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# Making Grades Meaningful: Parents' Perceptions of Using Standards-Based Report Cards

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Making Grades Meaningful: Parents' Perceptions of Using Standards-Based Report Cards

by  
Joseph G. Stanley

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Nova Southeastern University  
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## **Approval Page**

This applied dissertation was submitted by Joseph G. Stanley under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Joseph G. Stanley  
Name

May 29, 2017  
Date

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## **Abstract**

Making Grades Meaningful: Parents' Perceptions of Using Standards-Based Report Cards. Joseph G. Stanley, 2017: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. Keywords: standards-based grading, report cards, elementary school, parents, classroom grading

The information conveyed to parents on traditional report cards can be misleading. Although the use of the letter grade system has been in place for more than a century, these grades do not give parents the information they need in order to help ensure that their children are academically successful. In order to address this issue, schools must review the methods by which they communicate student progress.

In this study, the parents of students in an elementary school classroom were told the benefits of using standards-based report cards and were shown how to read them. They were then provided with a standards-based report card detailing how their children performed in reading. Following the use of this report card, parents completed a questionnaire and were interviewed about their perceptions of using this revised reporting document.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Teachers and administrators in schools across the nation have long believed that with higher parental involvement comes greater student achievement (Bafumo, 2003). However, with changing standards, many educators are concerned about the depth of understanding that parents possess regarding the curriculum that is being delivered in today's classrooms (Bolkan, 2014). While many programs are aimed at increasing parents' understanding of educational standards, efforts to make these standards relevant to parents are not wide-spread, representing an opportunity for educators to make these standards relevant to both students and parents, alike, as stated by Deddeh, Main, and Fulkerson (2010). However, the need for giving standards relevance increased significantly in the August of 2014, as the state of Florida began the implementation of the Florida Standards. These standards, which are significantly more rigorous than the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards, which they replaced (Florida Department of Education, 2016a). The change in standards that began in the autumn of 2014 requires a great deal of parent communication, as they raise the level of expectations for student performance.

**Topic.** The topic of this dissertation is parents' perceptions of standards-based grading and reporting. In an era where accountability for academic growth is often seen as the responsibility of the teacher or student, educators have started to ask why this accountability is not being assumed by, or expected of, parents. It is incumbent upon educational leaders to do everything possible to ensure that parents are able to understand their children's current academic performance in as much detail as possible. This is an obligation that is not being fulfilled by the grading and reporting practices that are

currently being utilized in most American school districts. As a result, parents are unable to provide assistance to students at home, putting students at a disadvantage as academic rigor intensifies during the progression from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

**Research problem.** When parents attempt to gather additional information about the progress of their children, such as in parent-teacher conferences or through other methods of communication, their efforts are often stymied by the use of a reporting system reliant based upon letter-grades. Despite being potentially able to determine a more-specific area within a larger subject area in which to focus their efforts at home, parents are unable to track their children's academic progress from anything other than a macroscopic level. This is due to the fact that parents receive graded assignments and report cards that do not indicate a child's progress in a particular subtopic. All too often, assignments are comprised of multiple standards, and are not disaggregated into their component benchmarks for reporting purposes. This is data that is crucial to keeping parents informed of how their children are developing academically. The report cards that are currently issued by the "Smith County School District," which is a rural school district in southern Florida, do not provide parents with the information necessary to support their children's academic achievement. As described by Guskey (2001), these report cards are norm-referenced. This leads to the fundamental flaw that exists in the traditional letter grading system: it is a representation of an aggregate measure of how one student compares to his or her peers. Parents are, therefore, limited in the amount of information they have at their disposal. For example, using a traditional letter-grade report card, a parent is not able to discern the specific area or areas within a particular subject of study in which his or her child is struggling. Moreover, the parent is unable to determine the progress of his or her child toward mastery of a particular content area.

The issues with grading that have been seen on a national level are also present in the Smith County School District. This school district has utilized traditional grading and reporting methods for more than 30 years. This report card, which consists of letter grades for academic subjects on the traditional scale of A-F, as well as effort grades for non-academic subjects. Effort grades are rated as unsatisfactory (“U”), needs improvement (“N”), satisfactory (“S”), and excellent (“E”). Grades are issued on a quarterly basis, with four quarters, consisting of nine weeks each, constituting an academic year.

The Smith County School District, like many districts, had used the letter-grade reporting method for decades without any discussion. These report cards, which are limited in the information they provide parents, do little more than report a student’s overall achievement in a particular subject. These subjects can be, in some cases, comprised of dozens of standards. This aggregate reporting method does not give the parents the information they require to assist their children at home. Indeed, teachers, parents, and students grappled with many issues that were hampered by a lack of standards-based grading and reporting, without ever examining a root cause. For instance, teachers frequently lamented that parents would not offer assistance to students as they worked to master skills. Likewise, parents would often express frustration with the lack of communication from teachers regarding the specific content in which children were expected to demonstrate proficiency. This has had a significant impact on the district as a whole, but particularly on its students, whose achievement suffers as a result.

### **Background and Justification**

Over the past three years, the Smith County School District has undertaken an extensive effort to incorporate standards-based instructional practices in all of its

classrooms. Standards-based instruction requires teachers to deliver instruction that is geared toward a particular instructional standard or benchmark. This includes tasks that are aligned to specific standards and require students to demonstrate independent proficiency in order to show mastery of the standard (Protheroe, 2008). With this initiative, however, the District has not changed its report card design to reflect the new emphasis in instruction. This has resulted in a significant amount of frustration on the part of teachers, who are being asked to teach and assess at the individual-standard level, but are required to report student progress at a level where standards are aggregated.

While this change in grading without a change in reporting has resulted in frustration at the teacher level in Smith County Schools, parents have also reported their concerns about issues that can be linked to current grading practices. Parents have indicated that they are unable to assist their children with their work, because they do not know what they are being taught in a particular subject, such as reading or mathematics. Additionally, parents in the district have noted that they are unable to determine the progress of their child using the District's report card. This makes it difficult to conclude whether or not a teacher is making a positive impact on a student. To illustrate this point, one should consider a student who enters a classroom significantly below grade level. It is likely that this student would, in the beginning of the year, have an academic grade percentage equivalent to an 'F,' such as a 10%. If the student makes significant gains, it is possible that he or she could end the year with a 59%. While this change represents nearly a 500% increase in the child's overall grade, which would certainly correspond to significant improvement in learning, the student would still score an 'F' on his or her report card. To a parent who is reading report card grades, and who may very well be punishing their child for having a failing grade, it may seem that there has been no

improvement. After all, their child had an ‘F’ in September and still has an ‘F’ in June. However, this student has made incredible progress toward mastering a standard, even though he or she still falls below the threshold of mastery.

Another example that has occurred in the Smith County School District can be seen, albeit from a different perspective, in the instance where a student who performs relatively well in a particular subject is not keeping pace. For instance, if a child performs well in Science the first quarter, he or she may earn an 89% average, corresponding to an overall grade of ‘B’ for the term. However, if he or she does not keep pace with the increasing difficulty of the material, that grade may decline to an 80% in the final term, which would also be reported as a ‘B.’ In this instance, a parent may not notice—or may even reward—their child’s declining academic performance.

The inability of the standard letter-grade reporting method to communicate progress is only one of the issues that exist. Another issue is that this lack of information makes it difficult for parents to assist their children at home, as they do not have an understanding of the various standards that comprise the content that their children are learning in school (Bolkan, 2014). This has also been reported by both parents and teachers in the Smith County School District. Parents have noted that they find it difficult to help struggling children because they do not know the various topics that are covered in each grading period. For instance, there may be as many as six different primary content areas (e.g., main idea, author’s purpose, etc.) in Reading each quarter. This number is even greater in Mathematics. Reporting student progress with standards-based reporting methods results in parents being able to determine exactly which standards comprise their child’s overall grade, as well as whether or not their children are progressing toward, or regressing from, mastery. This has led many in the Smith County

School District to consider how their method of grading and reporting is affecting students.

This lack of information has compounded to the extent that the result has become a parent population that is wholly unaware of either their children's academic standing or their academic progress. This is evidenced in the exertion made by Bolkan (2014), which indicated that the vast majority of teachers do not believe parents understand academic standards. As a result, one of the largest stakeholder groups a school system has, the parents of its students, are disenfranchised. Unable to determine where their children are excelling or struggling, they are not capable of providing the necessary assistance at home to help close any achievement gaps that may exist. This leads to students experiencing greater difficulty with academic deficiencies, as they are deprived of a valuable source of assistance. While this connection is seen in all students, it should be noted that it is magnified in students who struggle academically. A lack of assistance, coupled with a lack of parental understanding of the academic needs of students, destines these students to an academic career marked by continual struggle.

In order to improve the understanding of standards by parents, mechanisms should be implemented that are rooted in these standards, compelling parents to learn the various benchmarks that students are expected to obtain throughout their education. One such mechanism is a standards-based grading system. Although Swan, Guskey, and Jung (2014) demonstrated that parents found standards-based grading practices informative, little research has been done to describe the experience parents have with standards-based grading and reporting practices; specifically, whether or not these practices allow parents to better-assist their children in working to master the content, resulting in improved student achievement. However, Scriffiny (2008) suggested that parents would be better-

accustomed to using this data to assist their children. Based on the difficulties that have been experienced by teachers, parents, and students in Smith County Schools, it is necessary to explore parents' perceptions of standards-based grading and report cards. By doing so, the reduced ability of parents to assist their children academically, due to a limited understanding of the content standards that comprise the subjects that their children are learning, can be improved.

The researcher currently serves as a school-level administrator in the Smith County School District, where he leads an elementary school. Prior to his current role, the researcher served as a district-level administrator in the Smith County School District, specializing in school accountability. Having served as a classroom teacher, school administrator, and district leader, the researcher has a thorough knowledge of the current operational practices in the district, as well as an understanding of the local climate regarding education. In addition, the researcher has served in a district-level position focused on increasing parental involvement in schools, which gave him the opportunity to form significant ties with community stakeholders and parent groups. Finally, the researcher has maintained a close, working relationship with teachers and administrators in schools across the district. Taken together, it is evident that the researcher possesses ability and access needed in order to carry out this case study without involving any teachers, staff members, parents, or students at his school site, so as to avoid any possibility of undue influence.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** At present, there have been numerous studies conducted on standards-based grading. These studies cover a wide array of approaches and topics. Researchers have explored the impact of standards-based grading and reporting on student learning (Concus, 2015; Craig, 2011; Guskey & Bailey, 2001). In

addition, numerous studies have explored how standards-based grading impacts the practices of teachers in the classroom (Brookhart, 2011; Jung & Guskey, 2007; Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011; Williams, 2014). There has also been a significant amount of research conducted on the impact standards-based grading practices has on student learning (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Cheung, 2004; Miller, 2013).

Taken together with the fact that parental involvement in education has been a topic of research for years, it is natural to explore the experiences of parent with respect to standards-based grading and reporting; specifically, it is likely to assume that research would be undertaken to describe how parents utilize these grading and reporting methods at home. This assumption is all the more reasonable given the fact that such research has been called for in prior studies. Williams (2014) conducted a study “to explore the perceptions of elementary teachers and administrators regarding the impact of standards-based report cards on curriculum, instruction, assessment and parent communication” (p. 53). The study participants included four elementary schools across two school districts in Pennsylvania. Three of the four schools consisted of roughly the same composition of students and staff, while the fourth school in the study stood out as a high-achieving school whose demographics consisted of a low number of both economically-disadvantaged and minority students. Each of the schools included in the study were using a standards-based report card, at the time the research was conducted, however.

