: History, research, and future directions [PDF file]. Retrieved from [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reprints/2009/RAND\\_RP1384.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reprints/2009/RAND_RP1384.pdf)
- Hamlin, D., & Peterson, P. E. (2018). Have states maintained high expectations for student performance? *Education Next*, 18(4), 42–48. Retrieved from <https://www.educationnext.org/have-states-maintained-high-expectations-student-performance-analysis-2017-proficiency-standards/>
- Haynes, E., Zeiser, K., Surr, W., Hauser, A., Clymer, L., Walston, J., ... Yang, R. (2016). Looking under the hood of competency-based education: The relationship between competency-based education practices and students' learning skills, behaviors, and dispositions. Retrieved from <http://www.nmefoundation.org/resources/competency-based-pathways/looking-under-the-hood-of-competency-based-educati>

- Heise, M. (2017). From No Child Left Behind to Every Student Succeeds: Back to a future for education federalism. *Columbia Law Review*, *117*(7), 1859–1896.
- Hochbein, C., & Pollio, M. (2016). Making grades more meaningful. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *98*(3), 49–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721716677262>
- Hooper, J., & Cowell, R. (2014). Standards-based grading: History adjusted true score. *Educational Assessment*, *19*(1), 58–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10627197.2014.869451>
- Huddleston, A. P., & Rockwell, E. C. (2015). Assessment for the masses: A historical critique of high-stakes testing in reading. *Texas Journal of Literacy Education*, *3*(1), 38–49. Retrieved from [www.texasreaders.org](http://www.texasreaders.org)
- Jasinski, P. (2016). No-zero grading system ends at Leominster middle schools. *Sentinel & Enterprise*. Retrieved July 10, 2019, from [http://www.sentinelandenterprise.com/news/ci\\_29745919/no-zero-grading-system-ends-at-leominster-middle](http://www.sentinelandenterprise.com/news/ci_29745919/no-zero-grading-system-ends-at-leominster-middle)
- Key Shifts in English Language Arts | Common Core State Standards Initiative. (n.d.). Retrieved July 13, 2019, from <http://www.corestandards.org/other-resources/key-shifts-in-english-language-arts/>
- Knight, M., & Cooper, R. (2019). Taking on a new grading system: The interconnected effects of standards-based grading on teaching, learning, assessment, and student behavior. *NASSP Bulletin*, *103*(1), 65–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636519826709>
- Kusurkar, R. A., Croiset, G., & Ten Cate, T. J. (2011). Twelve tips to stimulate intrinsic motivation in students through autonomy-supportive classroom teaching derived from self-determination theory. *Medical Teacher*, *33*(12), 978–982. <https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2011.599896>

- Lauen, D. L., & Gaddis, S. M. (2016). Accountability pressure, academic standards, and educational triage [PDF file]. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(1), 127–147. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373715598577>
- Le, C., Wolfe, R. E., & Steinberg, A. (2014). The past and the promise: Today's competency education movement. *Students at the Center: Competency Education Research Series*, (September). Retrieved from <http://www.jff.org/publications/past-and-promise-todays-competency-education-movement>
- Lee, J., & Wu, Y. (2017b). Is the common core racing america to the top ? Student achievement. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(35), 1–23. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2834>
- Lynch, M. (2018). Academic rigor: you're doing it wrong and here's why. *The Edvocate*. Retrieved July 17, 2019, from <https://www.theedadvocate.org/academic-rigor-youre-doing-it-wrong-and-heres-why/>
- Massell, D., & Perrault, P. (2014). Alignment: Its role in standards-based reform and prospects for the common core. *Theory into Practice*, 53(3), 196–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.916956>
- McCombs, B. (2010). Developing responsible and autonomous learners: A key to motivating students. Retrieved July 17, 2019, from <https://www.apa.org/education/k12/learners>
- Minero, E. (2018, July). Do no-zero policies help hurt students? *Edutopia*. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/do-no-zero-policies-help-or-hurt-students>
- Moswela, B. (2014). Students' academic achievement: Whose responsibility and accountability? [PDF file]. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 5(10), 46–57. Retrieved from [https://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_5\\_No\\_10\\_September\\_2014/7.pdf](https://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol_5_No_10_September_2014/7.pdf)

