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Journey of Reform: A Phenomenological Study of the Perceived Impacts of Standards-Based Grading on Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

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Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

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Grading on Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

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Action Research Report

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Research reports in the 1980's showed that U.S. students were falling behind in their scores and rankings when compared to students from other countries. Concern for these findings prompted researchers to consider how to reform the "traditional" model of schools structured in the early 1900's - which catered to a theory of averages (average student, average learning times, and averaging scores) and other "factory-based" approaches - to a model that would make our students more competitive in the 21st century global market. This reform would require major overhauls in curriculum, assessment, and instructional mindsets to make students college and career ready and keep learners in school (Yanacheak, 2020).

Federal and state legislation efforts starting with the *No Child Left Behind Act* and *Every Student Succeeds Act* were added to state-mandated requirements around content and required courses. School districts began compliancy efforts to learn, unpack, and use these required standards and benchmarks in ways that were meaningful. Area education agencies and other resources began initiating pilot studies and experiments to guide districts in their efforts. A plethora of reform movements and initiatives around curriculum, assessment, and instruction were born, bought, and sold. Two of them that appear to be weathering the test of time and continue to gain momentum in their response to the research are Standards-Based Grading (SBG) and Personalized Competency-Based Education (PCBE) (Yanacheak, 2020).

Sioux Center Community School's History of Reform to SBG and PCBE

Sioux Center Community Schools, a district found in the northwest corner of the state of Iowa, was not absent from this reform journey. The Sioux Center Community School District, during the time of this research, was part of the growing community of Sioux Center, Iowa. The district consisted of three schools (soon to be four): an elementary that housed TK-4th grade, a middle school that served 5th to 8th grade, and a high school made of 9th-12th grades. The town of

Sioux Center experienced exponential growth during the time of their reform to SBG including the addition of students in the year 2019 relative to adding an entire average grade level in the district. Substantial growth began and continued alongside the time of expanding educational reform initiatives and mandates thus adding to its burden of learning and responding appropriately to a more diverse student population and its needs over the years.

Beginning in 2002, the Sioux Center District accepted an opportunity to be part of a pilot program through the Iowa Association of School Boards known as the Lighthouse Project. The essence of the pilot project was to teach districts how to engage in research-based frameworks for embedded ongoing professional development. The trainers were progressive in teaching systemic reform to district leaders in how to approach the onslaught of oncoming professional development opportunities needed for the federal and state education reform that was soon to be on Sioux Center's doorstep. With this reform movement, the school's lasting and overall professional development goal became "Improve instruction at every grade level and content area: [With the rationale] If Instruction improves at every grade level and content area, then student achievement will improve at every grade level and content area" (O'Donnell, 2002).

In 2008, the district engaged in the process of reading, and "unpacking" the Iowa Core standards in the areas of Math and ELA/Literacy which were formally released in 2010. The district began the process of curriculum mapping, translating the standards, aligning them by grade level and teacher, and bundling them within units. Meanwhile, the school superintendent, leadership and several school board members attended a conference by Rick DuFour and returned with two questions that were complementary to the teacher's current Iowa Core work and would drive the district's journey even nearer to standards-based grading. The questions that framed their next steps were: "What is it we want our students to know?" and "How will we

know when they have learned it?" (O'Donnell, personal communication, November 4, 2020).

According to O'Donnell, it was at this time, in regard to the curriculum, instruction, and

assessment triangle of professional development, that the board realized that the missing piece

for continued reform in Sioux Center was in the area of assessment: "How will we know they

have learned it?" (O'Donnell, personal communication, November 4, 2020)

Thus, began a two-year investigation into standards-based grading by pilot teams at the

middle and high schools. The following school year, having experimented in their classrooms

and feeling confident of both the theory and opportunity, yet acknowledging the magnitude of a

potential initiative, the pilot team expanded its ranks and traveled with a larger group of

interested teacher-leaders to another initial training led by Tim Westerberg. Westerberg "served

on the NASSP/Carnegie Foundation Commission on the Restructuring of the American High

School, which produced the seminal report Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution"

(Westerberg, 2016, p.162). Westerberg's presentation and book *Charting a Course to Standards

Based Grading: What to Stop, What to Start, and Why it Matters* laid a visual multi-year

groundwork plan that was appealing to both the pilot team and the school's administration.

The initiative for the entire district was formally begun following this trip, and the

school's administration and leadership teams designed their plans and professional development

around its rollout - K-12. Westerberg was invited to the school district to lead professional

development twice in the 2013-2014 school year. Westerberg's book laid out a series of four

chronological "Destinations," as he calls them, that set the road map for implementation of

standards-based grading. He started the Sioux Center district out with his first visit in

understanding "Destination 1: Addressing Seven Counterproductive Assessment and Grading

Practices and Beliefs" and moved on through Destinations 2 and 3 which included methods for

designing SBG proficiency scales and units of instruction (Westerberg, 2016). A sampling of the

back of his book blurb outlines the steps that were attempted to be followed by the Sioux Center

district as they considered their reasoning and route towards its implementation:

> What's the best way to ensure that grading policies are fair, accurate, and consistent
>
> across classrooms? How can schools transition to a grading system that better reflects
>
> what students are actually learning? Tim R. Westerberg makes the journey easier by
>
> offering a continuum of options, with four "destinations" on the road to improved grading
>
> and assessment.
>
> - Destination 1 critically examines such popular grading mechanisms as the zero,
>   extra credit, the "semester killer" project, averaging, mixing academic
>   performance with work ethic, and refusing to accept late work, and explains how
>   they undermine objectivity and instead result in widely divergent grades for
>   comparable work – with major consequences for students.
>
> - Destination 2 invites educators to put assessment and grading into the larger
>   context of districtwide guaranteed and viable curriculum and lays out the
>   organizational conditions and necessary steps to accomplish this goal.
>
> - Destination 3 brings parents and others on board with a multi-year
>   implementation plan and community engagement strategies for introducing report
>   cards that indicate student achievement by standards rather than – or in addition
>   to- letter grades.
>
> - Destination 4, competency-based education, involves a total rethinking of the
>   nature and structure of school, leading to individualized education for all students.

However far they choose to go, administrators and teacher leaders can turn to *Charting a Course to Standards-Based Grading* for the quick wins and long-term support and guidance they need to make the trip well worth the effort. (Westerberg, 2016)

With Westerberg's training and with the experience of those who had begun individually experimenting prior to the rollout, it soon became apparent to leadership that SBG was far from just a grading platform and had its best potential being linked closely to the district's efforts with curriculum reform in unpacking, aligning, and leading through state standards complemented with researched-based instructional reform. At this time, Sioux Center determined that it would refer to the initiative as Standards-Based Instruction (SBI) rather than Standards-Based Grading (SBG) to promote its usefulness in all three areas of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment triangle.

However, as anticipated with any major reform or learning initiative, these "destinations" were met with varying levels of resistance, fidelity, depth, and pacing. Differentiation for the entire district was allowed as the three schools of the district quickly discovered varying levels of readiness and needs in its ranks. In addition, without some form of monitoring or reflection tool and implementation data, leadership realized it was getting harder to determine the best "next steps" for the good of the whole. SBI capacity-building and development was still the implied primary focus district-wide for professional development, but it was becoming more difficult to ascertain what that meant in terms of decision-making by leadership. Hefelbower and colleagues (2014) confirmed the landscape at Sioux Center noting, "This is not a task for the faint of heart…All reform on a districtwide scale is tough but moving a system to true standards-based grading is extraordinarily tough, long-term work and requires district leadership to tenaciously do the right thing for students" (p. 87).

With some of these misgivings and obstacles in mind, in 2019-2020, the district instructional coaches set out to create a formal district-wide set of guiding principles to assist next steps and monitoring efforts. Hoping to regain some structure and a "North Star" to guide continued SBI work, the team did a crosswalk of the different leading experts in SBG that each of the buildings and teams had been using over the years to develop their practice and system reform. This crosswalk included the works of Westerberg, O'Conner, and the state's SBG resource known as the Iowa Competency-Based Education Collaborative (ICBEC), a group of representatives from Iowa schools, area education agencies, the state education department, and higher education institutions which worked "to research, explore, and implement facets of personalized, competency-based education" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 5). The goal of the Sioux Center instructional coaches was to provide a one-page summary of principles fitting to the district that could help to continue and to guide professional development work and that could be used as a uniform foundational tool for planning and monitoring progress. After discussion and revising, six guiding principles came to light that complemented Westerberg's original destinations including the final (fourth) destination of PCBE. The principles document was presented to a school board representative and approved by the administration in the spring of 2020 (Appendix C).

As a set of guiding principles, it was determined that it needed to remain a guide rather than policy. As Westerberg's (2016) text alludes, administrators and teacher leaders in the Sioux Center district will decide how far they choose to go on the journey (back cover). Several questions will remain at the surface for this district in their reform initiative: What is the next "best" destination? Is the Sioux Center district holding true to their reform efforts to "Educate the whole student for a whole lifetime"? Is the professional development around this

comprehensive initiative sustainable? If so, what more needs to be done in the way of developing

governing tools and procuring data within the district before making further decisions? To be a

data-driven, collaborative professional development community, the need for ongoing inquiry,

discussion, and research was determined as the premise for this study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how the shift, transition to,

and ongoing implementation of the standards-based instruction reform and professional

development were perceived and experienced in the Sioux Center Community School District.

The focus was on this initiative's impact on curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices as

well as its effect on student learning. By asking questions centered around these focal points, the

researcher hoped to flesh out common themes for the following purposes: to provide guidance

around continued district professional development response and professional development

pacing as well as to ascertain implications to next steps and destinations for short- and long-term

professional development planning; to create potential "best practice" tools for monitoring

fidelity, efficacy, and teacher confidence; and to provide insights to prevent future teacher

burnout in the process.

Guiding Research Questions

The interviewer asked questions centering around teachers' experiences of SBI by

exploring perceptions of benefits, challenges, and overall worth to instruction of the SBI reform

in the Sioux Center District as well as overall perceptions on the effects of student learning.

1. What has been the impact on the individual teacher's pedagogy and practice at SCCS

    since the implementation of SBI and a more personalized competency-based model?

2. What has been the impact on student learning at SCCS since the implementation of SBI

and a more personalized competency-based model?