This data revealed that, in terms of the curriculum, teachers felt that reading and mathematics were aligned closer to the standards and that the pacing of the curriculum had become more rigid. In addition, it was found that instruction was impacted as a result of teachers being more aware of the standards as they planned their lessons, as well as being more purposeful during the delivery of instruction. Moreover, teachers and

administrators indicated that standards-based report cards had helped teachers become more aware of the individual needs of their students. As for assessments, respondents stated that standards-based report cards had resulted in the transition of grading practices from being a process of averaging individual grades for each student to one in which qualitative observations were factored in to the overall proficiency levels of students. In terms of parent communication, analysis of the study's data indicated that while standards-based report cards has resulted in increased communication with parents, this communication was improved when informational sessions were conducted with parents so that they could interpret the large amount of information contained in these documents. Among the suggestions made by Williams (2014) was that further study be conducted in the area of parental perceptions; specifically, "a qualitative study of parents' perceptions of the use of standards-based report cards" (p. 117).

Smith County Schools have produced lackluster results on achievement tests for several years. As measured by the results of the 2016 Florida Standards Assessment for English/Language Arts, 39% of Smith County students in Grades 3-10 were on grade level (Florida Department of Education, 2016b). In fact, two of the District's five elementary schools scored low enough to be ranked among the lowest 300 elementary schools in the state of Florida. This resulted in these school being required to provide an additional hour of instruction per day as a result of their poor student performance in English/Language Arts (Florida Department of Education, 2016b). This reading difficulty has proven to be systemic, as at none of the ten schools in Smith County had more than half of the students been deemed proficient in English/Language Arts. It should be noted, however, that despite these difficulties in English/Language Arts, there has been very little change implemented by the District in terms of how student scores are reported to

parents during the course of the year, as they prepare to take statewide exams.

A second study, conducted by Johnson (2001), sought to investigate the impact that standards-based report cards had on teachers' relationships with students and parents. The study was conducted using six teachers in the Bellevue School District. The Bellevue School District had done prior work with standards-based grading and reporting practices, resulting from the appointment of a new Superintendent. This appointment had begun a collaborative effort with the school board in response to the State of Washington's adoption of new accountability measures incorporating numerous performance standards. These performance standards have been incorporated into the new standards-based report cards, which were designed in consultation with parents, teachers, curriculum specialists, and administrators. Following its creation, the new report card had been mandated for use at the elementary level.

Based upon a review of the participants' responses, the researcher concluded that standards-based grading and reporting improved communication between teachers and parents. This conclusion followed the analysis of the interview transcripts in which teachers indicated that the use of standards-based report cards facilitated the communication of additional information to parents, thus improving the quality of the communication between school and home. For example, teachers noted that they found themselves being more descriptive of students' progress while using the new report card layouts, as well as more specific about student progress during other interactions with parents, such as at parent-teacher conferences. Following the analysis of the study's findings, Johnson (2001) goes on to recommend that further research be conducted on the amount of information standards-based report cards provide parents as to their children's mastery of the academic standards necessary for success on state exams.

As part of this study, an intervention will be provided to parents. This intervention will consist of a workshop designed to inform parents about the purpose of standards-based grading and how to read a standards-based report card so as to be able to offer their children assistance in the area of drawing inferences from a text selection. During this workshop, parents will be taught the purpose of standards-based report cards, as well as how the data included on these report cards differs from the data included on a traditional letter-grade report card. Moreover, parents will be shown how to interpret this information in such a way as to improve their ability to assist their children as they learn to draw inferences from text selections.

The academic gap that this case study will fill is academic research that studies how, and in what ways, the parents of elementary school students describe their ability to assist their children in drawing inferences before, and after, an intervention is applied. As described above, this intervention is a workshop designed to inform parents about standards-based reporting and how the information included in these reports can be used to assist their children in learning to draw inferences from a text. This gap is one that currently exists in the literature and will be addressed by this topic of study.

**Audience.** District leaders will benefit from this study when deciding upon not only whether or not to utilize standards-based grading and reporting methods in their schools, but when deciding on the best methods to use when implementing these grading and reporting practices. In addition, district leaders will benefit from discovering the advantages and disadvantages of these methods, from parents' perspectives, so that they can be better-prepared when initiating these changes. By researching the perceptions of parents who have the opportunity to use a standards-based report card as a potential means to be better-able to assist their children, teachers and schools will be provided

evidence to support a shift in current grading practices. This shift will benefit numerous stakeholder groups, the most important of which is today's students.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms and definitions are used in this study:

*Academic standards* – a set of clearly-defined goals and objectives for academic courses in grades K-12 that frequently evolve from foundational levels in the primary grades to advanced conceptual levels in the upper secondary grades (Iamarino, 2014).

*Benchmark* – a specific skill or curriculum objective that serves as a component part of an academic standard. A student must demonstrate mastery for all of the component benchmarks for an academic standard in order to demonstrate mastery of that standard (Downey, Steffy, Poston, & English, 2009).

*Level of performance* – the academic mastery demonstrated by a student in a given period of time for a particular subject area (Rouse & Kemple, 2009).

*Questionnaire* – the document that will be provided to study participants by the researcher in an effort to explore their experiences with standards-based grading and reporting. The document in question will contain approximately ten questions. These questions will be a combination of formats, with some measured on a Likert scale and some being designed to require a short response from participants (Creswell, 2015).

*Standards-based grading* – the use of progress criteria to determine a student's progression in the attainment of various benchmarks related to specific academic standards (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015).

*Standards-based reporting* – the use of a reporting form designed to inform parents of their children's progress in the attainment of various benchmarks related to specific academic standards (Guskey, 2001).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study dissertation is to investigate elementary parents' academic understanding of reading scores on a standards-based report card before and after an intervention. This study will address the academic gap stated earlier, providing research that studies the perspectives of parents regarding their knowledge of the standards their children are learning in school and whether or not this knowledge will improve the degree of their academic involvement with their children. With the implementation of standards-based grading, it is hoped that parents will have a far better understanding of not only the level at which their children are performing, but also their progression toward mastery of each of the standards that comprise a particular subject or area of study. This will be supported through instructional sessions that will be provided both to parents and teachers. These sessions will contain information covering the structure and content of standards-based report cards. In turn, parents will be able to support their children academically and, in doing so, will give their children an academic advantage as they work to attain mastery of their subjects' content. As a result, parents will become more aware of the academic standards that their children are learning, giving them a better understanding of the scope of material being taught to their children.

As parents learn more about their children's academic progression, it is possible that overall parental involvement will improve. Conversations between teachers, parents, and students started as a result of standards-based grading and reporting have the potential to inevitably lead to a greater amount of parental involvement in schools overall. This can only improve the educational experiences had by students, as relationships between school and home have been shown to close demographic achievement gaps (Hill & Tyson, 2009). It is evident that, when taken together, the

evidence shows that the promise of standards-based grading and reporting far exceeds simply improving the design or format of report cards (Brookhart, 2011; Guskey, Swan, & Jung, 2011; R. Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; Miller, 2013). The promise of standards-based grading and reporting lies in its potential to change the way in which the vast majority of students' parents interact with their children's schools. Moreover, as a result of improved communication between home and school, together with additional academic support from parents, standards-based grading and reporting has the potential to improve children's academic performance.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the discussions that are frequently held regarding the changes necessary for children to receive higher-quality educations, many topics are debated. These topics, which may include popular subjects such as standardized testing and learner-centered curricula, rarely include standards-based grading and reporting. Indeed, given the number of changes that have occurred in education, it is important to note the lack of impact these changes have had on how students' progress is reported. Given this fact, it is necessary to examine how shifts in a reporting system that is nearly 125 years old can benefit students and parents, alike, as schools grapple with increasing expectations for teachers and students. These increasing expectations have resulted in parents playing an ever-increasing role in students' educations. Yet, in order for parents to fulfill this role, they must possess the capacity to do so, in the form of an understanding of the content that students are expected to master as part of a particular course.

Literature related to several aspects of both grading and parental involvement practices was reviewed. First, literature related to the history of standards-based grading was reviewed. Also, as the study is rooted in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, the literature related to this framework was reviewed, as well. Additionally, standards-based grading is often mentioned in conjunction with the topics of formative and summative assessments, as these instruments are what inform the standards-based grading process. Likewise, literature related to standards-based grading mechanisms was also reviewed. Finally, literature related to the role parental involvement plays in students' academic development was reviewed, as it relates to the parental involvement aspect of the study.

## **History of Standards-Based Grading**

The use of letter grades to score student work is a practice that has been in place for years. Kohn (2011) pointed out the letter-grade system is so established in our academic life that even “the criticisms of grading today were laid out forcefully and eloquently decades ago” (p. 28). The letter grade itself, as it applies to students’ academic records and demonstration of mastery, has been discussed in the literature as far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as in when Meyer (1908) discussed how grades could be used to rate students on an equitable basis. In fact, the current system, in which letter grades corresponding to students’ academic performance are used to determine a grade-point average, was determined by the Committee of Ten in 1892 (Cox, 2011).

While letter grades have become a commonly-accepted practice in today’s schools, this has not always been the case. For example, O’Connor (2010) noted that “Prior to about 1880, reporting was in a narrative format and often simply listed the skills and concepts that each student had mastered” (p. 38). Following narrative grade reporting, percentage grades were implemented in schools during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, the accuracy of teachers’ grading practices was eventually subjected to a new degree of scrutiny, which led to the adoption of grading scales broken into categories, such as the A to F letter grade scale, by many schools (O’Connor, 2010).

The identification of learning criteria, or standards, has not always been a practice undertaken by those assigning grades, however. Following the advent of the letter-grade system, it became a common practice to grade students’ work on a curve. This was done in an effort to ensure that grades were distributed equally between teachers, in effect weighting out varying levels of difficulty. However, in stark contrast to a standards-based grading system, curving scores produced the added effect of eliminating any need for the

identification of specific standards when scoring students' work (Guskey & Bailey, 2001).

The majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the use of varying methods for grading. Such methods included the reemergence of narrative grading, the institution of pass-fail systems, the continuation of curving methods, and, for some, the complete abandonment of formalized grading (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). For the majority of schools, however, the use of letter-grading systems became the predominant method of rating student work (Hargis, 2003). This was how the status of grading remained until the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Citing the need for wide-reaching reforms, this document is widely seen as the catalyst for the standards-based movement. Yet, grading practices had remained largely unchanged in the wake of this publication, even though there has been a far greater push towards standards as a result of this seminal work, until the early 1990s, when performance standards began to be discussed in a wider circle. These discussions marked the origins of the standards-based grading movement as it exists today (R. J. Marzano, 2011).

### **The Smith County School District**

The participants in this study will include both teachers and parents from a school district in Southcentral Florida. The school district in question, the identify of which will be protected through the use of a pseudonym, is a small, rural district consisting of ten school sites that, combined, serve slightly more than 6,400 students. For this study, teacher participants will be solicited on a voluntary basis. The sample will include instructional staff members representing several grade levels from various school sites. The solicitation of teacher participants will be conducted prior to the start of the 2016-2017 school year.