- Nelson, L., McMahan, S., & Torres, T. (2012). The impact of a junior high school community intervention project: Moving beyond the testing juggernaut and into a community of creative learners. *School Community Journal*, 22(1), 125–144. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.umsl.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eft&AN=77393014&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Nichols, S. L. (2008). An exploration of students' belongingness beliefs in one middle school. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 76(2), 145–169. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JEXE.76.2.145-169>
- Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2007). *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15434300701776393>
- Niemiec, C. P., & Ryan, R. M. (2009). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: Applying self-determination theory to educational practice. *Theory and Research in Public Education*, 7(2), 133–144.
- O'Brien, P. (2018). Self-determination for primary school children: Theory and practice. *REACH: Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland.*, 31(2), 155–168. Retrieved from <http://login.ezproxy.lib.umn.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=eue&AN=131273201&site=ehost-live>
- Palma, A. (2019). An argument against allowing test retakes in high school | *Edutopia*. Retrieved August 4, 2019, from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/case-not-allowing-test-retakes>
- Peterson, P. E., Barrows, S., & Gift, T. (2016). After common core, states set rigorous standards. *Education Next*, 16(3), 9–15.
- Phelps, R. P. (2017). Kill the messenger: The war on standardized testing. In *Kill the Messenger: The War on Standardized Testing* (first). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203787755>

- Polleck, J. N., & Jeffery, J. V. (2017). Common core standards and their impact on standardized test design: A New York case study. *The High School Journal*, *101*(1), 1–26.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2017.0013>
- Ryan, S., & Cox, J. D. (2017). Investigating student exposure to competency-based education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *25*, 24. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2792>
- Saultz, A., White, R. S., Mceachin, A., Fusarelli, L. D., & Fusarelli, B. C. (2017). Teacher quality, distribution, and equity in ESSA. *Journal of School Leadership*, *27*(5), 652–674.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461702700503>
- Scagell, J. (2017). More schools are offering test retakes. But does that make kids less resilient? Retrieved August 4, 2019, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2017/12/04/more-schools-are-offering-test-retakes-but-does-that-make-kids-less-resilient/?utm\\_term=.cf4ba0f52177](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2017/12/04/more-schools-are-offering-test-retakes-but-does-that-make-kids-less-resilient/?utm_term=.cf4ba0f52177)
- Sharma, P. (2015). Standards-based assessments in the classroom: A feasible approach to improving the quality of students' learning. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, *12*(1), 6–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973184914556864>
- Stecher, B., Holtzman, D., Garet, M., Hamilton, L., Engberg, J., Steiner, E., . . . Chambers, J. (2018). *Improving teaching effectiveness: Final report: The intensive partnerships for effective teaching through 2015 & 2016*. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2242>
- Steele, J. L., Lewis, M., Santibanez, L., Faxon-Mills, S., & Rudnick, M. (2014). Competency-based education in three pilot programs: What it is, how it's implemented, and how it's working [PDF file]. Retrieved from [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9796.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9796.html).

- Sturgis, C. (2016). Reaching the tipping point: Insights on advancing competency education in New England [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://aurora-institute.org/resource/reaching-the-tipping-point-insights-on-advancing-competency-education-in-new-england/>
- Theory Overview. (2019). Retrieved June 17, 2020, from <https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/>
- Toledo, S., & Dubas, J. M. (2017). A learner-centered grading method focused on reaching proficiency with course learning outcomes. *Journal of Chemical Education*, *94*(8), 1043–1050. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.6b00651>
- Walker, T. (2016). Teachers divided over controversial “no-zero” grading policy. *NEA Today*. Retrieved from <http://neatoday.org/2016/08/04/no-zero-policy-pro-con/>
- Wang, C. K. J., Liu, W. C., Kee, Y. H., & Chian, L. K. (2019). Competence, autonomy, and relatedness in the classroom: Understanding students’ motivational processes using the self-determination theory. *Heliyon*, *5*(7), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2019.e01983>
- Weiss, J. (2015). Competing principles. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved July 13, 2019, from website: [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/competing\\_principles](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/competing_principles)