3. How are the main pillars and guiding principles being perceived and experienced by the

teachers at SCCS?

Key Words and Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used. These definitions

were provided to participants in the study for the sake of common language and understanding.

- *Assessment* – a variety of methods or tools used to evaluate, measure, document, and

communicate the academic readiness, learning progress, skill acquisition, or educational needs of

students. In SBG this includes both formative and summative assessment.

-Competency Based Education (CBE) or Personalized CBE (PCBE) – a potential concluding

destination of standards-based grading that allows students autonomy in making decisions about

how, where, and when to demonstrate their learning. Instruction and assessment are student-

centered. Students' progress is based on evidence and allows for different pathways and varied

pacing.

-Curriculum -- the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn. In SBG curriculum is

based on state standards.

-Standards Based Grading (SBG)- a method of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic

reporting that are based on students demonstrating understanding or "mastery" of criterion-

referenced knowledge and skills.

-Standards Based Instruction (SBI) – Standards Based Grading approach that centers on

research-based pedagogical practices to complement curriculum and assessment change.

Literature Review

For the past two decades, in school districts across the nation, educational reform centered around the three main areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. More recent reforms have shifted away from the more traditional models designed in the early 1800's Industrial Age, which have since been dubbed the "factory model." This factory model tended to design and deliver instruction "established by a preconceived idea that there is an average student" (Yanacheak, 2020).   More recent reform initiatives have been centered around a personalized, student-centered model as part of the implementation of state-mandated school improvement plans. "There are a growing number of states who have begun to introduce personalized, competency-based education in their PK-12th grade, community college, and four-year college educational systems" (Patrick et al., 2018; as cited in Yanacheak, 2020, p. 22). In addition, "many states began to see a change in grading practices, moving from issuing grades on a purely subjective 100-point scale to a more competency-and standards-based grading scale" (Brookhart, 2009; Marzano, 2010; as cited in Yanacheak, 2020, p. 19). Teachers are no doubt experiencing these shifts in curriculum, instruction, and assessment at many different speeds, depth, and with varying levels of fidelity and success.

While much of the educational reform was focused on creating and implementing clear, specific, and measurable standards through the common core and state-level mandates, research literature implied that districts were working anywhere on an invisible continuum that began with the "unpacking standards" to establish an aligned curriculum, to establishing sweeping new assessment practices such as standards-based grading. Still other reforms included experimenting with the complementary researched-based instructional practices of a more personalized competency-based education model. It first appeared possible to stop short at simply

implementing standards as the basis of one's school curriculum and leave it at that; however, it became apparent that it was nearly impossible to change or reform assessment practices without changing and reforming instruction and vice versa. "You must be prepared for the pedagogical shifts that are necessary to completely adopt a standards-based grading approach" (Davis, 2020) due to significant interdependence between a teacher's grading practices and his/her teaching practices (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 73).

"There are many entry points for schools to begin the journey toward a PCBE model. It may start with SBG" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 26). Some schools began with the mandatory unpacking of state standards and quickly (or simultaneously) moved to investigating new assessment practices (such as the elements of standards-based grading) to accompany their work. In turn, these shifts often evolved into the necessary adaptations and reforms of pedagogy and instruction. In many schools, the instructional shifts inevitably pointed in the direction of PCBE, or, in the least, a modified or hybrid approach of SBG and PCBE. "Composed of several specific reform efforts, SBG manifests itself in different ways across districts and even grade levels" (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 66). There is currently still no cookie-cutter approach to these shifts. According to the Great Schools Partnership website, proficiency-based learning "may take different forms from school to school – there is no universal model or approach – and educators may use some or all of the beliefs and practices of proficiency-based learning" (Great Schools, 2020).

SBG and PCBE: Indicators of Implementation

Although many school reform initiatives were underway, as of 2015, it was reported that schools continued to need to reform to help students graduate with a high level of academic proficiency and the dispositions needed to be successful in the current global market when

compared to graduates from other countries (Marion & Leather, 2015; as cited in Yanacheak, 2020, p. 17). Personalized, competency-based education models that gained momentum since the turn of the century could make a difference for all students and their needs in this current global environment (Rikabaugh, 2016; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2014; as cited in Yanacheak, 2020, p.17). In fact, PCBE had been shown to increase the number of students graduating from both the secondary and post-secondary educational systems, who are career-ready and competitive in the global market (Boyer & Crippen, 2014; Brodersen & Randel, 2017; as cited in Yanacheak, 2020, p. 36). Another study by Pollio and Hochbein (2015), provided quantitative support for standards-based grading. Their results "indicated that the rate of students earning an A or B in a course and passing the state test approximately doubled when utilizing standards-based grading practices" (p. 1).

Positive indicators were not just emerging in terms of benefits for students. Some experts reported that a personalized, standards, or competency-based system appeared to be an approach "that keeps both teachers and students invested in learning that reaches mastery at a much higher level and in a way no other educational initiative has in the past 50 plus years (Friend et al., 2017; Sullivan et al., 2015; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; as cited in Yanacheak, 2020, p.20). Consequently, there was a growing level of enthusiasm for teaching being rediscovered and reported by educators "who had become disenfranchised" (Stewart, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2015; as cited in Yanacheak, 2020, p. 20).

If done with fidelity, the reform movements of SBG and PCBE appeared to fit the needs for both teachers and students and addressed the challenges facing educational systems. While the reform initiatives of SBG and PCBE were initially attempted to positively impact meager student academic data which revealed many of America's students lagging, further evidence

indicated that SBG and PCBE changes in educational frameworks also yielded positive

perceptions in motivation:

> Teachers and students become more excited and engaged in learning when they are
>
> involved in a personalized competency-based program. […] Teachers take on the role of
>
> a facilitator, coach, or mentor (Sturgis & Casey, 2018). The students own their learning,
>
> co-designing with teachers on how they will demonstrate their mastery of the required
>
> academic knowledge and transferrable skills needed to graduate (Stack &Vander Els,
>
> 2018). […] A personalized, competency-based education system supports a framework
>
> that can change what learning looks like for teachers and students as they all become
>
> learners and co-designers of the learning path. PCBE is keeping both teachers and
>
> students vested in education in a way no other educational initiative has in more than 50
>
> years. (Casey et al., 2019; as cited in Yanacheak, 2020, p. 26)

Shared Principles of SBG and PCBE

Standards-based grading research yielded common components or principles of

implementation across a variety of research articles and studies. For example, one research study

which analyzed five districts using varying levels of SBG from self-proclaimed "traditional" to

"hybrid" to "SBG compliant" concluded there were three main ingredients to the SBG

framework: "Composed of several specific reform efforts, SBG manifests in different ways

across districts and grade levels; however, core components include basing grades on proficiency

of specific standards, removing behavior factors from academic grades, and allowing multiple

opportunities to reach proficiency" (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 66).

Similarly, regarding SBG, another study (Hany et al., 2016) analyzed perceptions of 31 teachers from a self-proclaimed standards-based school in Illinois and reported the following four criterions:

1. The purpose of grading is to report on student achievement; grades should reflect mastery of specific criterion referenced standards.

2. A grade should accurately represent student achievement, meaning the grade should not include non-achievement factors such as formative work, lateness, responsibility, and effort.

3. The grade should accurately summarize achievement, meaning standards should be weighted to reflect accurate reporting of expectations.

4. Standards should be clearly communicated to students, parents, and other teachers so they are aware of the expectations within the class. (Tierney et al, 2011; as cited in Hany et al., 2016, p. 750)

The report contended that "If the criteria above is not met, then the purpose of standards-based grading is lost, which is to clearly define goals for students, and accurately assess if students have met those goals" (Hany et al., 2016, p. 750).

A third study based its research on the work of the Iowa Competency-Based Education Collaborative (ICBEC), a group of representatives from Iowa schools, area education agencies, the state education department, and higher education institutions which worked "to research, explore, and implement facets of personalized, competency-based education" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 5). This team created a site for resources for schools investigating or endeavoring in standards-based and/or competency-based models. Their leadership identified five vital principles for schools developing and implementing professional development around competency-based

frameworks and practices: (1) students advance upon mastery; (2) assessment is meaningful and part of the learning process; (3) learning and support are personalized based on individual learning needs; (4) all learning is validated regardless of when, where, or how students acquired or demonstrated the learning; (5) competencies are based on enduring understandings and require the transfer of knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Gallagher, 2014; IDOE, 2015; Levine & Patrick, 2019; Sigrist & Stewart, 2017; Warner et al, 2015; as cited in Yanacheak, 2020, p.47).

In 2019 and 2020 the Sioux Center Community School District, a small rural school in northwest Iowa with the assistance of The Center (the resource database for Iowa Competency Based Education Collaborative noted above) completed a crosswalk of both SBG and PCBE common criteria and principles and came up with a set of six "Guiding Principles" for their district which combined their hybrid of SBG initiatives with their experimental transition toward PCBE. Having started as a standards-based grading (only) initiative in 2012, the district soon discovered the need to change the name of its initiative from standards-based grading (SBG) to standards-based instruction (SBI) to encompass all three of the professional development areas of curriculum, assessment, and instruction. The hope was that the district's professional development direction for years to come would be available through continued and ongoing embedded work revolving around these six principles (see Appendix C). The remainder of this literature review researched each principle from a variety of literary resources.

Sioux Center Guiding Principle 1: All Students Are Held to Clearly Defined Goals and High Expectations.

The rollout of common core standards across the states led to many schools using the standards as the sole basis of their curriculum hence the title "Standards-Based." Clear learning

goals around these standards were key to deep and authentic learning and resulted in a shift from

fragmented learning to deeper transferable learning:

> [Learning Targets] convey to students the destination for the lesson – what to learn, how
>
> deeply to learn it, and exactly how to demonstrate their new learning. […] Without a
>
> precise description of where they are headed, too many students are 'flying blind'…A
>
> shared learning target unpacks a 'lesson-sized' amount of learning – the precise 'chunk'
>
> of the particular content students are to master (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & William,
>
> 2005). It describes exactly how well we expect them to learn it and how we will ask them
>
> to demonstrate that learning. (Brookhart et al., 2011, pp. 66-69)

Transfer of knowledge from lower-order rote memory to higher-order thinking has been

shown to be a hallmark of the progression within these standards. Research indicated that

students retained information where they could make real-life connections or when it was taught

conceptually. This type of instruction encouraged transfer of knowledge that students would

extend to new circumstances (Englert et al., 2009). "According to a study by Darling-Hammond,

Rustique-Forrester, and Pecheone (2005), students in states currently using assessment systems

that evaluate a full range of state standards, including higher order thinking and performance

skills, show higher levels of achievement and lower dropout rates" (Englert et al., 2009).