**Hillsdale Elementary School.** Built in the early 1980s, Hillsdale Elementary School is a public school within the Smith County School District. During this time, Hillsdale has maintained a reputation for outstanding student achievement results, including several years of ‘A’ school rankings using Florida’s school grading system; however, this performance has been known to fluctuate from year to year. Serving students in grades K-5, Hillsdale serves approximately 650 students. Around 450 students at Hillsdale are from the neighborhoods immediately surrounding it, while roughly 175 of its students reside in other schools’ attendance zones, but have received a zone waiver from the school district. In the Smith County School District, Hillsdale enjoys a reputation as being an outstanding school. The result of this reputation has been that Hillsdale has the largest number of zone waivers in the district and there are more applicants per instructional vacancy at Hillsdale than at any other school in the county.

***Staff demographics.*** The staff at Hillsdale Elementary School is a tight-knit group of individuals. Clearly a group with extensive experience, nearly half of the instructional faculty possesses more than 15 years of experience in education, while a quarter possesses between 10 and 15 years of experience. In terms of diversity, the staff is nearly entirely female and of Caucasian descent. Of the 65 staff members, 45 of whom are classified as instructional personnel, there is one male. This individual also represents one of the three employees of African-American descent. Of those staff members who remain, eight are Hispanic, with the remaining 54 staff members being classified as Caucasian. It should be noted that of the eight staff members classified as Hispanic, only two serve in instructional positions. Two others serve in paraprofessional capacities and the remaining four serve in non-instructional roles.

While the school has gone through a succession of Assistant Principals, for

fourteen years Hillsdale benefited from the continuous leadership of a well-respected principal. Following this principal's promotion to a district-level leadership role, the sitting assistant principal at the time was named Hillsdale's principal. During that transition, a record number of teachers left Hillsdale, either through attrition or to seek other positions in the district. This created a significant number of vacancies to be filled, nearly 20% of the staff in all. During this period of transition, the newly-appointed principal selected a new assistant principal which, it should be noted given the contents of the preceding paragraph, was of African-American descent.

***Student demographics.*** The staffing at Hillsdale Elementary School is not representative of its student body. While enrollment figures are constantly fluctuating, the student body remains comprised of roughly half male and half female students. Regarding the socio-economic demographics of these students, 79% qualify for assistance through the Free and Reduced Price Lunch ("FRPL") program. This percentage represents the second-lowest of the district's elementary schools. The school's student body also represents a greater array of diversity than does its faculty and staff. While around half of the students are Caucasian, 40% of the students at Hillsdale are classified as Hispanic. The remaining 10 percent are divided nearly-evenly into students of African-American descent and those with 'Other' listed as their ethnicity.

***Parent demographics.*** The parents of students at Hillsdale Elementary School represent a wide cross-section of the local area's demographics. While the majority of the families may have financial difficulties, as evidenced by the school's FRPL rate, this varies by the student's residential area. In fact, nearly none of the students who attend Hillsdale on a zone waiver participate in the FRPL program. The parent population mirrors that of the student population in terms of ethnicities, as well.

**The current grading system.** The Smith County School District has employed the letter grade system for the past several decades. During this time, parents have been given little information on the specific meaning of letter grades, other than what is included in the district's Student Progression Plan. This plan includes generic information, such as the fact that a grade of 'F' indicates a student is not performing at a level appropriate to pass a course. The document does not specify how parents can use the information on the district's report card to help their children improve academically, however.

The only reporting that approaches the design of a standards-based report card, and is required by the Smith County School District, is a document referred to as the "Kindergarten Attachment." This document specifies the percentage of numbers recognized by a student, the percentage of letters identified by a student, the percentage of letter sounds identified by a student, and the percentage of select sight words identified by a student. This document is completed each grading period by kindergarten teachers and sent home as an addendum to the standard report card. This attachment is required because the district mandates that all students promoted to first grade from kindergarten be able to accurately identify 90% of numbers, letters, letter sounds, and select sight words. In other words, while this report card does provide more information to parents, it is not produced for that purpose. Instead, it is produced in order to demonstrate where a student is performing in relation to a promotion goal.

The primary form of grading in Smith County Schools remains to be that of summative grading that is norm referenced in nature and categorized by the use of letter grades on an A-F scale. The letter grades that are a part of this system correspond to varying percentages related to students' overall scores in a class. For example, an 'A' is

assigned to an overall class score of 90% or greater, a 'B' is assigned to an overall class score that is equal to or greater than an 80% but less than a 90%, and so on. These letter grades are reported on a quarterly basis, with each quarter consisting of nine instructional weeks. In addition, the District requires that progress reports be sent home with each student half way through the grading period. These reports indicate a student's current course grade, again reported using the letter-grade format.

The Smith County School District has used grades in such a way as to provide parents with the information that they need to monitor their children's overall performance in various academic subjects. However, there has been no effort to help parents use these grades to improve their children's academic performance. Even if such an effort were to be undertaken, the grades provided by the District are not conducive to this activity, as they only report summative results on the part of the students. In fact, the letter grade parents receive as part of their child's progress report or report card indicates a range of possible summative results; for instance, a child earning a 'B' in reading may have attained anywhere from 80% mastery to 89.99% mastery. Worse yet, a child receiving an 'F' may have attained anywhere from 0% to 59.99% mastery. This significant difference in performance abilities being represented by the same letter grade does not provide parents with the information they require to provide support to their children, let alone the fact that the individual standards that comprise these letter grades are omitted. This lack of information makes it difficult, if not impossible, for parents to identify the specific level of support that their children require in order to demonstrate academic improvement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guides this study is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal

Development, which is rooted in social constructivism. Social constructivist theory was advanced by Lev Vygotsky, who formalized the learning concept that came to be known as the zone of proximal development (Derry, 2013). This concept has become one of the seminal teachings in colleges of education across the country. According to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, students have one of three relationships with a task: (a) they cannot complete the task, (b) they can complete the task with assistance, or (c) they can complete the task independently. In other words, a student's zone of proximal development represents the student's ability to complete a task without that task being too easy or so difficult that it causes the student undue frustration (Kozulin, 2003).

Vygotsky's work is important to educators because its principle allows them to determine, with greater specificity, the precise level at which students should receive instruction (Wass & Golding, 2014). When combined with standards-based grading and reporting practices, teachers' abilities to precisely-determine the level at which a student should receive instruction are increased. In turn, this results in a greater degree of specificity that leads to precise instruction at students' individual levels of need, due to teachers being able to identify the precise standard or benchmark that the student is struggling to master. As stated by Colby (1999), the primary advantage of standards-based grading is its ability to "[align] standards, assessment, and instruction with a learner-centered focus" (p. 53).

Understanding precisely where a student's areas of difficulty are located will assist parents as they work with their children at home. Indeed, when looking at what constitutes meaningful parental involvement, many educators point to parents' lack of ability to assist children with studying content that has been delivered in class. For example, a recent survey indicated that "more than 95 percent of teachers believe the

parents of their students do not understand what the Common Core State Standards are” (Bolkan, 2014, p. 1). Yet, this lack of understanding is potentially due to the fact that the information received by the vast majority of parents regarding their children’s academic progress is reported as a letter grade. Much like teachers, parents would benefit from standards-based reporting, as they would be given information regarding the standards that students are expected to master, along with a record of how their children are progressing along the continuum of learning.

With an understanding of their children’s progress, parents will be able to better-assist their children in overcoming academic challenges. Students will benefit from this extra help and teachers will benefit from the added support from parents. As reported by Ariës and Cabus (2015), the ability of parents to support their children through involvement in homework has been linked directly to students improving academically. The impact of this ability to provide targeted support at home is even more important in today’s world of high-stakes testing, which, in some cases, can lead to mandatory student retention for those students who do not demonstrate a level of proficiency on the end-of-year standardized exam (Huddleston, 2015).

The Zone of Proximal Development concept, which focuses on individual learner abilities, closely aligns to the practice of standards-based grading. This concept will allow teachers to better address misunderstandings not only through scaffolding or extending instruction to a students’ precise instructional level, as is often discussed in relation to this theory, but to ensure that they are tracking students’ progression precisely, by individual standard and skill (Subban, 2006). Of course, this approach’s benefit will extend to parents, as well.

In systems where a standards-based grading approach is not utilized, grades are

often a composite of product, process, and progress criteria. These three criteria correspond to a student's work product, the process by which a student arrived at that product, and the amount a student gains from that process, respectively (Guskey, 2001). This composite calculation of student grades has the potential to lead to a great deal of possible confusion and misunderstanding on the part of parents, students, and teachers, alike. However, when standards-based reporting is implemented, grades represent only product criteria (Guskey, 2001). Taken together with reporting forms that specify standards, this results in parents being able to accurately identify how their children are performing across any one of the several standards that comprise a subject area's curriculum.

### **Understanding the Letter-Grade Reporting System**

The letter-grade reporting system is comfortable. While this comfort may be found in its wide-spread use, it is also found in its history. For nearly the last 125 years, letter grades have been used to rate student performance, resulting from the fact that their reliability and lack of bias have been touted by those in academia (Cox, 2011; Meyer, 1908). Yet, the primary weakness associated with the letter-grade reporting system used by many of today's schools is that the grades students receive are, by and large, norm-referenced. In other words, a student's performance is ranked against that of his or her peers (Guskey, 2001). Not only is this the case, but the grades that lead to this ranking are determined by varying factors, including product criteria, process criteria, and progress criteria (Guskey, 2001). Moreover, grading can frequently include a combination of effort and behavior components (Brookhart, 2011). Taken together, these issues inevitably led to a misinterpretation on the part of parents and students. Indeed, many educators often lack a complete understanding of student performance as a result of grading outcomes.

As it stands, the letter-grade system represents what a student was able to earn in a course over a given period of time. This fact is often extrapolated to represent what a student has learned in a course. However, in order for a student's learning to be reported, a standards-based reporting system must be utilized (Brookhart, 2011).

**Formative and summative assessment.** At the heart of standards-based grading practices lie the concepts of formative and summative assessment. Harlen (2007) explained that formative assessments encompass those activities that produce data for the purpose of learning, whereas summative assessments serve the purpose of producing data that is used to report achievement. Although the traditional letter-grade method reports students' performance on both of these types of work, standards-based grading practices dictate that student performance be reported based solely on the outcome of summative assessments, each of which are based upon the learning standards students are expected to master (Deddeh et al., 2010). This allows students and teachers to utilize formative assessments for the purpose of learning content, meaning that students can make mistakes while learning the material without fear of negative consequences on their overall grade for a particular course or subject (Deddeh et al., 2010). It should be noted that one of the strongest correlations between assessment and the improvement of student learning is seen when formative assessment results are shared with students and students are expected to track their own growth (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2012).

**Standards-based reporting mechanisms.** When considering the actual standards-based reporting document that is distributed to parents, there are several shifts from the more-familiar, letter-grade report card. Even though many organizations have chosen to retain a letter-grade on their report card during the period of transition to standards-based reporting, these documents still require that labels be developed

representing students' progression toward mastery of the standards (Guskey, 2004). This reporting design, by its very nature, removes any sense of norm-referenced comparisons between students, as it relates how an individual student is learning the standards that are being presented. Additionally, by only reporting student outcomes on summative assessments, these designs eliminate the bias that exists in traditional reporting methods towards those students who are not able to master material quickly, thereby performing poorly on formative assessments. Of course, these methods also benefit teachers by allowing easy reporting of the precise standards students are having difficulty mastering. Rather than being expected to disaggregate a composite grade into its component parts in order to pinpoint the area in which a student is struggling, teachers will be able to easily identify these areas by virtue of the very design of standards-based reporting methods. These benefits also extend to parents and students as they work to improve students' academic achievement. As a result, not only do students benefit from improved academic performance, but they also benefit from improved involvement in their education on the part of their parents.