**Appendix A:**

Conversion Chart for CBE Grades

## WCMS CBE Grade Scale Conversion

A CBE GRADE 4.0-5.0 *HONORS 3.0-3.03		B CBE GRADE 3.0-3.9 *HONORS 3.5-3.2		C CBE GRADE 2.0-2.9 *HONORS 2.5-2.4		D/F CBE GRADE 1.0-1.9 *HONORS 1.5-1.4	
CBE Grade	100 Point Scale Equivalent	CBE Grade	100 Point Scale Equivalent	CBE Grade	100 Point Scale Equivalent	CBE Grade	100 Point Scale Equivalent
5	100						
4.9	99	3.9	89	2.9	81	1.9	71
4.8	98	3.8	88	2.8	80	1.8	70
4.7	97	3.7	87	2.7	79	1.7	70
4.6	96	3.6	86	2.6	78	1.6	69
4.5	95	3.5	86	2.5	77	1.5	68
4.4	94	3.4	85	2.4	76	1.4	67
4.3	93	3.3	84	2.3	75	1.3	67
4.2	92	3.2	83	2.2	74	1.2	66
4.1	91	3.1	82	2.1	73	1.1	65
4	90	3	82	2	72	1	65

\*Letter grades displayed above correspond to the Honors level grade after 30 points added at the end of each grading period

**Appendix B:**

One-on-One Interview Questions

1. What is your understanding of Competency-Based Education?
2. How do you feel about Competency-Based Education?
3. Why do you think Academic Demeanor is included as a competency?
4. What are some positives of including Academic Demeanor as a competency?
5. What are some negatives of including Academic Demeanor as a competency?
6. How do you feel about losing Academic Demeanor points for off-task behavior? Lack of preparation? Late/missing assignments? Lack of effort? Failure to follow directions? Cheating?
7. Which reasons would you eliminate and why?
8. What reasons for losing points in Academic Demeanor should be added?
9. How should the Academic Demeanor competency be implemented?
10. How does including Academic Demeanor as a competency affect how you feel about your ability to control your own education?
11. How does including Academic Demeanor as a competency affect how you feel about your academic ability?
12. How does including Academic Demeanor as a competency affect how you feel about your relationship with your teacher?
13. How does including Academic Demeanor as a competency affect how you approach your coursework?
14. How would you feel if Academic Demeanor was included as a component of your grade in all your classes?

**Appendix C:**

Artifacts Collected for Each Participant in Quarter One

Participants	Q1 AD	Why were points deducted?	Q1 grade	Q1 BM
1	4.5	Late or missing assignments	97	80
2	5	N/A	88	65.7
3	4.5	Late or missing assignments	96	71.4
4	4	Late or missing assignments	89	71.4
5	3.5	Late or missing assignments	88	71.4
6	4.5	Late or missing assignments	84	48.6
7	5	N/A	98	51.4
8	4	Late or missing assignments	85	74.3

Note. Q1 = quarter one of the school year. AD = academic demeanor and refers to the score of the academic demeanor competency in quarter one. BM = benchmark and refers to the score on the benchmark taken in quarter one.

**Appendix D:**

Artifacts Collected for Each Participant in Quarter Two

Participants	Q2 AD	Why were points deducted?	Q2 grade	Q2 BM
1	4.75	Failure to follow directions	95	70
2	4.75	Off-task behavior	89	67.5
3	4.5	Failure to follow directions	95	65
4	4.25	Failure to follow directions and Off-task behavior	86	72.5
5	4.5	Failure to follow directions	87	57.5
6	4.25	Late or missing assignments, failure to follow directions, lack of effort	82	62.5
7	5	N/A	90	57.5
8	4	Cheating, lack of effort, lack of preparation	81	74.3

Note. Q2 = quarter two of the school year. AD = academic demeanor and refers to the score of the academic demeanor competency in quarter two. BM = benchmark and refers to the score on the benchmark taken in quarter two.

**Appendix E:**

Artifacts Collected for Each Participant in Quarter Three

Participants	Q3 AD	Why were points deducted?	Q3 grade	Q3 BM
1	3.75	Late or missing assignments	93	77.8
2	4.25	Late or missing assignments	88	64.4
3	5	N/A	95	68.9
4	2.75	Failure to follow directions, Off-task behavior, lack of effort, late or missing assignments	87	77.8
5	3.25	Late or missing assignments, failure to follow directions	81	68.9
6	3.75	Late or missing assignments	79	42.2
7	4.5	Late or missing assignments, failure to follow directions	95	80
8	5.25	Earned points	81	62.2

Note. Q3 = quarter three of the school year. AD = academic demeanor and refers to the score of the academic demeanor competency in quarter three. BM = benchmark and refers to the score on the benchmark taken in quarter three.