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AN EXPLORATION OF PORTFOLIOS

AS AN ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT TO STANDARDIZED TESTING

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Literacy Education.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Introduction

According to the Minnesota Department of Education (2010), the average Minnesotan eighth grader is expected to learn and become proficient in over seventy Common Core English Language Arts standards and substandards—ranging from standards in reading and writing to standards in speaking, media literacy, and language skills. However, that is not all. On top of the curriculum and standards for their other subject areas, there are also thirty additional Common Core literacy standards spanning history, social studies, science, and technical subjects. At the end of each demanding school year, as per usual, those eighth graders are subjected to a gamut of testing in math, reading, and science. Finally, when the rigorous testing is over, they discover if they have reached the promised land: *proficiency*. Do they meet the standards? Exceed? Partially meet? Fail to meet altogether?

For any student, this process is daunting. However, for so many students, this process is anxiety-inducing, and it is not hard to see why. For Minnesota's MCA-III Reading test, students are isolated in silence in a classroom filled with peers testing all around them. In this silence, they must conduct several hours' worth of cold-reads of passages and then attempt to choose the best multiple-choice option from those available. Meanwhile, a test proctor is circling the room—checking for students needing assistance, evidence of cheating, or technical issues. Is this what we want for our children? Does this

scenario produce results that accurately reflect their learning and the growth they have made throughout the school year? Is there another way—a *better* way? In the face of so many standards, do educators owe it to their students to provide them with a more thorough, authentic chance to prove their knowledge and abilities? All of these questions, and more, have led me to my research question: *How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?*

In this chapter, Chapter One, I will introduce my personal and professional motivations for researching this question through an exploration of my teaching journey. Then, I will provide a rationale for my research question as well as smaller subtopics that will be explored throughout the research process. Finally, I will provide a brief glimpse of the chapters to follow, specifically Chapter Two.

My Teaching Journey

In 2009, I graduated from Luther College with an English major and a 5-12 secondary education minor—idealistic, bright-eyed, and ready to change the world. I knew—I just *knew*—that I was ready for my first real job as a secondary English teacher. I had visions of what my future would entail: discussions with my students of the merits of literature, letters from students detailing how I had become a positive role model in their lives, strategies that would leave my students begging for more. I knew that this would not be easy; after all, I had grown up in a teaching family. My mother was an eighth grade science teacher, and I had countless memories of the long, arduous hours that my mother put in grading at the kitchen table, creating detailed bulletin boards about

the solar system in the sweltering heat of summer, and agonizing over struggling students. In addition, just five years earlier, my older sister had graduated from the same college with a degree in music education; already, I had watched her begin her career in a small, private school where she was tasked with not only teaching general music but also teaching computer literacy. So I knew that teaching, while worthwhile, would not always be easy.

However, my path to teaching was not as clear-cut as I had once dreamed it would be. After finishing my student teaching in December 2009, I was unable to find a teaching job for the remainder of the 2009-2010 school year. So, instead of discussions with college-ready seniors about the symbolism in *The Grapes of Wrath* or *The Color Purple*, I worked as a substitute teacher, a library worker, and an AmeriCorps tutor. My dream of influencing tomorrow's leaders was shattering around me; however, after putting in my time substituting in the area in both short- and long-term capacities, I received my first official teaching job in 2012. After a long wait, my time had come! I was to teach sophomore and junior English; novels such as *Animal Farm*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Scarlet Letter* were in my curriculum, and I was finally, *finally* going to make waves.

As thousands of other new teachers have discovered, the realities of teaching are sometimes a far cry from what many envision in the confines of a college dorm or a childhood bedroom. School policies, administrative decisions, and department mandates often dictate what a new educator can teach, and the curriculum that remains must adhere to the current state standards and standardized testing. Yet, the state standards themselves

are not the issue. Though they are numerous, the standards are not inherently bad. As Gallagher (2015) writes, "The standards simply indicate *what* should be taught; they do not discuss *how* they should be taught….*how* the standards are taught is the critical component to elevating our students' literacy skills" (p. 6). As a new teacher, I found myself working tirelessly to integrate the standards into my curriculum in a way that inspired, elevated, and empowered students. Then came my first experience with standardized testing.

As a new teacher, I did not know what to expect with my first round of standardized testing; however, I did not expect anything out of the ordinary. After all, as a student I had taken numerous standardized tests—in fact, I had taken the ACT three times alone. What I did not expect were multiple training sessions in keeping test materials secure, a list of rules concerning everything from bathroom escorts to snacks, and severe cases of student anxiety. All of this was for a test that took place over the course of two mornings—a snapshot in time of my students' skills. After the testing, countless hours of staff meetings were held to bemoan and chastise: teachers were spending too much time on writing, speaking, and media literacy as those were not tested standards; teachers were spending too much time discussing overarching literary themes that are found in society and not enough time having students practice test-taking; teachers were inefficient and ineffective. I was left feeling disheartened and degraded. Long gone was the idealized view of teaching that I had waited and wished for; in the trenches, it was difficult to see the impact that I could make with students and the life-long teaching that could take place. In their place was a grocery list of standards that

needed to be taught in such a way that students could score well on a test. I found myself wondering, “Is this as worth it as I once thought?”