### **Positive Impact on Parental Involvement**

Current data trends show that parental involvement in children's education is at its peak when students are enrolled in elementary school (Child Trends, 2013). As students advance into higher levels within the K-12 system, parental involvement shows a decline. Even in the earlier grades, parental involvement is generally confined to attendance at meetings or classroom volunteering opportunities (Child Trends, 2013). Yet, it is noted in the literature that parental involvement has a positive impact on student achievement. Tan and Goldberg (2008) found that when positive parental involvement is engaged in by a child's parents, he or she is more likely to do well academically, as well as demonstrate

an overall enjoyment of school. While educators, especially those in the secondary grades where involvement typically wanes, may debate how to engage parents, Bafumo (2003) noted that “getting parents involved means building trust” (p. 12). This sentiment runs counter to studies which show that teachers fail to engage parents, especially those from lower socioeconomic statuses, in a meaningful way because they do not believe parents will support the teachers’ goals; namely, teachers do not believe that parents will assist students with academic struggles at home (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009).

As studies continue to demonstrate that educators feel parents do not understand the Common Core State Standards, which serve as the basis for curriculum delivered in today’s schools, it is possible that a shift in reporting to make these standards more relatable to parents would allow them to be serve as a better support structure at home (Gallup, 2015). To that end, Guskey et al. (2011) noted that, when presented with an opportunity to receive a standards-based report card, “by a wide margin, families favored the standards-based form over the traditional form” (p. 56). Indeed, as reported by Webber and Wilson (2012), parents indicate that they are open to receiving as much communication from teachers as possible.

This increase in relatability to parents is due, at least in part, to the lack of ambiguity that is present in a standards-based reporting system. Scriffiny (2008) noted that parents have a greater degree of comfort with standards-based systems, as they mirror the format of many workplace evaluation systems. While various advantages of standards-based reporting methods have been discussed, the primary advantage of these designs continues to be that they “create a straightforward link between curriculum and assessment” (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015, p. 68). In contrast to the report cards that are used by the majority of today’s schools, which provide an aggregate grade representing

numerous standards, standards-based reporting methods communicate to parents how students are progressing toward the mastery of the expected content (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015). This benefits not only parents, but students, as well, since they are able to see their progression throughout the course of a particular unit of study, instead of receiving a letter grade that represents their overall performance on multiple standards (Shippy, Washer, & Perrin, 2013). As these instruments are designed, however, educators must be careful to consider the perspective of parents, as research had shown that parents can often misunderstand the information presented in report cards, even though school personnel believe that the information contained in the report card is straight-forward and easily understood (Tuten, 2007). This importance is underscored by Jacobsen, Saultz, and Snyder (2013), who asserted that poorly designed report cards can lead to frustration that erodes parents' confidence in the quality of their children's schools.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Although there is extensive discussion related to both the advantages and methodology surrounding the creation of a standards-based grading and reporting system, at present, there is a gap in the literature regarding parents' perceptions of their knowledge of the standards their children are learning in school and whether or not this knowledge will improve the degree of their academic involvement with their children. Although briefly mentioned by Guskey et al. (2011), there is a dearth of information related to parents' perceptions of how standards-based grading and reporting mechanisms assist them in providing academic support to their children, especially as it relates to their capacity to understand the specific areas in which their children struggle. By extension, there is a noticeable lack of research published in the literature regarding parents' perceptions of whether or not standards-based reporting methods will help them better

understand the expectations that exist for students in a particular course or subject area, thereby enabling them to provide the scaffolding necessary for students to learn the material.

While research conducted in the future should continue to focus on the benefits of standards-based grading and reporting, it should approach these benefits from the standpoint of improving academic achievement. At present, the vast majority of the literature focuses on one of three primary topics: (a) how these systems will improve the accuracy of grades, as they reflect students' academic standing, (b) overcoming teachers' resistance to changing grading methodologies, and (c) the design of standards-based reporting systems. However, the true power of this reporting method may lie in its ability to specify the skills or benchmarks that students struggle to master, ensuring that parents can assist students with their exact areas of weakness. Therefore, future research should be focused in this area, as realizing the benefits of this reporting method requires moving past the logistical aspects of implementing standards-based reporting systems to explore how these systems can directly benefit student achievement.

**Unique contribution of the intended dissertation study.** This dissertation study will investigate parents' perceptions of standards-based reporting as it relates to providing them with the information necessary to assist their children academically. This study is based on the premise that the traditional letter-grade reporting system in place in school districts across the country does not provide parents with an understanding of the content students are learning to an adequate degree. With few exceptions, the letter-grades found on the reports of student progress that parents receive, as noted by Hooper and Cowell (2014), "fail to communicate what each student really knows" (p. 60). Furthermore, Hooper and Cowell (2014) go on to state that there are "inherent

ambiguities in communicating student learning when averaging all student scores to determine a single final grade” (p. 60). The result of this ambiguity is that parents are left unsure of the exact standards with which students struggle, preventing them from being able to assist their children in overcoming these deficits.

The research conducted as a part of this study will seek to determine whether the use of a new reporting structure, designed to report students’ achievement on summative assessments tied to specific academic standards, can clarify this ambiguity. As stated by Proulx, Spencer-May, and Westerberg (2012), “standards-based education and the system of grading it entails...enhances communication between classroom teachers and...parents...regarding what students are expected to know and do in each course and how well each student is performing in relation to those expectations” (p. 30). This study will seek to determine whether this enhanced communication will result in students benefiting from an increased level of support at home once parents have a new-found understanding of the standards related to a particular course or subject area.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are parents’ perceptions of reading content their children are learning when standards-based grading and reporting methods are utilized?
2. How and in what ways do parents incorporate/understand the formative nature of standards-based grading and reporting as a means to support their children academically in reading?
3. What are parents’ perceptions of their ability to assist their children in enhancing their academic strength and supporting some of their academic weaknesses in reading after understanding the use of standards-based report cards?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study was designed to investigate parents' perceptions of standards-based reporting as it related to providing them with the information necessary to assist their children academically. Participants were drawn from a population consisting of the parents of students enrolled in a fifth grade classroom in the Smith County School District. Research was conducted using a case study approach, and data was collected by way of participant interviews, questionnaires, as well as an observation log recorded by the researcher during interview sessions. This information was then analyzed for themes using qualitative analysis techniques.

#### **Qualitative Research Approach**

A case study approach was utilized for this research study. As stated by Yin (2014), case studies are appropriate when a study's research "questions seek to explain [a] present circumstance (e.g., "how" or "why" some social phenomenon works)" (p. 4). Yin (2014) further defined a case study as being "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon ("the case") in depth and within its real-world context" and further explained it should be used when "the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16).

In her dissertation exploring parents' perceptions of public education, Russell (2010) utilized a case study approach. The method employed by Russell (2010) included gathering data through multiple methods, including a review of quantitative data and multiple participant interviews. This approach to data collection allowed the study's researcher to identify information that was not immediately apparent, as the case study method allows for descriptive or explanatory information to be collected (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). This led to a more in-depth understanding of parents' perceptions of

public education following the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act than would have been possible with other methods of study.

This study examined how parents utilized the information on a standards-based report card to provide support to their children in the subject area of reading. The study was an in-depth exploration of parents' perceptions of standards-based grading and its impact on their ability to assist their children, utilizing three methods of data collection. Creswell (2013) noted that case study approaches were ones in which the researcher explored a phenomenon "through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (p. 97). Taking these facts into account, and given the definitions stated by Yin (2014), the case study approach was appropriate for use in this study.

### **The Research Site**

The research site was Hillsdale Elementary School, a public elementary school in the Smith County School District. Smith County Schools serves approximately 6,500 students in rural southern Florida. Serving grades K-5, Hillsdale Elementary has an enrollment of approximately 625 students. In terms of its student population, Hillsdale is classified as a Title I school site, meaning that the majority of its students qualify for free or reduced lunch under Federal guidelines. In fact, approximately 85% of Hillsdale's students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The majority of students at Hillsdale are white, with 52% of students having that ethnic classification. 35% of students are Hispanic and 10% of students are African-American. The remaining 5% of students are classified as either African American or Multiracial.

Smith County Schools has used a letter-grade reporting system for decades. Yet, as student performance has started to decline in recent years, the District started to look for alternative ways of work, including grading policies and plans. Hillsdale had

traditionally been viewed as a high-performing school, but its history may not have always aligned with that reputation. Under Florida's school accountability system, Hillsdale has been designated, at various times, as an A, B, C, and D school. When classified a 'D,' the school was visited by representatives of the Florida Department of Education's Differentiated Accountability team. This team conducted instructional walkthroughs and provided recommendations for instructional improvements. At the conclusion of that year, the school increased in designation to a 'B.'

The school had been identifying several strategies to facilitate continual school improvement. Among these were programs that focused on instruction that was rooted in the instructional standards. Specifically, programs and instruction must be rooted in the Florida Standards, which closely align to the Common Core State Standards. Yet, while a significant amount of time and money had been invested in this process, reporting mechanisms remained the same as they had been for many years. This prevented teachers from moving toward standards-based grading on a large scale, as the format of progress reports and report cards continued to be entrenched in reporting performance through the use of letter grades.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were selected using a purposeful sampling method. The population from which a sample was solicited was all parents or guardians (hereafter referred to a "parents") of fifth grade students in the classroom of a fifth grade teacher at Hillsdale Elementary School who volunteered to participate in the study. At the time of the study, enrollment in fifth grade classrooms at Hillsdale Elementary School numbered approximately 110 students. According to the Florida Law, there can be no more than 22 students enrolled in a fifth grade classroom at a public school. As a result, the maximum

population size would have been 44. From this population, a sample of 8-10 parents was approached regarding their participation in the study. In an effort to ensure that the selected sample of participants was representative of the larger population, a sample was solicited that was representative of the larger population as a whole; that is, the individuals recruited for this study were similar to the population as a whole in terms of gender and ethnicity. As stated by Stake (1995), this would result in a study sample that is representative of the larger population.

Once the teacher had been selected, the parents of the students enrolled in this class were notified of the project. As part of this notification, parents were given the option to take part in the research study. The direct participation of participants was limited to the following events: (a) one informational meeting that was held to introduce the concept of standards-based grading and reporting, (b) one informational meeting to explain how students' standards-based report cards would differ from the traditional report cards issued by the school district, and (c) an interview that was conducted to determine whether or not the participants felt that they were better-able to assist their children with academic deficiencies as a result of standards-based grading. The teacher participant took part in a meeting to discuss standards-based grading practices in the classroom, ensuring that he or she was comfortable with the methods and procedures involved with this significant change in practice. The teacher in question also took part in regular follow-up meetings with the researcher in order to ensure that any issues or difficulties encountered as a part of the research study were addressed.

The researcher is an administrator within the Smith County School District. Given this role, he had access to the population from which the sample was drawn. In addition, it should be noted that none of the participants, nor the teacher in their children's

classroom, were subordinates of the researcher. The researcher solicited permission for the study from the Superintendent of Schools, who was the highest governing official in the Smith County School District in regards to obtaining permission to conduct academic research.

**Informed consent.** Participants were solicited by the researcher using a letter that was sent home with students in the selected classroom. The letter introduced the researcher, explained the study, and invited the recipients to an informational meeting that was held after school hours (see Appendix A). At this meeting, the researcher explained the scope of the study, including its purpose, to all potential research participants. In addition, following the explanation of the study's scope, the procedures that the study would follow were explained to the participants, so that they could make an informed decision when considering whether to consent to take part in the study. Prior to the conclusion of this informational session, potential participants were notified of a training on standards-based report cards that would last for around one hour and was held approximately one week from the date of the informational session.