Sioux Center Guiding Principle #2: Student Achievement is Evaluated Only Against Our Clearly Defined Goals.

Westerberg (2016) called the practice of extra credit, combining academic performance

with behaviors, and averaging scores three of the most damaging or counterproductive

assessment and grading practices and beliefs. He contended that these (along with the zero and

semester tests) should be the first things that need to be removed when a district is transforming

to standards-based grading. In Pollio and Hochbein's (2015) research regarding the measuring of student achievement, they noted:

> The results of the survey of secondary teachers' grading practices exhibited that teachers use a wide variety of factors to grade student work. Therefore, grades are not necessarily a valid measure of students' level of achievement […] For grades to be a valid measure of student achievement, teachers must assess students [only] on their achievement based on required curriculum standards. (p. 6)

One of the biggest factors found in research regarding the SBG principle of using standards solely as a basis for grades -- beyond an omnibus and potentially over-or under-inflated grade -- dealt with student behaviors and punitive grading practices. Traditionally, educators have believed that punitive grading was a reasonable consequence for poor classroom behaviors. "These teachers continue to argue that grading as punishment works despite over 100 years of overwhelming research that suggests it does not" (Guskey, 2011; Reeves, 2010; as cited by Duek, 2014). As a result, this principle, stood out in several research pieces as one of the more difficult instructional shifts for many educators adjusting to SBG reform.

Sioux Center Guiding Principle #3: Students Advance Upon Demonstrated Proficiency.

An important feature of models using a standards-based approach to grading and instruction, particularly those geared toward PCBE, was making sure that standards, proficiency scales, levels of performance, and gaps were clearly tracked and communicated with all vested parties.

> Although they have different labels (standards, learning results, expectations, outcomes), every state has standards that are determined at the state level. These standards are published and all teachers, parents, and students should be familiar with them. This is

essential because the research shows that 'it is very difficult for students to achieve a

learning goal unless they understand that goal and can assess what they need to do to

reach it'. (Black et al., 2003; as cited in O'Conner, 2009, pp. 1-7)

Indications showed that the use of proficiency scales based on rigor inherent in a course standard

allowed for clearer differentiation practices in former traditional classrooms. Students were able

to advance to deeper levels of learning that were most appropriate for them. Students

encountered deeper learning when they were asked to transfer new knowledge in disciplined

inquiry. "The second phase of curriculum redesign entails systematically embedding increasingly

challenging learning tasks […] These may take the form of multi-faceted projects or extended

performance tasks, but they should force students to think critically and creatively about

content…" (Hess et al., 2014, p. 2).

Experiential research indicated differentiating and allowing students to proceed through

standard proficiency levels upon their own demonstrations of learning depended on authentic

learning experiences and cooperation with connections outside the classroom. "Connections to

experts outside of school can also have a positive influence on in-school learning because they

provide opportunities for students to interact with parents and other people who take an interest

in what students are doing" (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 247). Having students in varied places of

learning upon a learning continuum and differentiating instruction accordingly was another noted

significant change of pedagogy and mindsets for educators in districts undergoing SBG and

PCBE with fidelity.

Sioux Center Guiding Principle #4: Students Engage in Multiple and Varied Assessments as a Meaningful and Positive Learning Experience.

Research and practice confirmed the design of assessment practices as a very important

component in both SBG and PCBE approaches. Perhaps the single most comprehensive part of

reform, this element demanded the most tangible changes and reconstruction for students and teachers. Moreover, these changes in assessment practices showed positive gains for students.

> We do know from research that Robert Marzano conducted for McREL that the school-level variable with the strongest apparent link to student's success is 'opportunity to learn'; that is, is the extent to which a school 1) clearly articulates its curriculum, 2) monitors the extent to which teachers cover the curriculum, and 3) aligns its curriculum with assessments used to measure student achievement. Of these three variables, aligning curriculum to assessments appears to have the strongest link to student achievement. (Goodwin, 2010, pg. 18)

Furthermore, improved achievement was reported extensively with the use of more formative assessments rather than graded homework or quizzes. "Schools and districts across the nation are reporting impressive gains in student achievement through the use of teacher-created, criterion-referenced assessments" (Bambrick-Santoyo 2008; as cited in Andrade et al., 2012).

Further research indicated other positive effects of formative assessment: "In 2004, Ruiz-Primo and Furtak measured the effect of three formative assessment strategies – eliciting, recognizing, and using information –in the science classroom. They found that the quality of teachers' formative assessment practices was positively linked to the students' level of learning" (Greenstein, 2010, pg. 63).

Multiple and varied assessments personalized to the learner and formative assessment additions to pedagogy also were found to have surprising effects on motivation.

> Perhaps the most surprising aspect of…student-centered assessment is that it is motivating. Many people associate being evaluated with mild to moderate anxiety, not motivation, and research has shown that grades can be associated with decreased

motivation and lower achievement (Butler & Nisan, 1986; Lipnevich & Smith, 2008).

However, recent studies have shown that formative assessment – particularly detailed,

task-specific comments on student work – can activate interest in a task (Cimpian et al.,

2007) and result in better performance. (Lipnevich & Smith, 2008; as cited in Andrade et

al., 2012)

Sioux Center Guiding Principle #5: Students Receive Timely, Personalized Feedback Based on Individual Learning Needs.

The art of feedback alongside formative assessment was discovered to be another

instructional practice that was inevitable yet imperative when switching to standards or

competency-based grading and learning. Dueck (2014) noted that there were decades of research

that showed letter grades were much less effective than the personalized learning practice of

timely feedback. "Responsive teaching has always reacted to the needs of learners over the

agendas of teachers: it is less about delivering a grade than about delivering timely, accurate, and

specific feedback" (Reeves, 2010; as cited in Dueck, 2014, pg. 4). Statistically the literature

spoke well in favor of the use of feedback as positive pedagogy:

> At least 12 previous meta-analyses have included specific information on feedback in
>
> classrooms. These meta-analyses included 196 studies and 6,972 effect sizes. The
>
> average size was 0.79 (twice the average effect). To place this average of 0.79 in
>
> perspective, it fell in the top 5 to 10 highest influences on achievement in Hattie's (1999)
>
> synthesis. (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, pp. 88-112)

Marzano (2007) referred to the research of Hattie as well when he reported, "As a result

of reviewing almost 8,000 studies, researcher John Hattie (1992) made the following comment:

'The most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest

prescription for improving education must be 'dollops of feedback'" (pg. 5).

Sioux Center Guiding Principle #6: Students Receive Rapid, Personalized Support Based on Individual Learning Needs.

Adopting instructional standards in an SBG or PCBE approach that supports student's unique individual needs was another professional development element for many districts undertaking this challenge. Promoting student autonomy through reflective practices such as goal setting and providing "voice and choice" options in a student's learning path around standard growth was discovered to be motivating and showed promise for improved college and career readiness for today's learners. "Metacognitive skills are more abstract than organizational skills, but equally important. Students with a grasp of metacognition can reflect on their learning, develop identities as learners, and frame their own learning and career goals" (Hess et al, 2014).

In terms of personalization, research showed that when students have tasks that they find valuable or interesting and relevant to their lives, they, in turn, showed more perseverance. This method of intentionally teaching students personalized learning approaches increased motivation and provided many other benefits for the student as well:

> Students who are skilled at self-regulation are able to consciously set goals for their learning and monitor their understanding and progress as they engage in a task. They also can plan appropriately, identify and use necessary resources, respond appropriately to feedback, and evaluate the effectiveness of their actions. Acquiring these skills helps students become independent lifelong learners. (Dean et al., 2012)

Teacher Perceptions of SBG and PCBE Practice

Studying teacher perceptions to the implementation of SBG or CBE in their schools (because of school-led reform and professional development) yielded a variety of results needing further investigation for schools desiring to sustain similar reform movements. One study found that years of teaching experience as well as level of educational degree played an important

factor on teacher's perceptions noting that, "less experienced teachers are more likely to subscribe to the Standards Based Grading approach, while teachers with more experience are more likely to be skeptical of SBG and prefer a traditional grading method (Haney et al., 2016, p. 762)." Another trend that emerged from these teacher's perspectives involved their understanding and efficacy of SBG. "The results indicated that teachers felt neutral about their personal understanding of the implementation of SBG" (Hany et al., 2016, p. 749).

A second study conducted in the state of Iowa "explored high school teacher's perceptions of the effects of standards-based grading on planning, instruction, assessment, classroom management, and student behaviors. Findings indicated that despite some infidelity and an initial implementation dip, systemic (SBG) changes made teaching clearer, more purposeful, and more conducive to student needs while enhancing student growth mind-set and ownership" (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 65). Their comprehensive research produced eight over-arching themes in the areas of planning, instruction, and assessment: 1) Planning, instruction, and assessment become more purposeful. 2) Communication is clearer [and learning is the focal point of communication]. 3) Compromises are often made between adopting recommended practices and maintaining tradition. 4) SBG creates an environment conducive to learning. 5) An SBG climate meets student's needs. 6) Teachers must find new ways to promote and enforce desirable student behaviors. 7) Students shift toward a growth mind-set. 8) Student's accountability initially decreases [but], given time, students take more ownership for their learning (Knight & Cooper, 2019, pp 74-84).

A final phenomenological study and dissertation (Yanacheak, 2020) asked questions "to examine five principles that support personalized competency-based education and the impact PCBE has had on administrators, teachers, and students in the Midwest region of the United

States" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 72). Her study was designed to gather perceptual information from teachers and administrators in several schools working to transform learning from the traditional, time-bound, place-bound model to a student-centered model. The five principles participants were asked to provide information about were: (a) students advancing upon mastery, (b) assessment is meaningful and part of the learning process, (c) learning and support are personalized based on individual learning needs, (d) all learning is validated regardless of when, where, or how students acquired or demonstrated the learning, and (e) competencies are based on enduring understandings and require the transfer of knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 72). Each principle was found to have had a significant impact on the learning and achievement of all students. Furthermore, the researcher concluded, "The findings in this study confirmed the principles that support PCBE and the significant impact at those sites where it is implemented with fidelity is transformative for education, educators, and students" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 98). The researcher broke down her findings on each principle investigated.