Information regarding informed consent was then distributed to all potential participants. It was explained that all informed consent documentation would be collected at the informational session, giving participants far more than the 24 hours required as part of the informed consent process. If participants had any remaining questions regarding the study, they were given the opportunity to have these questions answered by the researcher.

### **Instruments for Data Collection**

Data collection for this study was done through three methods. The first method that was used was questionnaires. The questionnaire used in this study contained open-

ended questions, as this design would elicit direct quotations from participants, providing the raw data necessary to determine themes (Patton, 2015). These instruments were used in conjunction with participant interviews and a log of the researcher's interview notes. This design allowed the study's data to be triangulated, bolstering its validity (Creswell, 2013).

The questionnaire used in this study (see Appendix B) was derived from an instrument used by Gianatasio (1999) in *Parents' Perceptions of Children's Reading Abilities*. Prior to use in this study, the researcher sought the permission of Deborah Gianatasio to adapt the questions she utilized during her research to this study (see Appendix C). Because the instrument was modified to fit the study in question, it needed to be validated through a pilot study. Also verified during the pilot study were the questions asked during participants' interviews (see Appendix D).

Prior to the pilot study being conducted, the instrument was to be reviewed by Dr. Thelma Jackson, a school administrator with an extensive background in curriculum and instruction. This initial review was geared toward determining whether the instrument would garner the information required to ensure that the data gathered was valid. Dr. Jackson provided feedback on the questionnaire, which was adjusted according to her comments. Following these revisions, the instrument was piloted with 2-3 teachers of students in fifth grade. The instrument was adjusted according to the feedback received from the pilot group. The pilot group reviewed questions to determine whether they aligned to experiences and information that would be possessed by the parents of fifth grade students.

The questionnaire utilized by Gianatasio (1999) sought to determine the extent to which parents understood the reading abilities of their fifth grade children. The

questionnaire included questions regarding not only parents' perceptions of their children's abilities, but their understanding of their children's academic abilities, as well. In addition, the questionnaire used by Gianatasio (1999) contained questions regarding parents' perceptions of whether or not their children should improve academically. It should be noted that the questionnaire was closed-ended in design. In the study that was conducted, the researcher modified the questionnaire to be open-ended, in order to elicit additional information from parents, leading to a more-complete picture of parents' perceptions regarding their children's ability to read.

In her study, Gianatasio (1999) found that more than 90% of the time, parents had an accurate perception of their children's reading abilities. Gianatasio (1999) goes on to state that this is due to the fact that grades are communicated to parents through corrected papers and report cards being sent home, giving parents the information necessary to determine their child's reading performance.

### **Procedures**

The researcher's first step was to gain the approval of the Institutional Review Board ("IRB") of Nova Southeastern University. Once IRB permission had been obtained, the researcher gained the approval of the Superintendent of Schools for the Smith County School District. The Superintendent is the highest governing official who can grant approval to conduct this research in the district's schools. Following approval by the Superintendent, the researcher sought consent to conduct research at Hillsdale Elementary School from the school's principal. After this was completed, a teacher was recruited from the fifth grade team. The purpose of the study, as well as the procedure and supports that were offered by the researcher, was explained to the teachers in question. At that point, a volunteer was solicited for participation in the study.

Once a classroom had been identified, dates were selected to hold an informational session covering the purpose and procedure of the study. In addition, a date was chosen to distribute a letter (Appendix A) to parents inviting them to this session. At the informational session, potential participants received additional, in-depth information about the study. At that point, the researcher discussed informed consent with the potential participants, and provided them with consent forms before telling them about a training that was to be held one week from that day. Those parents who were interested in participating returned to the informational session, where they provided their written consent.

The informational session focused on explaining the concept of standards-based grading and reporting to the participants. During this session, the theoretical basis of standards-based grading was discussed, as was the practical application of the information that is contained in these documents. The researcher also showed the parents an example of the standards-based report card that was to be used in this study (see Appendix E). Based on a standards-based report card used by a metropolitan school district in South Florida, this report card covers the English/Language Arts content from the Florida Standards. These standards were taught during the fifth grade year. At the conclusion of the informational session, parents were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix B) regarding their perceptions of their children's performance in Reading.

Following the informational session for parents, the researcher also met with the participating teacher to discuss the logistics of standards-based grading and reporting. During this meeting, the researcher outlined the processes that should be put into place in the classroom in order for this process to be successful. In addition, the researcher discussed the various supports that were to be offered to the teacher during this process.

For example, in the event that the teacher required assistance in determining the appropriate assignments to use with students, the researcher was able to offer support in the form of finding resources. The primary difficulty that would likely be experienced by the teacher is the sparse availability of materials linked to only one academic standard. However, Smith County Schools had the resources that are necessary to fulfill this need, and the researcher was able to assist the teacher in locating these materials.

The participants received standards-based report cards over the course of the grading period, which was nine weeks in length. The first report card was sent at mid-term and the second was distributed at the end of the grading period. In keeping with the District's policies, this report card accompanied the District's letter-grade report card. One week after parents had a chance to review both report cards, the researcher conducted interviews with parents that lasted no longer than one hour each. Each interview was captured on audiotape so that it could be transcribed after its conclusion.

Following the transcription of the interview, the participant was given a copy of the transcript to review. After their review, the participant had the opportunity to make any corrections to the content of the transcript. During the interviews, the researcher also kept a journal of observations. This journal assisted the researcher in triangulating the data during analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

As noted by Creswell (2013), data analysis is an ongoing process during qualitative research and is comprised of several steps. The first step that the researcher performed was the organization of the data into various files. Next, the researcher continued analyzing the data by reading the transcripts of the interviews several times. During these readings, the researcher engaged in memoing, making notes in the margin to

help identify initial themes. This process was facilitated by the use of word processing software, namely Microsoft Word, which included an annotation and memo feature. Following memoing, the researcher looked to classify and interpret the data through coding.

Creswell (2013) writes that “coding involves aggregating the text...into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (p. 184). In this study, the researcher read the organized text and assigned codes based upon a pre-determined coding scheme. Given that this is a case study, the researcher sought to identify codes and themes that describe the case and its context (Creswell, 2013). The researcher then organized the data into these various categories in an effort to see if patterns or themes could be established. The researcher was cognizant of the fact that themes other than those that were anticipated may have emerged, which would have led to the creation of additional categories.

The coding process was aided by the use of Microsoft Excel, which helped the researcher identify themes through direct interpretation of the data. This information was then converted into a visual matrix, so that emerging patterns and themes were easier to identify. Once these patterns and themes had been identified, the researcher created a narrative report, summarizing the information that was found in the matrix. This narrative provided a detailed description of the case itself (Creswell, 2013).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The case study in question adhered to the overarching ethical research concepts of respect, beneficence, and justice (Glesne, 2016). The concept of respect was adhered to using informed consent. All participants had the opportunity to give informed consent

after a presentation that gave a complete overview of the research study. In fact, participants had a week to consider whether they would like to take part in the study. They were also notified that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason. It should be noted that, because no children were involved in this study, students' assent was not necessary.

Participants' privacy was protected using pseudonyms. No identifying information was included in the dissertation report, including in any of its data. In addition, there was no discussion of specific information related to the study while research was being conducted. Furthermore, any information that would allow a third party to determine the identity of a participant was removed, as well. Privacy was of exceptional importance during the collection and reporting of data, given that all sensitive information regarding students is protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA"). For all of these reasons, the researcher was acutely aware of identifying information that could have been used to identify participants, as well as the security of the data that was collected. Electronic data was housed on a password-protected computer that is equipped with tracking software. Any data that was collected in the form of a hard copy was stored in a locked filing cabinet stored in an undisclosed location. After three years, all research materials will be destroyed in a secure manner, such as crosscut shredding.

The researcher demonstrated justice by working to ensure that participants experienced reciprocity in the form of increased knowledge of their children's academic performance, as well as an improved ability to support their children in Reading. This was the only tangible reward that participants received, as monetary compensation was not possible. However, the researcher demonstrated his gratitude by offering to assist

parents in identifying specific methods that they could employ at home to offer their children academic support in Reading.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure that the study that was conducted was trustworthy, the researcher built two specific elements, member checking and triangulation of data, in to the research procedure. The use of member checking resulted in the verification of one of the three sources of data present in this study. By giving participants the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of their interviews' transcripts, the researcher worked to ensure that one possible source of data corruption, an interview that was inaccurately transcribed, was not present. In addition, the researcher had piloted the interview questions being used with participants. This additional step ensured that the answers these questions elicit was valid.

The validation of this data was important, as participant interview transcripts served as one of the three sources of data collected during this study. During data analysis, the researcher collected and compared not only the results of the questionnaires given to participants, but also the patterns and themes that emerged from the participant interviews, and examined the contents of his observation log. This tripartite approach to data collection and analysis provided the information necessary to validate research outcomes through the triangulation of corroborating evidence (Creswell, 2013). This led to further validation of the data and bolstered the study's trustworthiness.

Following the study's conclusion, the findings were presented to the participants. This fact was told to participants ahead of them giving their informed consent to participate in the study. This transparency regarding the outcomes of the research allowed participants to trust the researcher's intentions, as well as his assurances of privacy,

beneficence, and justice.

### **Potential Research Bias**

The researcher works as a school-based administrator in a K-12 public school system. In the past, the researcher served as the District's Coordinator of K-12 Accountability & Assessment. As part of this role, the researcher oversaw many areas of student, teacher, and school performance, including school improvement efforts. During this time, the researcher developed a strong belief in the use of standards-based instruction by teachers in schools across the district, as this practice routinely led to improvement in students' academic achievement.

In his time as an assistant principal, the researcher also worked extensively with kindergarten teachers at his school site. During these interactions, the researcher noted that teachers frequently referenced the District's report card addendum that was used, in part, to determine student promotion. This addendum, which listed the various letters, sounds, numbers, and sight words that students must master prior to promotion to first grade, was a rudimentary version of a standards-based report card. The researcher noted that in the vast majority of conversations regarding student performance, kindergarten teachers would reference the student's progress on this addendum. Often, parents would ask for a copy of this addendum so that they could offer support to their children at home. This led the researcher to consider whether the use of a standards-based report card at grade levels other than kindergarten would help parents support their children in other areas of the curriculum.

The researcher believes in the merit of standards-based report cards. Specifically, he believes that standards-based report cards have the potential to move teachers to instruction that is based completely on the standards. This shift has the potential to be

revolutionary; it could result in greater parent understanding of the content that their children are learning as part of their curricula, enabling them to offer additional support to their children. The result would be a true partnership between school and home, and increased student achievement would be the inevitable result.

The researcher managed bias in this study using triangulated data. This resulted in data that was able to substantiate the outcome of the research. In addition, to ensure this data was accurate, the researcher gave participants the opportunity to review and correct transcripts of their interviews, to provide an unbiased examination of this data source. In addition, the researcher kept a journal to reflect on his thoughts throughout the study. This allowed him to identify any potential bias in his entries and compensate accordingly. The researcher also sought the input of unbiased colleagues. The current Coordinator of K-12 Accountability & Assessment was asked to provide input regarding the conclusions drawn by the researcher from the collected data. In addition, both of the District's Assistant Superintendents were asked for their feedback on the results and whether or not other conclusions could be derived from the data set.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study include a small sample size, as only nine individuals were identified through purposeful sampling and only seven individuals took part in all parts of the study. In addition, the study drew participants from one school, in one school district. Moreover, participants were only selected from one classroom and grade level. It is possible that, as a result, the participants chosen for this study were those who were extensively involved in their children's education.

Additional limitations of this study included the fact that it was conducted within one grading period, rather than throughout an entire school year. This may have resulted

in findings that are indicative of short-term change, rather than long-term growth.

Furthermore, given that the informational and recruitment meetings were held in the evening, it is possible that parents who work at night, and are therefore more likely to be from a lower socioeconomic level, would have had a lower chance to take part in the study.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this case study dissertation was to investigate elementary parents' academic understanding of reading scores on a standards-based report card before and after an intervention was applied. As academic standards continue to increase in rigor, the need for parents to support their children at home is becoming ever more important. However, in order for this to occur, it is necessary for schools to ensure that parents have a working understanding of academic standards and the role they play in the assignment of student academic grades. Without such an understanding, the amount of effort that a parent puts in to supporting his or her child will not be met with a proportional return in terms of academic achievement. This is because, while parents may have the best of intentions and offer a significant source of support for their children academically, without an understanding of the academic standards to which students are being held, they will not be able to target instruction. This will result in students not being able to demonstrate their potential in terms of learning the material in question.

Three sources of data were collected as a part of this case study. These sources included questionnaires provided to parents prior to an intervention being applied, transcripts of participant interviews, and anecdotal notes taken by the researcher as interviews were being conducted. Questionnaires were provided to participants as the first step of the research process. Following the completion of participant questionnaires, those individuals taking place in the research study consented to taking part in an in-person, recorded interview with the researcher. These recordings were then, subsequently, converted into verbatim transcripts and analyzed for various content themes. During participant interviews, the researcher kept anecdotal notes on the participants' nonverbal communication, particularly their body language when

responding to questions during the interview. This allowed for the triangulation of data by the researcher during the data analysis phase of the research. Following the conclusion of the data analysis process, an image of the parents of today's students took shape and several themes emerged. These themes included: (a) helps parents support their children academically, (b) provides detailed information, (c) helps determine where students need support, and (d) a desire to incorporate letter grades.

### **The Parents of Today's Students**

Eight parents took part in all aspects of the study, including the trainings, questionnaire, and interview. With the exception of one student, all of the study participants were mothers. In addition, all of the participants spoke English fluently. Indeed, with the exception of two participants who were of Hispanic descent, all participants were Caucasian. During the initial training, parents expressed interest in learning more about the academic standards being taught to their children. All of the parents involved in the study maintained full-time employment and balanced this against the needs of their children. Moreover, two of the participants held positions in the field of education. In addition, each of the families that took part in the study had more than one child, meaning that the student was not their sole focus. Finally, all of the parents indicated that they had a familiarity with the Florida Standards, but did not have an in-depth understanding of how the standards fit into the Florida Standards Assessment for English Language Arts, which all students would take at the end of the year.

Hillsdale Elementary School, the school in which the study was conducted, groups students by their reading ability. The classroom selected for the study was one in which high-performing students were placed. As a result, most of the parents had grown accustomed to their children being strong in the area of reading, which was reflected in

both their questionnaires and interviews. When responding to the question, “How do you feel that your child performs in reading?” on the questionnaire, one parent, Mary (all names are pseudonyms), wrote, “Great.” Moreover, Mary replied, “N/A” (“Not Applicable”) to the question, “What reading skill, if any, do you feel your child needs to improve.” However, this sentiment was not shared by some. When responding to how her child performed in reading, Pauline wrote, “I feel she does good [*sic*] but I think if she did it more she would be a lot better.” Pauline went on to respond that she needed information to get her daughter “more intrested [*sic*] she can read and well she just dont [*sic*] like to.”

The image of the parents of today’s students is one of maintaining high expectations and experiencing frustration when faced with academic struggle. While none of the parents stated this explicitly, the researcher observed that none of the parents were at ease discussing their children’s areas of need. Participants, without exception, sat up and displayed tense body language, lowered their voices, and avoided eye contact when conversations turned to students’ areas of academic difficulty. Participants also showed visible relief when the topic of conversation changed from their children’s areas of academic need. This stands in stark contrast to participants’ body language when discussing their children’s academic strengths. When those topics were discussed, parents smiled, maintained eye contact, and were more prone to use hand gestures when talking about their children. The researcher’s notes reflected an opinion that, based on participants’ actions, parents were embarrassed and hesitant to discuss their children’s struggles with reading, while they were proud and eager to discuss their children’s successes with reading. Indeed, because the reactions were expressed in such a visceral manner, in his notes, the researcher speculated that parents viewed their children’s failing

as being a personal failing of their own.

### **Helps Parents Support Their Children Academically**

Early in the participant interview process, it was evident that parents valued feedback from school as a way to provide support to their children. This sentiment was conveyed by participants in the training, questionnaires, and interviews. When asked about whether or not they felt better prepared to help her child with reading after using a standards-based report card, all participants indicated that they did. Samantha stated, "...you're better able to help them where they need the help versus just kind of winging it. Okay, let's get the math cards out or let's get the reading cards out..."

The general feeling surrounding standards-based report cards was that their ability to help parents support their children academically was of significant benefit. As Pauline said during her interview, a standards-based report card "lets you as a parent know what steps you need to take." After speaking with parents, the general consensus was that standards-based report cards gave parents information that they did not already possess, enabling them to support their children. Given that the parents involved in this study were the parents of students who were, generally-speaking, high performing in the area of reading, coupled with the fact that parents appeared to take their children's struggles in reading personally, this is not necessarily surprising. The parents in this study valued academic success and saw the use of a standards-based report card as a tool for increasing their children's academic performance.

As participant interviews progressed, it became evident that parents valued the degree of communication that standards-based report cards offered, in part, because it helped them understand what was being taught in Reading. This is also the reason that parents were better prepared to support their children academically. As Alice stated,

when using a standards-based report card “you actually have a written description of what your child should be able to do, and that’s what’s missing from a letter-based report card.” In speaking with the classroom teacher, the researcher determined that parents had increased the amount of communication in which they were engaging, and that this communication had become far-more targeted around specific standards and learning objectives.

While the teacher may have stated that communication had improved regarding the academic standards that were being taught in the classroom, at least one parent believed that a benefit of utilizing standards-based report cards was the ability to have more information without having to contact the teacher. Pauline’s overall impression of the standards-based report card included that it “makes it easier to know at home, this is what I can do.” She went on to say that the document helped parents “really see where the teachers get their grades from and how, in return, it’s actually helping your child.” Christine also commented on how the standards-based report card assisted in facilitating communication between school and home, saying it gave her more information to “go back to the teacher and ask her what I could help my child with.” Overall, the feeling among the participants was one where, while they were working to keep students excelling in a cultural climate when their attention and time are divided between school and a litany of extracurricular activities, the information provided by the standards-based report card allowed them to save time going to the teacher with general questions regarding the support that they could provide their child, as this information was contained in the document itself.

### **Provides Detailed Information**

With the advent of Common Core State Standards and their counterparts in

Florida, the Florida Standards, parents have found it increasingly difficult to grasp the content that their children are learning in school (Remillard & Jackson, 2006; Webber & Wilson, 2012). Moreover, parents are confused about the content that comprises their children's educational experiences, as the very standards that children are taught in today's school vary drastically from those taught as few as ten years ago. To this end, parents have expressed that they place great value on the detail that standards-based report cards provide them in regards to their children's performance in class. This specificity has given parents the opportunity to understand the curriculum that their children are expected to master during their time in a particular grade level.

In her interview, Mary noted that the standards-based report card "gave us a little bit more information because we knew what a standard was or what the standards were [that were] being addressed, versus just language arts and then [the] grade. So I feel like it helped us understand a little bit more what they were learning." This sentiment was echoed by other parents, who also valued the greater level of explanation that existed in the standards-based report card. Samantha found the standards-based report card to be "way more explanatory than what we get now." As iterated by these parents, the design of the standards-based report card allows students and their families to have access to additional information that will make their attempts to improve student learning more effective.

The eagerness of the parents to possess a deeper understanding of the content that their children are learning in school was evident across nearly all interview subjects, based upon a review of the researcher's anecdotal notes. This is not a surprising fact, given that parents have expressed a lack of familiarity with the Common Core State Standards and teachers frequently report that parents have become less skilled in

providing support to their children. While, traditionally, these issues had been limited to parents who lacked the financial means or educational background to support their children's learning, as new standards have been adopted, they have now started to appear in those parents who have been able to assist their children in past years when older standards were in effect.

Samantha went on to extol the virtues of the standards-based report card's specificity even further, saying "the more information you can get, the better, in my opinion...I think the more information, the better, always." Samantha, a parent who considered herself to be actively involved in her child's education, presented a confident demeanor and had posed several questions during the lead-up to the interview. These questions, which were about the specifics involved in the feasibility of implementing standards-based report cards, revealed her to be someone who was deeply invested in her child's education. The researcher noted she discussed the lengths she went to in order to communicate with her child's teacher and to make sure that her child was successful in school. Indeed, the researcher noted that Samantha was one of the few participants who arrived for the interview with annotated copies of the standards-based report cards that had been sent home during the year.

Other participants went on to comment about the reasons why they preferred the detail present in the standards-based report card. Pauline stated that "when [the standards-based report card] broke everything down...I actually, I loved it." She went on to say that the standards-based report card "really shows you what's going on." When asked what parts of the standards-based report card were useful, another participant, Melissa, said that the standards-based report card "was more detailed than what I usually get, so all of it was very useful." Both Pauline and Melissa presented with similar personalities,

which were shared by several other participants. The vast majority of interviewees were mothers who considered themselves to be involved parents. Many discussed their approaches to parenting, such as putting their children's educations before extracurricular activities, during pre-interview and post-interview informal conversations with the researcher, which the researcher recorded in his anecdotal notes.

### **Helps Determine Where Students Need Support**

As parents strive to support their children academically, they value tools that support them in these efforts. While additional information being present in a standards-based report card may, at first glance, provide parents the information necessary to support student learning, it is certainly possible that the details provided in these documents is not what is needed to improve student learning at home. To address this issue, the researcher deliberately posed questions related to whether the standards-based report card contained information that enabled parents to understand the type of assistance their children needed in school (see Appendix D).

Without exception, all parents indicated that they felt the standards-based report card provided them with information that supported their efforts to improve their children's academic performance. The general sentiment among the parents was that, given more information that was targeted to specific academic standards, they could offer targeted assistance to their children during times of academic difficulty. One participant, Samantha, stated she felt parents were "better able to help [students] where they need the help versus just kind of winging it." When pressed on the specific aspects of the report card that benefited her in this manner, Samantha said "you could narrow it down to what [students] didn't [know]...and what they've gotten to and what they haven't gotten to."

Other participants echoed similar sentiments. During the interview, Pauline stated

the standards-based report card “makes it easier for a parent know how to help [their] child get better in what they’re needing to.” Pauline went on to note that the standards-based report card “was just kind of a learning tool.” Like Pauline, other participants noted that they had utilized the information on the standards-based report card to garner a deeper understanding of the material that their children were being taught in their classes. This trend is important, as it demonstrates that parents do utilize the documents schools send home with students to learn more about what is being taught during the school day.