Regarding the first principle, "Students advance upon mastery" – findings indicated that all 16 schools participating reported a mindset shift in this category particularly in how they viewed time and place-bound learning and flexible learning pathways. Results indicated that this principle helped them become more aware of where their students were at in their learning. The second principle, "Assessment is meaningful and part of the learning process" was also found to be an area of significant change for all 16 participants. "All 16 participants agreed they had made significant changes in how they used assessments and what their assessments looked like within their PCBE models. Assessments were both formative and summative in nature. […] Grading was no longer punitive" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 100). Learning principle three stated, "Learning

and support are personalized based on individual learner needs." The main result of this area for all 16 participants was that "The teacher's (former) instructional practice of delivering the same content at the same time in the same room on a specific date was terminated" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 101). The fourth learning principle researched in this study read, "All learning is validated regardless of when, where, or how students acquired or demonstrated learning." Yanacheak noted that, "While this was identified as one of the least implemented principles supporting PCBE, it was still present to some extent at each of the sites" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 102). The final principle of research "Competencies are based on enduring understandings and require transfer of knowledge, skills, and dispositions" had mixed results. Despite being reported as another growth area for the participants, all 16 sites indicated this principle was being implemented namely through proficiency scales (Yanacheak, 2020) but no other significant perception of effect was noted.

Many professional resources indicated "a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating the effects of SBG, which makes it difficult for school administrators and teachers to rectify the gap between scholars' recommended grading practices and stakeholders' long held belief systems" (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 68). This negatively affected teacher perceptions in that many teachers needed to see working evidence before changing established mindsets. According to Yanacheak's preliminary literature research regarding available case studies prior to her study, "Many discussed at length the difficulty in implementing a personalized, competency-based model with fidelity (Dragoo & Barrows, 2016; Hamilton et al., 2013; Horn, 2017). Competing priorities in a school can disrupt implementation with fidelity" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 35). Accountability to fidelity around the outlined principles or criteria of both SBG and PCBE were noted across the multiple research pieces reviewed.

All three of the studies reviewed noted that teachers still reported concerns around the SBG/PCBE communication and report card mechanisms (one mainly in terms of equity), the need for more training and professional development opportunities around SBG and PCBE, and the need for more collaboration time with peers. "Challenges identified in much of the research reviewed were lack of communication, time constraints, and a lack of ongoing support of staff" (Yanacheak, 2020, p. 35). These concerns and parallel findings were expected to arise to some degree from this author's study as well.

Methodology

A phenomenological study and methodology were used to collect and analyze data obtained from general education classroom teacher leaders at Sioux Center Community Schools. A phenomenological approach assumes that there are shared experiences of those who have lived a similar situation and that one may better understand the essence of the lived experiences through careful analysis of their first-person accounts (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). This research study included interviewing a purposeful sampling of these teacher leaders and then analyzing their responses to discover the perceived impact that the district's professional development reform to SBI and PCBE has had on their curriculum, instructional, and assessment practices -- as well as on student learning. Analysis and synthesis of these experiences and perceptions deepens the understanding of what implications, principles, and elements are critical to the following leadership goals: advancing district-wide guidance around next steps and destinations for short and long term professional development planning; creating potential "best practice" tools for monitoring fidelity, efficacy, and teacher confidence; and providing insights to prevent teacher burnout in a continued journey of SBI/PCBE reform.

It was determined that a survey alone would provide only a limited view of the teachers'

broad experiences, and the intricacies and interconnectedness of teachers' curriculum,

instruction, and assessment practices and its perceived impact on student learning would likely

be missed. The researcher, therefore, determined that a phenomenological approach was the most

prudent, practical, and appropriate method with the most potential to explore the teachers' lived

experiences of their professional development journey in instructional reform.

Participants

A purposeful sampling method was used in which participants who met predetermined

criteria were invited. Teachers who had taught more than two years and who were current (2020-

21 school year) teacher-leaders in the Sioux Center Community School District were among the

invitees. The two-year minimum and teacher leadership determination was established to ensure

that the sample population had a reasonable level of experience with the SBI/PCBE and

professional development models as developed at Sioux Center and that they were professionally

engaged and invested in the welfare of its future destination. This also helped to ensure that the

implementation dip, common to rigorous reform initiatives, as well as the time it takes to build

background capacity and efficacy with Sioux Center's professional development model did not

work as a barrier to their overall perceived experiences.

Furthermore, the researcher desired an equal distribution of participants in the pool who

had been in the district over 10 years, as those who had been in the district less than 10. A

selection emphasis was placed on securing at least three participants who had been a part of the

SBI/PCBE journey prior to and since its initiation in 2012. Another consideration for

determination of selected invites was to have a representative sample from each of the district's

three buildings and across a variety of disciplines/content areas. In the consideration of realistic

time for interviewing and arrangements, invitations to participate went out initially to twelve

classroom teacher leaders fitting the desired criteria. Due to its emergent design, the minimum

number of interviews the researcher found critical to reach potential data saturation was six.

Table 1 represents the demographics of the final eight-person participant pool. The final

tally of eight participants was found to have satisfactorily saturated the data. Although

participants' anonymity was ensured with an informed consent (Appendix B), Table 1 includes

pseudonyms, district building (elementary K-5, middle 6-8, high 9-12), core or non-core content,

number of years of experience in teaching (provided in five-year ranges), and number of years of

SBI experience. It was the author's position that other demographics such as gender and age of

participants would not be critical factors for the analytical purposes of this study and could

threaten confidentiality so were not included. Although level of education (graduate, Masters, or

Doctorate) might have been a helpful factor in the analysis of perceptions and insights amongst

this cohort, the researcher believed anonymity would certainly be lost.

Table 1

Research Setting Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	School	Core/Non-Core	Years Teaching	Years in Sioux Center SBI/PCBE
Brenda	HS	Core	11-15	4-6
Curtis	HS	Core	11-15	4-6
Alan	HS	Non	26-30	4-6
Kate	HS/MS	Non	6-10	4-6
Conner	MS	Core	2-5	1-3
David	ES/MS	Core	21-25	7+
Rick	ES	Core	11-15	7+
Rose	ES	Core	6-10	1-3

Note: HS refers to high school grades 9-12, MS refers to middle school grades 6-8, ES refers to

elementary and intermediate school grades K-5.

Procedures

  The design of this study was a qualitative, phenomenological study. A protocol (Appendix A) was designed for this study and was followed at the start and conclusion of each interview. In this protocol, participants were reminded of the steps that would be taken to ensure confidentiality and privacy as well as informed that none of their responses would have any bearing on their personal evaluation or associated with their positions of leadership within the school. They were instructed of their right to discontinue participation in the study or answering of any questions during the interview process that they did not feel comfortable answering. Participants were asked approval for recording purposes.

  Each participant was asked the same set of non-leading pre-piloted questions (Appendix A). The main two of these open-ended questions were paraphrased as part of the author's purpose statement and sent digitally to the participants as part of the consent form (Appendix B) at least two days prior to the interview to establish awareness and a feeling of readiness and ease. The two main questions centered on the perceived impacts of SBI on instruction and student learning. If questions in the latter part of the series of six had been thoroughly addressed and responded to prior to reaching the question, the interviewee was reminded of their right to skip the question and both author and interviewee determined if the question was priorly addressed to the respondent's satisfaction before moving on. Participants were also sent the document titled "Sioux Center District SBI Guiding Principles" (Appendix C) prior to the interview. The consent form (Appendix B) invited participants to review and consider the elements for part of the interview. This document provided a framework from which to respond openly and easily and became a reference tool for elaboration on experiences for the interviewees. No potential

follow-up questions were needed (if participants required more probing to open up conversation and reach saturation points of data).

Upon receipt of willingness to participate, each participant was contacted to determine best dates and times for interviews over a three-week time frame. Interviews were conducted in the building of the participant for their comfort and ease or the office of the author as desired by the participant. These considerations provided a relaxed atmosphere for open conversation. Prior to the interviews each participant was sent an informed consent agreement to sign (see Appendix B) which was collected at the commencement of the interview process. As each interview was conducted after school hours, the environment was free from distractions and disturbances. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interviewees all provided rich feedback to the questions provided and data saturation was met satisfactorily across the demographic diversity.

Data Analysis

Each interview was both video (iPad video) and voice recorded (via Google Speech to Text extension) to ensure two levels of evidence and data. The speech-to-text transcriptions were then "cleaned up" as the researcher re-watched each video from the iPad using a second device to simultaneously clear up all speech-to-text transcription errors in translation on the Google transcripts. This included adding proper punctuation to assist the researcher in analyzing pacing, tone, inflections, and the use of borrowed expressions, acronyms, or technical language by the participants. The cleaned-up transcripts were next sent to participants for member check to ensure the information gathered and transcribed had accurately reflected the interviewee's intentions and accuracy. A concern of the study was that the researcher is a colleague of the participants. When interviewing, both the researcher and participants could potentially make

assumptions on certain ideas from previous collegial conversations. The process of member

checking addressed this concern. Upon receipt of participant's member check confirmation, the

researcher began a process of data analysis that included the following: data organization,

coding, thematizing, collecting best evidence pieces (quotes), and creating notes to represent

substantive and descriptive meanings of the phenomenon. Thus, the researcher engaged in a

mixed coding process using descriptive, conceptual, and In Vivo (direct quotations) on each

transcript to better identify shared experiences and themes. The transition step of coding to

thematizing included charting the key code words and noteworthy quotes across a table with the

axis of pseudonyms (organized from experience levels left to right) to a vertex of the questions

asked in the interview series organized by sequence and named by category heading. In this way

patterns could be determined, and the enormity of the various code words could be filtered down

by frequency across the chart. Outlier codes or comments with no replication across the chart

were filtered out.

Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how the shift, transition to, and

ongoing implementation of the standards-based instruction reform and professional development

were being perceived and experienced in the Sioux Center Community School District. The

focus was on the initiative's impact on curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices as well

as its effect on student learning. In this section the researcher will present findings through

descriptions of participant's experiences and perceptions in the categories of impact on the

instructor, impact on instruction, impact on student learning, and overall perceptions of the

district's reform.

Impact on the Instructor

The results of this section were led by the following interview question: What has been the impact on the individual teacher's pedagogy and practice at SCCS since the implementation of SBI and a more personalized competency-based model?

The first common theme shared by all eight participants interviewed in this study was the experience of significant impacts and changes to their thinking, professional development, and workload as instructors. Participants particularly noted shifts in philosophy and previous educational mindsets, changes in perceptions of professional development value and its follow-up applications and impacts on subsequent increased workload and time investments.

A commonly experienced phenomenon of impact in respondent's approaches and mindsets was in recognition of the shift away from grading to student learning as a process of learning approach. Conner, a younger SBI participant, noted this shift anecdotally stating, "I am now concerned about IF my students are learning and less about their scores" (Personal communication February 2, 2021). Kate, another of the younger participants noted, "SBI has trained me to think differently and to teach in ways differently than I was taught. For meaningful thinking and learning, not for grades" (Personal communication, February 5, 2021). The most veteran of participants (Alan) added that there are, "big learning shifts of student-led learning over teacher-led instruction and grading. It is learning for the sake of learning" (Personal communication, February 12, 2021). This sentiment of shifting thinking in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment being led by the student and his or her needs rather than by the teacher and his/her needs was shared by all eight respondents across the researcher's questioning.

Improvements in and concerns around professional development were also a theme of focus among all eight respondents with some mixed results. A common experience was noted by most participants that their induction into SBI was "eye-opening" but that professional development and support around the initiative continues to improve and take shape - albeit "with a long way to go" (Curtis, personal communication, February 1, 2021). All realized SBI requires a long-term investment of learning and that professional development around SBI mirrors SBI itself in that it is a learning process. Alan stated a shared result among the high school respondents that early on and sometimes currently teachers professionally encounter feelings of incompetency with the sheer amount of continual change and learning. Pointing to the district's recently developed SBI Guiding Principles for learning and growth around SBI, Alan stated, "I don't know that we are anywhere near a finish line…if there is one…or that we ever will be" (Personal communication, February 12, 2021). Shared expectations of increased time in learning, application, reflection, and collegial conversation were points of agreement.

Six of the eight respondents referred to the value of the district's leading of professional development allowing personalization, teacher autonomy, and ownership of their own learning around SBI. Conner put it this way:

> At first my learning around SBI felt like I was thrown in and wished 'good luck', but also there was this sense that no one was expecting perfection. Looking at the principles of SBI and the overwhelming amount of learning… initially was like drinking through a firehose. But digging into my standards and learning to set up my proficiency rubrics, I realized I was given so much more ownership of my own learning and application of my learning. The standards make it very clear what I need to get my students to learn, but the how is mine. This is what drives our professional development. Teaching and learning

collaboratively and authentically in professional development is as personalized as

learning is now in our classrooms! This changes everyone's thinking. It's obviously a

process, and teachers are learning more and more to trust the process, I think. (Personal

communication, February 2, 2021)

Rick, an experienced elementary educator had similar reflections:

Before SBI, PD was just a hoop to jump through. But SBI gave us a shared focus. It has

made PD meaningful, challenging, and immediately applicable. It is authentic learning

for us. PD has been put on us so-to-speak. I'm growing as an educator, but it's a

frustrating shift sometimes because you sometimes just want someone to just tell you

what you have to do…but with SBI our PD is around principles and parameters, but we

get the opportunity to learn and assess ourselves in different ways and now

administration doesn't just tell us 'here's how you do it'. (Personal communication

February 9, 2021)

Brenda, an experienced high school respondent agreed stating, "When we made SBI our

intentional PD focus, we were encouraged to apply and try things in our classrooms. It wasn't a

'here…do this'. PD became personalized, authentic, and meaningful in this way" (Personal

communication, January 29, 2021). She added that another bonus of this approach was the fact

that the school began to use many of its own teacher leaders as internal supports to professional

development and the culture became collaborative in nature. Teacher leaders were used to lead

professional development opportunities around SBI learning. Many participants shared an

enthusiasm to professional development personalized to the individual or the respected building

across the district.

David, a veteran middle school teacher seemed to agree with the importance of both trained

professional-led PD mixed with collegial conversations and collaboration in professional

learning teams. He also, like several others, referenced the importance of allowed differentiation

and personalization around SBI principles and learning for teachers and buildings across the

district during professional development. "We are continually changing our assessments and

fine-tuning our rubrics. It is constant re-working. SBI requires a continuous process of learning.

It is more personalized which allows for autonomy and ownership around the principles. But

collaboration is required" (Personal communication, February 8, 2021).

More quantitatively around the changes experienced in professional development: six of

eight referenced "autonomy", five of eight used "personalized" and "meaningful" and recognized

their learning as a "process", half of the respondents called PD more "challenging", three used

the descriptors of "focused" and "intentional", and three noted the importance and shift to more

"collaboration" and "discussion". Increased workload and time needed for learning and growth

was a shared common talking point for all respondents.

Impact on Instruction

The results of this section were led by the following interview question: What has been

the impact on the individual teacher's pedagogy and practice at SCCS since the implementation

of SBI and a more personalized competency-based model?

The researcher discovered several common themes around the perceived impacts and shifts in

instruction. All participants reported that SBI made noteworthy changes in the following areas:

curriculum changes that impact instruction, instructional approaches in the classroom, and using

assessment as a driving force around those latter two elements. In short, the most common theme

shared across respondents in the area of instruction was the following: SBI will significantly

impact one's approach to instruction far beyond assessment changes and grade reports. It is

worth noting that all eight respondents directly or indirectly referenced the importance of

acknowledging that, in their opinion, standards-based grading can never truly be a simple

grading shift or grading platform. In agreement with the initial district's pilot team's

recommendation to change the initiatives name from standards-based grading to standards-based

instruction early in the reform (2014*),* the respondents together believed fidelity to the

philosophy behind standards-based grading required changes to the whole instructional triangle

of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Rick stated it in these terms, "Changing the title,

even, from SBG to SBI---just that simple wording was a turning point for me. It changed my

approach. It isn't a part of my instruction. SBI *is* my instruction" (Personal communication,

February 9, 2021).

Curriculum

In the area of curriculum adjustments, common agreements arose around instructional

changes being driven by rigorous but clear standards and the goal to hold students accountable to

these high standards. Several discussed the value of continuously unpacking and aligning these

standards - developing meaningful criterion-referenced and language-based proficiency rubrics

aligned to these standards to create clear pathways for students toward deeper learning. Just over

half referenced a shift to backwards planning toward these rigorous standards as well as an

"abrupt" shift to using a variety of appropriate resources towards authentic learning around these

standards as opposed to scripted textbooks. In fact, all respondents attested to their discontinued

use of textbooks and posted text objectives. Most indicated a reform to leading classrooms and

instruction explicitly around the standards posting the standards in the classrooms and keeping

the standards and corresponding rubrics "in front of the students" at all times throughout the

learning process. Several commented on feeling the need to keep the clear standards in front of the students as a clear positive change. Brenda summed up a common point of the respondents noting that SBI curriculum based on standards creates "clear goals and expectations for everyone which leads to more clarity…and by backwards planning around these standards and their corresponding proficiency scales, we can provide better focused instruction and trim away non-essentials" (Personal communication January 29, 2021). Rick affirmed this sentiment stating, "…with clear standards and rubrics, we can know exactly where our students are at and make further curriculum choices from there" (Personal communication February 9, 2021). As far as planning around the standards, David added:

> If proficiency around these rigorous standards is the goal, anything I plan for my students, and I mean anything, is aligned to what that proficiency means. I am going off common core state standards and those are what guide me for what students have to be able to know and do. This is my curriculum if anyone should ask me." Curtis stated that in allowing the standards to guide what is done instructionally, it gives "more shared ownership to both the teachers and the students over the learning- this brings a focus to our methods of instruction. (Personal communication, February 8, 2021).

These curriculum changes tied to respondent's professional development experiences yielded a range of responses. Conner noted that his standards and proficiency rubrics are under a continual reflection and change process. In summary, most respondents described the shift in the SBI curriculum essentially as "student-led" and responsive rather than "teacher led" and directive.

Classroom Instruction and Management

The most significant changes in approaching classroom instruction as reported by the respondents were in the areas of teaching toward deeper thinking and learning and providing more of those opportunities to transfer from lower-order thinking to higher-order through the following: increased inquiry-based learning and in-class discussions; providing more authentic learning experiences of application through high-order questioning and project-based learning opportunities; and personalizing and differentiating learning in the classroom with alternative learning pathways and responsive, flexible pacing (to promote continuous learning along the designed learning continuums). Brenda reported, "A lot more class time is dedicated to helping practice deeper learning and higher-order skills of application rather than memorization and regurgitation which once dominated the learning process" (Personal communication January 29, 2021). Alan noted more time spent on authentic learning through project-based learning and authentic real-world classroom and assessment opportunities to match the rigor expectations of the standards saying "[There is] also much more authentic instruction from my side of the desk" (Personal communication, February 12, 2021). Half of the respondents attested to adding much more discussion and student collaborative work into their classroom instruction to help their students practice and reach the deeper, more rigorous learning proficiency levels. Four of the eight respondents included conceptual-based teaching as driving their essential questions.

Additionally, personalized response to formative and summative assessments in the form of differentiated instruction, alternative pathways to learning, and individualized pacing impacted each respondent and their classroom instructional management with varying degrees of efficacy. "We may all start together toward a standard, but very quickly, with the help of our proficiency rubrics and continuous formative assessment, we take divided highways in the classroom.

Whereas before, everybody stayed the same place and the same pace" (David, personal

communication, February 8, 2021). Rick elaborated on this sentiment stating:

> We can still teach a core lesson to everyone…but can all be in different spots on the
>
> standard in terms of learning and different needs and now we can address that with some
>
> clarity and confidence. The beauty of SBI is that they (students) don't all have to be there
>
> tomorrow with the majority. Used to be, we all had to be together. We approach kids
>
> more as individual learners during class and help them grow where they are" (Personal
>
> communication, February 9, 2021).