This indicates a major advantage of standards-based report cards over traditional report cards, in that the former offer far more detail than the latter, which may report a broad grade in an entire subject area. As stated by Samantha, “I loved [the standards-based report card]. I just liked to see everything they had done [and] they hadn’t done.” This sentiment was one that other study participants shared. Throughout the interviews, including during casual exchanges before and after the interview session periods, participants indicated that they were pleased with the use of standards-based report cards in schools, as they had a better understanding of what their children were doing in school and how they could lend their support to students as they worked to meet varying levels of academic proficiency.

### **A Desire to Incorporate Letter Grades**

Nearly all the participants involved in this research study expressed one area of concern when asked about areas of the standards-based report card that could be modified to improve the efficacy of the document. Specifically, participants expressed a desire to see the standards-based report card incorporate letter grades. In general, participants’ comments revealed a desire to understand their children’s level of performance on the revised reporting document further, but for this understanding to come from comparing

the new measurement against the familiar metric of a letter grade. Melissa noted that she “would like to receive...the regular report card. Just because...it would put more into perspective of what was being expected.” This statement illustrates parents’ desire to learn more about the standards-based report card itself, but that this learning is facilitated by comparisons with traditional reporting methods.

Participants other than Melissa noted that modifying the standards-based report card to incorporate letter grades would be beneficial. For instance, when asked how he would change the standards-based report card, James stated that including “grades on there” would benefit him in assisting his child at home. Pauline noted a different advantage of having letter grades included on the report card. She noted that “It’s a nice tool to have [letter grades and standards performance keys] to really see where the teachers get their grades from and how in return [the support] is actually helping your child.” Such a sentiment indicated that parents may have started to look at the standards-based report card as a modification of the traditional report card, with letter grades being replaced by standards-performance keys.

Discussions about the incorporation of letter grades also led to the revelation that parents had a desire to compare their children’s academic performance to other students and that this comparison was easier when letter grades were utilized. The researcher was not necessarily surprised by this occurrence, given that the classroom involved in the study consisted of several high-achieving students. The researcher noted that parents were open about being driven to see their students excel, as well as their conscious efforts to instill a sense of competition in their children. Yet, in the end, parents only indicated that the comparison of their children with other students was only for their personal benefit.

When asked about what he found beneficial on the standards-based report card, James stated, in part, “I think it’s very helpful to know where your child is at, compared to all the other kids.” This thought was repeated by other parents, as well. Samantha noted “like I said, [wanting letter grades] might just be an ego thing or just might be—just being used to seeing the ‘C,’ ‘B,’ ‘A.’ You know, ‘C’ is proficient; they’re passing.” This desire to include letter grades as an element of the standards-based report card may, indeed, be an element geared solely to improve parents’ egos, at least among study participants. However, with such a large number of study participants indicating a desire to see letter grades incorporated into the reporting document, it is an important area to consider.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Overview of the Dissertation

Three questions served to guide the research conducted as part of this qualitative case study dissertation:

1. What are parents' perceptions of reading content their children are learning when standards-based grading and reporting methods are utilized?
2. How and in what ways do parents incorporate/understand the formative nature of standards-based grading and reporting as a means to support their children academically in reading?
3. What are parents' perceptions of their ability to assist their children in enhancing their academic strength and supporting some of their academic weaknesses in reading after understanding the use of standards-based report cards?

Results for Research Question 1 indicated that parents have a much deeper understanding of the content that their children are learning when utilizing standards-based grading and reporting methods. Although parents may have had an acceptable degree of understanding regarding the material that their children were learning, they did not understand it to a degree that could be considered mastery when using the traditional report card. Parents indicated that they were able to better understand the exact material that students were expected to learn using standards-based report cards, since these documents itemized the standards that were taught during the year. Overall, parents indicated that they felt the use of a standards-based report card provided them with additional information regarding the content that students learned in the subject area of reading during the course of the school year.

Results for Research Question 2 indicated that that parents incorporated and

utilized the formative nature of standards-based grading and reporting as a means to support their children academically in the subject area of Reading. Parents utilized the information that was included on the standards-based report card to isolate the skills that needed to be remediated at home. In addition, parents noted that the formative information provided on the standards-based report card allowed them to discern the exact degree to which their children were learning, rather than providing them with an overall average that reflected student learning across the entirety of the grading period.

Results for Research Question 3 indicated that parents felt that the information included on the standards-based report card better-prepared them to support their children's academic deficiencies. Parents noted that the information provided on the standards-based report card gave a greater degree of specificity than a traditional letter grade report card, thereby enabling them to pinpoint the areas of academic need experienced by their children. This, in turn, left parents with the feeling that they were addressing their children's precise academic deficiencies, leading to greater returns in terms of improved student learning gains. All of these efforts were made possible by the fact that the standards-based report card outlined the precise content that is taught in the subject area of Reading.

### **The Parents of Today's Students**

The findings of this qualitative case study revealed that the parents of today's elementary school students are generally involved, with their children's academic proficiency as a core concern. Indeed, many of the parents of today's students appear to live their lives vicariously through their children, seeming to take their children's successes on as their own. Likewise, they view the academic struggles of their children as what can be best described as an assault on the quality of their parenting. With this in

mind, parents are seemingly determined to ensure that their children succeed in terms of scholastic achievement. Yet, even more than that, parents are determined to see their children succeed when compared to their peers. However, this determination results in parents who are involved in their children's education and place a premium on supporting their children academically. These findings supported the work of Hill and Tyson (2009) and Van Voorhis (2011), which echoed the dedication of parents to their children's education.

### **Helps Parents Support Their Children Academically**

The findings of this qualitative case study revealed that parents utilized the standards-based report card in an effort to help their children academically. As stated by Ariës and Cabus (2015), as parents become more involved in their children's academic progress, student learning increases. This approach to involvement was seen in the research conducted in this study, as parents often cited their children's academic achievements when discussing the level of involvement that they had in their children's academics. This involvement was aided by the use of standards-based report cards, as these documents provided parents with the information necessary to provide support to their children. Such information was missing from traditional letter-grade report cards, leaving parents with a dearth of information as they attempted to provide the support at home necessary for their children to demonstrate academic proficiency, much less academic excellence.

Findings indicated that, as parents currently receive letter-grade report cards, they see only an overall picture of their children's academic performance in a particular area of study. When determining where their children require assistance, this can be a frustrating reality, as they are unsure of the degree of progress made by their children

over the previous grading period. Instead, they receive a letter grade that corresponds to the overall grade percentage that their child received during the term. This grade percentage may be comprised of anywhere from five to fifty assignment scores and is often the result of various grade weightings and other calculations. In short, parents find this determination to be difficult to interpret when considering such questions as how their children are progressing in a particular area of study. When first contemplating the matter, it may seem reasonable to conclude that a child's progress could be determined from examining his or her summative grades on such documents as progress reports and report cards, but consider the following scenario, adapted from conversations with study participants:

Billy, a fifth-grade student, has experienced mixed success with mathematics. For this reason, his parents always carefully examine his grades. Billy's class is beginning to study interpreting the division of unit fractions, which is a difficult skill for any student. As such, his parents want to ensure that Billy studies the appropriate materials and is making progress that, at least, equals that of his peers. They see that Billy has earned a 'C' in mathematics on his progress report. Indeed, according to his progress report, Billy has a 79.4%, which represents a very high 'C' and his parents are pleased. They are pleased even more when they receive Billy's report card four weeks later and he still has a 'C' in mathematics.

In this scenario, Billy's parents are blissfully unaware of the fact that he has not mastered the skill of interpreting the division of unit fractions. Indeed, Billy's grade has declined significantly, but this is not represented on his report card, which only lists letter grades. In reality, Billy's grade is now a 69.5%, the lowest 'C' possible. Yet, given the information they have received, his parents have no way of knowing that their child's

grade has declined to such a degree. Findings indicated that this scenario is one that parents have experienced during their children's academic careers, leading to a source of worry for them as they work to support their children academically.

It should be noted that, while many schools send graded papers home that parents can track, not all abide by this practice. In these situations, there truly is no other way for parents to track student progress than through the use of progress reports and report cards. Such documents, therefore, must provide parents with the information necessary for them to support their children in their academics. Otherwise, parents are left to guess about their children's academic progress, while potentially not having a firm grasp on the content itself (Swan et al., 2014).

### **Provides Detailed Information**

Results indicated that parents found the lack of detailed information on letter grade report cards to be frustrating. As students are facing even greater demands with the advent of the Common Core State Standards, which significantly increase the level of rigor, cognitive demand, and conceptual knowledge required for a student to demonstrate proficiency in either English/Language Arts or Mathematics, parents are facing the reality that their schooling may not have been sufficient to provide students the support necessary to master these more complex skills (Bolkan, 2014). This deficiency is made significantly greater by the realization that not only may parents lack the education to support their children academically, but that they may not understand where to start providing support, given the fact that the letter-grade report cards they receive from schools do not provide them with the information necessary to target their instruction. This is especially important when one considers that parents have little understanding of the revised academic standards and purposes behind these standards, such as the teaching

of conceptual understanding in mathematics, which is the source of the frequently-maligned Common Core State Standards for Mathematics (Remillard & Jackson, 2006; Webber & Wilson, 2012).

Without such an understanding, parents must rely on report cards to provide them with better information regarding their children's progress. The results of the case study indicated that the detailed information contained in a standards-based report card provided parents with this understanding. While, in the past, parents have perceived that their children were receiving grades in broad subject areas comprised of a nebulous set of standards, their work with standards-based report cards gave them an understanding of not only the standards that were included in these subjects, but also the relationship that existed between these standards and how these standards interacted to form the subject area's curriculum. Such an understanding would not be possible without the use of a document such as a standards-based report card, with its detailed content.

### **Helps Determine Where Students Need Support**

The findings of the qualitative case study were such that it was made evident that parents were intent on utilizing grades to support their children's mastery of academic content. The information necessary for such support to take place was simply not available on the letter-grade report cards that parents received. These documents, which referred to subject areas alone, did not give parents any insight into the content that was included in these areas of study, unlike a standards-based report card. In order for parents to provide this support to their children, they must know the academic standards that are taught as a part of English/Language Arts and Mathematics, among other subject areas. This information is simply not included on a letter-grade report card, making such support difficult.

In addition, the findings pointed to the fact that parents valued the degree to which standards-based report card indicated the progress that their children were making in the areas of study included in the study. For instance, parents suggested that they appreciated knowing if their children were progressing toward mastery of the content, as opposed to only being provided with a letter grade indicating their current level of performance. This information allowed parents to understand whether the support that they were giving their children at home, in the form of homework assistance, help with studying, or another type of aid, was benefiting their children when it came to their classroom performance. The findings pointed to the fact that parents truly appreciated this knowledge, as they were prone to feeling that their support was not benefiting their children in a meaningful way in terms of academic improvement. These feelings were alleviated by having the ability to see the progress their children were making in class.

### **A Desire to Incorporate Letter Grades**

Another finding from the research indicated that parents, while appreciative of the benefits that were provided by the standards-based report card, still had a desire to see letter grades incorporated into the standards-based document. Even though the revised report card provided parents with a great deal of information that the traditional letter-grade report card did not, parents appeared to be comforted by the ability to compare their perceptions of student performance on the newer report card with their understanding of student performance on the letter-grade report card. Such a sentiment was shared by multiple parents, who referred to receiving letter grades as being a type of safeguard against misinterpreting the content on the standards-based report card.

Other parents discussed having letter grades included on the standards-based report card as being a way for them to determine their child's overall success. Indeed,

some parents discussed that their children, who were high-performing in terms of academic achievement, receiving letter grades served to boost the egos of the parents. Given the prevalence of awarding student academic achievement in today's schools, including award ceremonies where effort and citizenship awards are often perceived as awards for those students who do not excel academically, it is not outside the realm of understanding that parents possess such a significant amount of personal value and worth related to their children's academic achievement. Moreover, as implied by the findings of the study, if the benefits of standards-based report cards are to be reaped by schools, it is important to consider the method by which students will be acknowledged for their success. This is because parents attach such importance to their children's report cards and the support of parents is vital for the success of any large-scale change in a school, such as the implementation of standards-based report cards.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this case study have the potential to provide beneficial information in a variety of ways. This includes benefits to students, parents, teachers, schools, districts, even entire states (Guskey et al., 2011). For instance, the use of standards-based report cards promises to improve the degree of authentic parental involvement seen in schools across the country. While many schools may believe themselves to have high rates of parental involvement based on attendance rates at extracurricular activities and awards assemblies, true parental involvement, which provides support to children at home, is far less common (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). However, by increasing the degree to which parents are engaged in meaningful conversations regarding student academic performance, schools can truly shift this trend. Such conversations are made possible using standards-based report cards, which

empower both parents and teachers to ask questions that can engender a great deal of conversation related to academic progress. When such conversations are had, the relationship between home and school is strengthened and students benefit immensely (Mathura, 2008; Munroe, 2014).

As schools, districts, and states work to implement revised academic standards, it is critical that parents possess a working knowledge of these academic standards. As evidenced by the results of this study, the use of standards-based report cards can go a great way toward solidifying this understanding (Swan et al., 2014). By allowing parents to develop a greater degree of knowledge related to the Common Core State Standards or, indeed, any academic standards that are being utilized in a particular school district, standards-based report cards provide parents with the content necessary to support their children at home. This, in turn, would likely lead to increased student achievement and student understanding of the academic standards. When using traditional letter-grade report cards, as is the common practice today, the knowledge parents possess of the academic standards is not enhanced. Therefore, these reporting documents do not provide the greatest possible return on investment. This would not be the case if schools, districts, and states utilized standards-based report cards when implementing revised academic standards, as these documents would allow parents to develop a broader understanding of the new standards. This, in turn, could lead to a lower degree of frustration on the part of parents when the level of rigor demanded by a set of standards increases (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015).

This study also provides a measure of importance to teachers in today's schools. As teachers work to implement standards-based report cards and, consequently, engage in standards-based grading, it will become necessary for them to discuss their grading

practices with peers (Proulx et al., 2012). This will, in turn, require teachers to work with standards on a much deeper level, all the while examining their grading practices. As teachers cope with increased expectations in the classroom, conversing with other teachers and school leaders about their current grading practices can only result in improved practice among teachers across a school. Moreover, such discussions will likely result in grading practices that are far more standardized (Gullen, Gullen, & Erickson-Guy, 2012). This can only benefit students, parents, and teachers, as the performance of two students, in two different classrooms, will be able to be accurately compared, giving school leaders the ability to identify, and potentially replicate, the teaching practices that are leading to greater degrees of student achievement.

As districts work to design standards-based report cards, they can find support from the findings of this case study. Specifically, as the results of this study showed, standards-based report cards have a better chance of being supported by parents if they include a letter grade component. While this may, at first, run counter to the thinking that would lead an organization to make the transition to a standards-based report card, the findings suggest that incorporating this element will provide parents with a degree of familiarity that will make the use of a revised document more amenable. It is also the case that, based on the results of this study, the inclusion of letter grades on a standards-based report card will give parents a sense of accomplishment when their children are academically successful.

### **Limitations**

The study in question contained limitations that were related, primarily, to the size of the participant group and the number of research sites. The research was conducted in one school located in a rural area. For instance, the aspects of education that

parents of children enrolled in urban school settings may differ from the parents of children in rural schools. Such differences were unable to be explored in this case study, given the size of the participant group. Moreover, any differences in parental knowledge of standards were not able to be explored, as the parents were all members of the same classroom. Differences in parental knowledge may have differed if the sample included multiple classrooms or multiple schools, as the degree to which parents were made aware of revised academic standards may have differed in each setting.

Additionally, the participants who volunteered to take part in this study were those who were parents of students who were, in general, higher performing in terms of their academic achievement. Any differences in the approach to support taken by that may have been taken by parents of students who struggled academically could not be considered, as they were not represented in the sample. Also, the socioeconomic status of the parents was roughly the same, as none parents were vastly wealthier or more impoverished than the others and the school in which the study was conducted received Title I funding.

Finally, the research in question was only conducted for the subject area of Reading. This represents a limitation, as the degree to which parents utilize the information found on a standards-based report card for another academic subject may differ. Moreover, the degree of importance that parents may place on other subject areas may vary, as well.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

When considering future research, it could be beneficial to consider the impact that the use of standards-based report cards has on parents who are not actively involved in their children's academic lives. Given that the current research inquired about how the

use of standards-based report cards would impact parents who are actively involved in supporting their children's learning, examining what benefit, if any, parents who are not working to improve the academic proficiency of their children would receive from using a such a document could provide interesting findings. Moreover, such research could generate data that could broach wider discussion on the benefits of standards-based report cards to parents, in general.

Another suggested area of future research would be the benefit that students draw from the use of a standards-based report card. While the benefits to parents have been explored, there has been limited research into the benefits that these reporting mechanisms have for students. Given that students are, ultimately, the ones impacted by the content of any report card, be it letter-grade or standards-based, it makes sense to investigate how students utilize the information found on these documents to improve the degree to which they have mastered particular areas of study. Such research could provide a significant amount of insight into the creation of standards-based report cards in the future that have a maximum impact on student learning.

An additional area of suggested research is the impact that the use of standards-based report cards has for student academic performance in subject areas other than Reading. Not only may the degree of importance parents place on other subject areas vary, but the degree of importance that students give to these subject areas may differ, as well. Considering this fact, it would also likely prove prudent to explore the degree to which standards-based instruction impacts student learning at different academic levels. The case study in question explored the degree to which these documents supported elementary school students, but conducting research related to students at the middle and high school levels could also generate information that would be useful to schools.

Finally, it is suggested that research be conducted into the extent to which standards-based report cards impact communication between home and school. The utilization of these documents has the potential to greatly impact this area of education, but it is necessary to determine what this impact looks like in practice (Guskey, 2004). Moreover, such research could provide valuable information on the potential pitfalls that may be associated with the implementation of standards-based report cards. This could give schools valuable insight into what they should include in standards-based report cards to ensure they are successful at promoting communication between school and home.

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Appendix A  
Letter Soliciting Participants

## Letter to Solicit Study Participants

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Joseph Stanley, and I am currently a doctoral student at Nova Southeastern University. As part of earning a Doctor of Education degree, it is required that I complete a dissertation study. I have elected to conduct a case study exploring parents' perceptions of how standards-based report cards assist them in providing assistance to their children in the area of reading.

Your child's teacher has volunteered to take part in this study, but, in order to conduct this study, it is necessary for me to recruit parent participants, as well. In order to do so, I am emailing you today to invite you to an informational session that will be held at 6:00 PM in Room 303 of the District Office next Friday, October 7, 2016. This session will last for about one hour, and will provide an in-depth explanation of my study and its purpose, so that you can make an informed decision when considering whether or not to take part. I will also be happy to answer any questions you might have at that time.

The study itself will consist of participants completing a brief questionnaire about their child's experience with Reading, as well as a one-on-one interview to be held at a later date. Please know that all information collected as part of this study will be anonymous in nature. At no point, including in the final dissertation, no information that could be used to identify you, your child, or your school will be divulged.

Thank you very much for considering to participate in this study. It is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,



Joseph Stanley

Appendix B  
Questionnaire for Participants

## Parent/Guardian Questionnaire

Please respond to the following questions regarding your child's reading performance in fifth grade. When answering questions, please be thorough. Each question is open-ended in order to capture as much information as possible regarding how you feel your child is doing in reading. If you do not wish to answer a question, you may skip it. Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

1. How does your child feel about reading?
2. How do you feel that your child performs in reading?
3. What is your child's best reading skill?
4. What reading skill, if any, do you feel your child needs to improve?
5. What information do you feel you need in order to help your child with reading?

Appendix C

Email Requesting Permission to Adapt Questionnaire

### Email Requesting Permission to Adapt Questionnaire

Dear Ms. Gianatasio,

My name is Joseph Stanley and I am a doctoral student at Nova Southeastern University. As part of my degree, I am in the process of completing an applied dissertation study; specifically, I am conducting a case study on parents' perceptions of standards-based report cards and how they assist them in providing support to their children in Reading. In order to conduct this study, I need to utilize a questionnaire.

After reading your Master's thesis, *Parents' Perceptions of Children's Reading Abilities*, I believe that the questionnaire you utilized would provide an excellent basis for my questionnaire. I would like to adapt your questionnaire to my study, rather than use it verbatim. In order to utilize this, however, I require your permission.

If you are willing to allow me to adapt your questionnaire, I would appreciate it if you would respond and state that, as your statement would need to be included in my dissertation's appendices. I sincerely appreciate you considering my request.

Sincerely,

Joseph Stanley

## Appendix D

### Questions for Personal Interviews

### Questions for Personal Interviews

1. What was your overall opinion of the standards-based report card?
2. How did you use the information found on the standards-based report card?
3. Do you feel that you are better prepared to help your child with Reading after receiving a standards-based report card?
4. What information on the standards-based report card did you find useful?
5. What information on the standards-based report card was not useful?
6. How would you change the standards-based report card?
7. How do you feel about the use of standards-based report cards instead of traditional letter-grade report cards?
8. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Appendix E

Standards-Based Report Card Template

**Grade 4 Standards-Based Report Card**  
Hillsdale Elementary School

**Student:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Teacher:** \_\_\_\_\_

READING STANDARDS	
Performance Code	STANDARD CODE
<b>Foundational Skills</b>	
Phonics & Word Recognition	
Fluency	
<b>Literature</b>	
Key Ideas & Details	
Craft & Structure	
Integration of Knowledge & Ideas	
Range of Reading & Level of Text Complexity	
<b>Informational Text</b>	
Key Ideas & Details	
Craft & Structure	
Integration of Knowledge & Ideas	
Range of Reading & Level of Text Complexity	

WRITING STANDARDS	
Performance Code	STANDARD CODE
Text Types & Purposes	
Production & Distribution of Writing	
Research to Build & Present Knowledge	
Range of Writing	
READING/WRITING LITERACY STANDARDS	
Performance Code	STANDARD CODE
<b>Speaking &amp; Listening</b>	
Comprehension & Collaboration	
Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas	
<b>Language</b>	
Conventions of Standard English	
Knowledge of Language	
Vocabulary Acquisition & Use	

Teacher Comments

Performance Codes	
	Based on making progress toward meeting the grade level standards.
<b>EX</b>	<b>Exemplary</b> - Demonstrates broad in-depth skill/concept development that most often exceeds "grade level standards"
<b>PR</b>	<b>Proficient</b> - Demonstrates skill/concept development that meets "grade level standards"
<b>AP</b>	<b>Approaching</b> - Demonstrates skill/concept development that is beginning to meet "grade level standards"
<b>ND</b>	<b>Needs Development</b> - Demonstrates skill/concept development that is significantly below "grade level standards"
Standard Codes	
<b>X</b>	Student meeting standards
<b>!</b>	Area of concern
<b>-</b>	Not assessed