Connor took this personalized pacing and differentiation of learning perception further by noting

the desire to increase "anywhere and anytime learning and assessment opportunities" (Personal

communication, February 2, 2021).

Although six of the eight respondent's remarks revealed their value in personalizing

instruction, most respondents noted the areas of differentiation and flexible pacing as also the

most challenging in their work and development. Setting up differentiated learning "takes a

massive amount of work and time" (Alan, personal communication, February 12, 2021). In the

Sioux Center district, differentiation around pacing is centered around the professional

development guiding principle #3 "Students can advance upon proficiency." All eight

respondents cited this particular guiding principle as their most challenging and overwhelming in

the course of their SBI experiences. In fact, Brenda described the shift toward this specific

principle of SBI as "terrifying" stating:

> I agree with all parts of this principle, but it's scary to me because honestly we are still so
>
> trained to keep everyone together. I would love to get to a place where there are more
>
> personalized learning options, with alternate learning pathways, but just looking at all the

theory and the work and everything that goes into personalized learning in earnest…well

it's overwhelming. I would have to see a lot of things set in place before taking this

where it can go for students. I am not even sure I have the capacity to begin to think

about all that this could look like in our system. We have dreamed a lot of some awesome

and certainly possible things…but the logistics of that all…like how do you apply all this

great theory to actually make it work? It's terrifying! (Personal communication, January

28, 2021)

Rick also attested to the need for system change to accompany this particular guiding principle

and instructional shift. "How do you keep it [advancing upon proficiency] fluid? How do you

personalize by advancement for a kid in one standard but not on the next […] and keep the

logistics of that fluid? Looking forward, how can our system be changed to help us with that?"

(Personal communication, February 9, 2021).

A final common area of noteworthy change for the respondents in instruction came as a

result of changes to assessment practices. Increasing formative assessment also increased the

need for more time around personalized feedback during class time. Several respondents noted

that the development and use of their language-based and criterion-referenced proficiency scales

(rubrics) made feedback more meaningful and, therefore, increased time spent in these student

conversations. This feedback can direct (personalized) next steps of learning for the student.

Instruction then became "data-based decision-making by both the teacher and the student" for

personalized learning (Curtis, personal communication, February 1, 2021). Formative

assessments formed "next steps" conversations and feedback for several of the respondents.

Curtis commented, "Our proficiency scales (rubrics) help with feedback so we can zoom in on

what each student needs. It's personalized feedback. That's different than before SBI. We are

having meaningful conversations of learning during class time" (Personal communication, February 1, 2021).

The timeliness of this feedback was also noted as a change to how the respondents approached their planning and class time. The respondents revealed a common experience that increased feedback promoted the shift from teacher ownership of learning to student ownership of learning. Providing time for students to self-reflect and improve their metacognition and autonomy (repeated buzz words across all eight interviews) were noted among the participants. Several teachers referred to the need for increased time allotted for student conferencing and feedback.

Assessments

Participants' approaches to assessments revealed impactful changes as well. Assessments were described as clearer and more meaningful representations of learning. For the majority of participants, following initial training in SBG, assessments were redesigned and aligned to standards. These focused assessments were authored by the teachers themselves as intentional work of the district. Several participants attested to an increase in more project-based and authentic real-world type assessments. As noted earlier, formative assessment use increased among the respondents and were sometimes used as evidence to student learning as opposed to a final unit or summative assessment. Personalized assessments (and reassessments) that provided student "voice and choice" were common changes made by several participants. Kate discussed her focus on formative and summative assessments extensively noting a huge shift from assessments that were heavy on the lower-order-thinking (such as multiple choice and matching) around the foundational content material to more authentic real-world (by way of realistic scenarios) assessments that require more elaborate communication and explanation of the

student's thinking. David noted that a change in assessing comes in that there are "no surprises" as everything along the student's learning process aligns to the assessment. Also noted was an increase in allowing alternative pathways to prove one's learning rather than a "one-size-fits-all" traditional test. These alternative approaches were accepted more often across the range of participants in this study than were prior to SBI.

Impact on Student Learning

The results of this section were led by the following interview question: What has been the impact on student learning at SCCS since the implementation of SBI and a more personalized competency-based model?

Although all eight participants attested to some level of improved student learning, the participants who teach at the upper levels admitted to some evidence of complications to learning as a result of the dynamics of SBI and were hesitant to verify improved learning for their students attributed to this reform. All respondents, however, believed that the shift to SBI shifted the focus away from grades and to learning. All participants also noted that their proficiency scales reflect an "expectation" of deeper learning. However, there were some mixed results at the upper levels of learning in whether students were actually held to these higher standards and whether, despite the opportunities presented, students have lost the discipline of studying in "the washing machine cycle of reassessments" (Alan, personal communication, February 12, 2021). Although all respondents noted that there was a pronounced shift in encouraging ownership of learning, those at the upper levels (high school respondents) felt that students had not bought into this ownership to the degree where they could confidently say learning had improved for all students. Alan, who teaches at the high school level, believed that there was apparent deeper and more authentic learning for some but not others. Likewise, another high school respondent noted,

"Students are certainly more aware of their expectations, but have yet to arrive at the needed student autonomy to really own their learning. And this impacts student motivation…motivation to study" (Curtis, personal communication February 1, 2021).

In contrast, Conner, a teacher in the middle school, remarked that without the principles and framework of SBI, "…students can escape without having learned anything. There are ways in the former system that you can pass without actually learning. I don't think that can happen when you use standards and proficiency rubrics properly" (Personal communication, February 2, 2021). He continued by affirming:

> Students are leaving our classrooms having retained and learned more information
> because they were not given an option. As much of a pain reassessing and reteaching can
> be, I have more confidence that the student actually left my room learning the standard. I
> feel more confident now than the traditional way I, myself, experienced learning.
> (Personal communication, February 2, 2021)

And in response to the studying issue, Conner's experiences were much different than those of the educator participants at the higher levels. He stated that because he felt more of a need to hold students to a continual process of learning, there was less cramming. "We continually respond to the formative data together personalizing their learning along the way. I don't worry about their studying before the summative test. I can see and know readiness or not much earlier, and so can they" (Personal communication, February 2, 2021).

David, also a middle school educator, corroborated this theme regarding holding kids to high standards noting, "Before, I hoped to get them to a number or percent we deemed as passing… and when a majority had met that, we moved on. Now we all meet specific criteria of learning around each standard" (Personal communication, February 8, 2021). He continued attesting that

learning was deeply affected in his students as they learned to adjust to being held to learning

process expectations. "This process of learning can be eye-opening to kids. With SBI the goal is

proficiency – whatever it takes. I'm here to help them, so it is continuous learning. They realize,

'Hey, he's not going to let me get by with this' (below proficiency). I have to prove my

understanding at some point" (David, personal communication, February 8, 2021). The learning

progression and process creating an impact on student learning was also addressed by Brenda, a

high school respondent, who remarked:

> And so now we push to get all our kids to proficiency, even if we are aware some won't
>
> get there, hopefully pushing them to their next level of thinking and more higher-order
>
> thinking and application practice.… maybe even in a different situation or transfer of
>
> knowledge that has value beyond school. This has had impact on learning by setting a
>
> course and pathway to deepened learning. (Personal communication, January 29, 2021)

For over half of the respondents, themes emerged in relationship to being held to learning

progressions as a continuous learning model concluding that the use of proficiency scales had a

strong impact on the students' awareness of themselves as a learners, persistence and resiliency

as learners, and ownership of their learning. One high school respondent, Kate, stated, "Students

have a better chance to take ownership of their thinking and their learning to help get them to the

next level. I think, in that sense, our students learning has improved because they have to be

more aware of where they are and what that means" (Personal communication, January 29,

2021). Increasing times of specific and timely feedback following formative and summative

assessments also impacted student learning according to several respondents in this study. "We

have more conversations leading to deeper learning…in the forms of self-reflection and feedback

against our standards and rubrics, peer feedback, and student conferencing with their teachers.

We think and talk about how they think" (Kate, personal communication, February 5, 2021).

David noted that students and teachers talked through mistakes rather than just grading and

reporting mistakes. The process involved much more metacognition efforts by both parties.

"Students learn to self-identify. For some kids learning metacognition and this process takes a

long time before they adapt. But that is part of it: persistence and resiliency from all of us as

learners. This builds awareness and a growth mindset. This is lifelong learning deeper than any

content learning" (David, personal communication, February 8, 2021).

Exactly half of the respondents commented that students are engaged much more often in

what can be described as deeper learning. Kate summarized a common perception from several

of the respondents:

> "I think students are now given more opportunities here in this system to engage in deep
>
> thinking. That is something we push ---the levels of DOK (depth of knowledge), and that
>
> is still a developing part of our culture. We are not to its full potential here yet. But we
>
> continue to improve instruction in this way so that student learning has been improved."
>
> (Personal communication, February 5, 2021).

In addition, Brenda affirmed that there is deeper learning due to clarity of expectations and more

discussions and reflection as well as having students supporting their learning more with

evidence pieces of their own authentic creation that required them to justify their learning and

thinking. "So, I think having that goal in mind for them here --- saying 'Here it is. Can you show

me how you can get better—to the next level?' is a benefit to their learning" (Personal

communication, January 29, 2021). Elementary representative Rick noted, "We hold them to

more challenging and deeper learning, too. Now, we push them to the next level because it is so

clear on our rubrics and the way we continue to push learning with them, not just allowing them to all land in a certain place" (Personal communication, February 9, 2021).

Respondents referenced across the grade levels that grades were more meaningful now with standards-based reporting and that this, too, drove deeper learning experiences. Brenda noted that traditional reporting of grades "often hid skills and lack of understandings and allowed them to pass the class without being able to do essential things. Because on the test, well, they did some other things well and it all averaged out" (Personal communication, January 29, 2021). All respondents in some way referenced the fact that teaching to the "average" student as they had in the past had a negative impact on learning, but that the personalization of learning that the SBI approach provided increased and improved opportunities for deeper learning. "We came to realize how many things we had once graded weren't actually tied to what students knew or were able to do" (Rick, personal communication, February 9, 2021). At the middle level, David commented on the impact SBI reporting had on learning: "Before our proficiency rubrics and SBI grade reporting, grades signaled learning was done. Now, they may signal learning is just beginning" (Personal communication, February 8, 2021).

Respondents agreed that their improvements in feedback also improved their communication with students and parents and motivated some experiences of deeper learning. Six of the eight respondents commented on the notion that the improved quality of their feedback in this system was a driver of improved learning for students. Rick, an elementary teacher, stated:

> The biggest way student learning has been impacted is the way SBI impacts the feedback
> principle. Meaningful, personalized, specific, and timely feedback gets greater learning.
> Now, that's way more time and work on our part, and whole class feedback is still okay,

but it's the independent feedback where you get the most learning." (Personal

communication, February 9, 2021)

In addition, Connor confirmed the feedback principle as noteworthy to student learning saying,

"This system encourages meaningful feedback leading to some significant improvements in

student learning" (Personal communication, February 2, 2021). Overall, the majority consensus

of the participants was that learning had been positively impacted by many of their pedagogical

reform efforts.

Overall Impacts of the Reform

The final section of the analysis of results revolves around question number six in the

interview series (Appendix A), "What is your perception of the benefits, challenges, and overall

worth of Sioux Center's reform initiative from traditional grading and instruction to standards-

based instruction?"

Although this interview question, while piloted, was not expected to yield common themes,

the researcher found that the most reported theme across all questions reiterated by all

respondents significantly revealed by this final question was that of the perceptions of the overall

value of the SBI reform weighed against a huge increase in teacher workload. Every respondent

commented in some way, here and there, about the idea that there is a need for balance around

the desire to continue changes and shifts that work toward the benefits of the SBI framework

with continued discussions and reflection around the negatives of increased workload for

teachers. Each respondent reported potential teacher burnout without the availability of

appropriate and timely support such as PLC collaboration, consistent reflection evaluations and

discussions around system changes, and a shared accountability investment to the original

"destinations" (Westerberg, 2014) and "guiding principles" (Appendix C) by all parties across the district.

The best way to provide insights into the respondents shared viewpoints may be through their final interview comments listed below:

- "The benefits of SBI definitely outweigh the challenges, and the biggest challenge is just time. It is obviously a long-term learning process for us as educators. It is important that approach continue to encourage this as a process of grace. It feels good that there is this understanding that we will get there with time and guidance. It is about trusting the process…even through the dips and mistakes." (Conner, personal communication, February 2, 2021)

- "We can't teach like we have always been taught. And that's exciting but very time-consuming. It is a lot more thinking, planning, reflecting, and responding. So, yes, we can worry about burnout. I am willing to put in the time and effort because I know with this approach it is going to make that much of a difference. But system-wise I am not sure I am equipped with what I need to do these things well or do them in a timely pace. But I think even us doing this imperfectly is way better than doing things the way they had always been done traditionally." (Kate, personal communication, February 5, 2021)

- "When first introduced to SBI, one positive we could buy into was that students would be held to proficiency. If kids were not, they would not continue to just be passed along. But that doesn't appear to be the case. SBI was going to allow us to catch those kids and close gaps to assist our classroom instruction. But are we closing gaps? If students don't actually have to be held to meeting them?" (Brenda, personal communication, January 29, 2021)

- "If we get this to a point where we get student buy-in and teacher fidelity, the benefits are very big. It gives something regular teaching did not in terms of more feedback and then hopefully more drive to pursue the next level of learning. But until we get there, there is just a lot of frustration and the work it creates is so big in comparison." (Curtis, personal communication, February 1, 2021)

- "This reform is extremely valuable. It has been a good move. It's been an initiative that you can definitely see the benefit for the student, and that's what has been extremely important for me…not looking at how it is going to benefit me as a teacher, although it is benefitting me, it is best for the child, right? What's best? This is. But it is a lot of work. Student. Parent. Teacher. Administration. Everyone. But it all revolves around the student." (Rick, personal communication, February 9, 2021)

- "The SBI reform here is worth it and should continue. It encourages growth mindset from everyone. Even though it is more work than traditional as far as 'I've got to keep up with more preparation and personalized responses and have my learning process in order', the benefits outweigh the workload." (David, personal communication, February 8, 2021)

- "It is the single hardest think I have ever done as an educator. This reform and change was hard enough to almost probably drive me out of education. I think the principles of SBI have validity to them. I think the challenges in the time frame and scope of education as it is, severely inhibit the ability to do it well and do it right. So, I think it has to be thought of as bigger than just moving to a new grading system to a standards-based instruction system. There must be an entire cultural shift in the way teachers, students, administrators, school districts, communities, and families think about education." (Alan, personal communication, February 12, 2021)

Discussion and Implications

While the purpose of this study was not to prove the value or effectiveness of SBI, it provided much insight for administrators and teacher leaders on the ways in which adopting a standards-based grading and personalized learning framework affect curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices of instructors as well as the learning behaviors of its students. Thus, direction and informed decision-making can help practitioners decide if and how changes may be applicable in their own contexts.

By gathering data directly from those teacher professionals who have been involved in this transformational work, analysis and synthesis of these experiences and perceptions can reveal a deeper understanding of what implications, principles, and elements may be critical to the following leadership goals: advancing district-wide guidance around next steps and destinations for short and long term professional development planning; creating potential "best practice" tools for monitoring fidelity, efficacy, and teacher confidence; and providing insights to prevent teacher burnout in a continued journey of SBI/PCBE reform.

Professional Development and Supportive Tools

As noted by several participants in the study, it is critical that professional development be embedded to support an initiative of such magnitude as the shift to standards-based grading and personalized learning frameworks. Creating or using a set of "destinations" such as those presented by Westerberg (2014) as a roadmap that is clearly communicated to all parties and that acknowledges the investment as a long-term process of learning is essential. Clear communication of expectations regarding timelines and short- and long-term goals is also important. Strong considerations need to be discussed around how to ease into the sheer amount of workload this kind of change will likely present. Perhaps a year of frontloading around the

concept of "change" while a leadership team or pilot team engages in study would be wise; or

perhaps visiting participating schools followed by collaboration could be beneficial; or perhaps a

tiered-entry plan that provides for each teacher an incremental application of their learnings

around the principles and manageable implementation of them to reduce stress would be wise.

Although seemingly counter-intuitive, one of the last pieces of SBI implementation of potential

change should be in the grading report itself. As this study highlights, SBI is much more of an

instructional shift than a grading platform.

In addition, a set of guiding principles (not necessarily policies) early in the process can

help alleviate feelings of "trying to hit a moving target" (Alan, personal communication,

February 12, 2021). A posture of growth mindset and grace as well as a collaborative learning

environment around the extensive professional development pieces is well-advised. In fact,

frontloading this kind of large shift in pedagogy with professional development around the

change cycle or growth mindset research and theory (Dweck, 2007) may help alleviate the

"shock" factor of change. This will, in turn, help educators pass along this mindset to the student

when applying the shift to student-centered classrooms that hands much of the ownership over to

the student.

The results of this study also pointed clearly to the need to allow professional

development to be personalized. Providing a set of clear guiding principles (perhaps developed

by teacher leaders of the district) for the teachers to use to reflect on their practice and growth

areas as well as provide accountability and direction for professional development decisions are

keys to success in this personalized professional development endeavor. Resource tools (such as

reflection tools and rubrics designed around standards-based or personalized learning

frameworks) are being developed and made available to more and more schools making this

shift. The respondents in this study did not have a set of guiding principles initially and feel it led to "much frustration." Documents such as these can be used to monitor progress, determine next steps, and provide accountability at a personal level, building level, or district level. A recommendation would be to turn the guiding principles into another tool of self-reflection or in the form of a survey to gauge teacher's efficacy and fidelity to each. Finding and vetting support resources and tools available before beginning this change would be advised.

Allowing teachers to work on and implement one change at a time may reduce stress and maximize effectiveness. Some of the critical elements of change that need to be addressed through professional development as experienced by the respondents in this research centered around student metacognition and the dynamics of changing the culture to promote student ownership of their learning (student autonomy). The respondents in this study felt that professional development had been improving around this initiative and that they had a good start in most of the guiding principles (those mentioned most confidently were in the creating of their standards and proficiency scales, formative assessment, and feedback), but that they were lacking in knowing how to address the "advancing upon proficiency" principle with fidelity and understanding. This principle, currently, needs leadership's most attention during professional development planning and teacher leadership decision-making in the Sioux Center district.

Teachers, themselves, must be prepared for changes in their thinking and pedagogy. One of the biggest benefits of SBI comes with a costly revelation. Using clear standards and proficiency scales with fidelity increases one's awareness of where every student is performing on individual skills. Removing the use of averages and points-based scoring means there is no more teaching to an average. In fact, there is a heightened awareness that there really may be very few students who would meet the "average" student you were once teaching to. When you know where each

of your students is performing, and they can no longer be "hidden" (Brenda), it is harder to allow students to fall through the cracks. Then, as good teachers know, these obstacles to student learning must be addressed, hence, personalized learning. This is a new weight of substance that many teachers struggle to be able to balance. Truly meeting students more apparent needs by individual standards takes time, patience, and resiliency and an increase in workload that can seem unforgiving. The payoff for the student, on the other hand, can be monumental. Learning to reduce stress and practice healthy self-care habits is essential. And foremost, teachers need to allow themselves grace to make mistakes and allow the inevitable "implementation dip" to happen as it surely will.

Systemic Changes of Support

As a common theme represented across all respondents in this study, SBI requires much more than a few modifications or adjustments to the gradebook and grading scale. It is a comprehensive change to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. As such, this radical shift requires systemic modifications provided and discussed at the administrative and leadership levels to support its teachers and students. After all, they are most impacted by this change and this kind of systemic support is necessary to prevent burnout and escalating behavior issues. It is important for leadership to explore and address teachers' hesitations and concerns over adopting certain principles or participating in the full culture change required when converting to a student-centered learning framework such as SBI. These changes include considerations in schedule adjustments, support personnel, additional support programs, and more. Following is a bulleted list of potential support considerations to address themes that emerged from this study, namely addressing the increased workload for teachers and potential teacher burnout noted by all eight participants:

- Give teachers more preparation, planning, and professional development time in their contracted workdays to effectively handle the increased workload.

- Implement a reassessment and/or reteaching period (or set aside time frame) daily for students to provide "rapid personalized support" (SBI guiding principle) and address the principle of providing "multiple and varied assessment" opportunities as well as "timely and personalized feedback."

- Keep class sizes and teacher to student ratio manageable in this transition to a more personalized learning environment to meet several of the principles - primarily the SBI principle of providing "rapid personalized support." This may mean additional hiring considerations as a challenge to be met by administrative teams.

- Limit the number of "preps" per teacher or allow a manageable tiered transition into implementing SBI into multiple preps.

- Provide more resources of support including an increase in tutors or paraprofessionals or a healthy student teacher program to assist reteaching and reassessment and to address and assist the SBI principle of "rapid personalized support."

- Create a dynamic teacher leadership program that allows teacher leaders time to mentor, model, and assist around the initiatives and the guiding principles as well as to help teachers envision future "destinations" in their journey.

- Create a dynamic on-boarding process of new teachers into the SBI framework.

- Adopt a behavior or mentoring program (such as Positive Behavioral Instructional Supports or Habits of Mind or Portrait of a Graduate) to assist students in the shift of ownership of learning and to address the SBI principle of removing behaviors from grading practices. Behavior management and reporting was never meant to be left out of

the system - only the content area grade. A behavior or mentoring program can fill this

gap in the change of practice required by teachers and provide an alternative behavior

management approach to lessen frustrations with students' habits of learning that

accompany this shift.

- Create a sustainable MTSS (multi-tiered system of support) program/system to assist

  teachers with challenging "rapid personalized support" needs.

- Rethink how the TAG (Talented and Gifted) and Resource programs in the school can

  best complement and assisting the change to SBI to address some of the "advancing

  upon proficiency" principle challenges.

Conclusion

Standards-based grading is essentially a framework for improved instruction. It is an

educational reform that requires personal and systemic changes. It is a professional development

process that takes much time. The participants in this study who have adopted their district's SBI

framework and have made significant profession-altering changes in the areas of their

curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices are teacher leaders who believe the value of

this reform has the potential to significantly impact student learning. However, this

implementation does not come without a cost. Hefelbower and colleagues (2014) confirmed the

current landscape at Sioux Center experienced by the participants of this study in relationship to

this overall cost, "This is not a task for the faint of heart…All reform on a districtwide scale is

tough but moving a system to true standards-based grading is extraordinarily tough, long-term

work and requires district leadership to tenaciously do the right thing for students" (pg. 87)

Substantial research, planning, prevention, resources, and support are paramount to its

sustainability. Nevertheless, SBI was perceived by the participants in this study, overall, as

"meaningful" valuable work for themselves and for creating college and career-ready students of tomorrow who know how to think and learn for themselves.

Limitations

Researcher's Positionality

The author's passion and interest in this study stem from being part of the district's journey of reform - from the onset of a series of initiatives leading to the decision to undertake a pilot of standards-based grading in 2012 and continuing through her own personal experiences in research, practice, and development as both a classroom teacher and instructional coach for the district during the full process. Most teachers and teacher leaders in the Sioux Center district are aware of the investment this researcher has made in the areas of SBI/PCBE leadership. In this way, one of the concerns of this study from the onset was that the researcher's bias, as a colleague of the participants, may have influenced the responses of the participants by way of confirmation bias, fear, or assumption. Continued probing and open-ended questioning techniques as well as the process of member-checking helped to address this issue.

While the author views SBI/PCBE and its potential as a positive learning structure, it bears noting that primarily she is concerned about the continual need to learn and compromise from shared experiences as a means to continually develop and meet the needs of the various stakeholders affected by the implementation of such a large-scale reform. In addition, although the author presently continues to advocate for SBI reform --finding no strong evidence at this point that SBI is not a viable alternative to traditional grading-- she remains open to further change and is open-minded to personalization of these frameworks through data-driven modifications and refinement.

Despite this potentially biased view of SBI and its course toward PCBE, the author did attempt to set aside her experiences to present a listen-to-learn posture during the interviewing process. The interviews and reporting of data were not altered beyond what was approved by the respondents through member checks and can be used to inform and increase the district's awareness of the implementation experiences and impact of SBI/PCBE on teacher practice and student learning. The researcher used methods such as open-ended questioning, probing, member-checking, coding, and charting as precautions against bias. A set repeated pattern of protocols and questions for each participant were followed in the interview. The researcher did approach this study as if she had little knowledge of the participants themselves or the SBI/PCBE framework and did allow the participants to freely share their experiences, perceptions, and opinions.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Instrument

The following protocol will be followed prior to each interview:

-Send out a complete description and invitation to participate (Appendix B).

- Secure participant pool and arrange individual interview times and locations.

The following protocol will be followed during each interview:

-Thank the participant for their willingness to participate.

-Hand out, review, and get signatures on Participant Consent Form.

-Remind participants that their time and information are voluntary and confidential.

-Review the purpose of the research study and ask permission to record.

-Provide the participant with the definitions to terms for their review to ensure common

language and understandings and address any pre-interview questions.

-Provide the participant with a duplicate copy of the Sioux Center SBI Guiding Principles

for discretionary reference.

-At the conclusion of each interview, thank participants for their time and help and

provide an overview of the next steps of the study including copies of transcripts,

results and findings, and member checking.

Confirm Demographic Information (each participant)

Teaching Role of Participant: _____

Building Level: _____

# of years teaching (circle one): 3-9   10-15   15+

# of years in SCCS SBI/PCBE learning model/initiative (circle one): 1-3   4-6   since the 2012 (pilot)

1. Teacher History -Tell me about your personal history and experiences with standards-

   based grading and instruction (how and when it began until today).

2. Teacher History -What have been your experiences with professional development over

   the course of your time at Sioux Center?

3. Details of Experience- How has your pedagogy - in terms of curriculum, instruction, and

   assessment -been impacted since the implementation of SBI?

4. Details of Experience – How has student learning – in your classroom experience – been

   impacted since the implementation of SBI?

5. Reflection on Meaning – How are the Sioux Center SBI Guiding Principles being

   implemented, perceived, and experienced? What is the perception of their value and

   impact moving forward?

6. Reflection and Meaning – What is your perception of the benefits, challenges, and

   overall worth of Sioux Center's reform initiative from traditional grading and instruction

   to standards-based instruction?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Researcher: Melanie Cleveringa

Information and Purpose: The interview, of which you are being invited to participate, is on the topic of standards-based grading and instruction and its corresponding professional development. The focus will be on examining your experiences and perceptions of the impact this reform initiative has had on your pedagogy and on student learning in the Sioux Center Community School District.

Your participation: Your participation in this study will consist of an interview lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions about your teaching and professional development experiences at Sioux Center Community Schools. At any time, you may notify the researcher that you would like to skip a question or stop the interview and participation in the study.

Benefits and Risks: The benefits of your participation in this study will be the contributions of information to the school leadership regarding recommended next steps of professional development and refinement of the SBI/PCBE framework to potentially be personalized to our found needs. The findings of the study may be of benefit to you, your colleagues, as well as for the onboarding of new teachers. There are no known risks associated with participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Your name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report as pseudonyms will be utilized. All information gathered from the interviews will be kept confidential. There will be an opportunity to review the information gathered to ensure it accurately reflects the information shared during the interviews. The information from the interview will be published as part of the researcher's action research project.

Thank you for your consideration. Interviews will be scheduled at a time of your convenience. If you have any questions, please email me at melanie.cleveringa@scwarriors.org. To confirm your willingness to participate in this study, sign below acknowledging that you have read and understand all the above information. *I am aware that the experiences shared may be used in written research that will maintain my anonymity. A signature below indicates your decision to participate.

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C

Sioux Center District SBI Guiding Principles

1. **All students are held to clearly defined goals (state standards, proficiency rubrics, and competencies) and high expectations.**
   a. Learning expectations are clearly and consistently communicated to students and families.
   b. Demonstration of goals must require transfer of knowledge (concepts, DOK, cross curricular learning, learning beyond the classroom, etc)

2. **Student achievement is evaluated only against our clearly defined goals (standards, proficiency rubrics, and competencies).**
   a. Extra credit is NOT given
   b. "Exceeding" should not simply be more work, but instead a deeper level of work (quality/depth rather than quantity/amount of work across the proficiency levels)
   c. Behavior, work habits, and character traits are reported separately and are as important as the academic report, as they are the habits that students will need to be successful in high school and beyond.
   d. Most recent data will be used when reporting student achievement.

3. **Students advance upon demonstrated proficiency.**
   a. Learning is validated regardless of when, where, or how students acquire or demonstrate their learning including personalized learning options or alternative learning pathways.
   b. Students can advance at their own pace.
   c. Our instructional goal should be proficiency for all students; our responsibility is continual *learning* for all students.
   d. Awareness of current level of performance and academic gaps is a priority for both teachers and students.

4. **Students engage in multiple and varied assessments as a meaningful and positive learning experience.**
   a. Retakes, revisions, and alternative assessments will be provided after receiving meaningful and descriptive feedback.
   b. Reassessments should not be given until evidence of readiness is provided.
   c. All components of an assessment are aligned to standards, proficiency rubrics, and competencies.
   d. Proficiency is defined by the achievement of expected standards rather than student-to-student comparisons.
   e. Formative assessments are assessments FOR learning and results are used to inform instructional adjustments, teaching practices, and academic support
   f. Summative assessments are assessments OF learning and should only be administered after formative assessments demonstrate student readiness.
   g. Formative assessments can be personalized per classroom/teacher, but summative assessments should be planned and administered consistently across a grade-level content area (not necessary vertically).

5. **Students receive timely, personalized feedback based on individual learning needs.**
   a. Feedback should be timely, specific, and descriptive.
   b. Feedback should be language-based and aligned to the proficiency rubrics rather than a number or letter.
   c. Final letter grades, when necessary, are reserved for "after" the learning process is completed.

6. **Students receive rapid, personalized support based on individual learning needs.**
   a. Type of assessment and instruction should be personalized to the learner.
   b. Students can and should have varied learning experiences around the same standard according to their current proficiency and/or learner profiles.
   c. Students are given opportunities as well as explicitly guided in taking ownership of their learning through self-reflection, goal setting, voice and choice, accountability, self-regulation, etc.