My first standardized testing experience, I now know, was completely normal; I have gone through the same process numerous times. Though I have switched schools and grade levels, the testing remains fundamentally the same. Over the years, I have found myself continually wondering: is this what I set out to do in college all those years ago? After all of the hard work that I have put in over the years, does it boil down to a single test score for each student? Do these single scores determine my worth or the worth of my students? Again, is there a better way?

These wonderings were compounded when I began to take courses at Hamline University—first for my K-12 reading license and then for my Master’s degree in Literacy Education. Through my studies, I found that researchers from Gallagher (2015) to Robb (2003) express concerns with the way that standardized tests narrow the classroom, narrow the curriculum, and narrow the students. Yet, even knowing that my own feelings concerning standardized testing were shared by well-known educational authors, I was not sure what alternatives there were to standardized testing. Students have to show their knowledge of the standards somehow; what other options are available? Later, while reading Spandel’s (2005) *The 9 Rights of Every Writer* for the “Essentials in Literacy and Learning” course, I came across several pages detailing how the state of Kentucky used portfolios to determine student mastery of the state writing standards (p. 97-99). This passage led to a moment of clarity: *How can portfolios be used as an*

assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?

Rationale

My research question, *How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?* is an attempt to better meet the needs of my current students. As an eighth grade English Language Arts teacher, I am well aware of the many outside factors competing for time in the mind of an eighth grader: relationships with friends, romantic interests, parents, siblings, lack of sleep, the latest social media trend, etc. In addition, I am also well aware that many of my students suffer from severe anxiety—particularly testing anxiety. In my years as a teacher, I have witnessed students crying, skipping school, and hyperventilating before tests. If a student who suffers from such testing anxiety does not perform well on a standardized test, does it measure her knowledge of and ability to apply the standards? Or, rather, does it measure her ability to calm herself enough to take a two- to four-hour long test in rigid conditions? With all of this in mind, it is my belief that standardized testing does not accurately show the growth of my students throughout the year as pertaining to the standards; rather, I believe it shows the ability of my students to test.

Furthermore, I believe that standardized testing does not push our students to work towards individual growth. Gallagher (2015) states, "Standardization rarely leads to excellence….Instead of 'racing to the top,' our students are travelling in herds" (p. 187). Standardized tests produce a single set of statistics. When one student compares their score to the score of another student, they are missing out on the nuances of the score

itself; rarely does a student pay attention to the breakdown of a reading score or to the fact that his or her inferencing abilities proved to be far higher than his or her ability to provide evidence in support of a claim. Students simply see the number and the category that they attained and the number and the category that other students attained. The problem here is two-fold: students erroneously compare themselves to others while also missing the opportunity to understand the complexities of a standardized testing score. As I stated in the introduction, students are typically concerned about one thing, and one thing only: did they meet the expectations? Students are not alone in this; individual teachers rely on these simple numbers as well to prove his or her own worth as an educator. Do these numbers push students and educators to do the best that they can in terms of each standard?

Inspired by the writing portfolios used in the state of Kentucky, it is my intention to examine the following subtopics in pursuit of my research question:

- What are the attitudes of parents, educators, and students toward "traditional" standardized tests?
- Are traditional standardized tests an accurate reflection of student learning and/or student growth?
- How are portfolios currently used in terms of both informal and formal assessment at the school or state level?

Through these smaller questions, I will work to examine the ways in which portfolios can better serve my students as a means of assessing their knowledge of state standards.

Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced my research question: *How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?* I have also explained the journey that culminated in the formation of this topic—that of an idealistic young teacher questioning the accuracy of standardized testing to that of a more seasoned teacher *continuing* to recognize the follies of standardized testing for children. Finally, I provided rationale that shows the exploration of this research question is worthwhile, valid and will span multiple subtopics.

In the chapters to follow, I will continue my exploration of this topic. In Chapter Two, specifically, I will review and reflect upon the literature concerning standardized testing and the use of portfolios.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

How can I better serve my students? This is the question I am left with after a thorough reflection of my practice and my beliefs. It is my belief that one way to better serve my own students—the 135 rural eighth graders that I see on a daily basis—would be to incorporate the use of portfolios into my classroom in order to show growth and learning in terms of our tested standards. This, of course, led me to my culminating research question: *How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?*

In order to best answer this research question, I will approach the literature from three viewpoints: the attitudes of parents, educators, and students toward high-stakes, mandated, standardized testing; the overall effectiveness of standardized testing; and the possibilities that portfolios provide in the classroom. It is imperative that I study both the attitudes toward and effectiveness of standardized testing before exploring portfolios since, as the cliche states, "Why fix something that is not broken?"

My own perceptions of standardized testing tell me that there is a better way to ask our students to prove their knowledge of content—a more authentic way. The feeling of anxiety in my gut each spring tells me that this climate of stress cannot be what is best for my colleagues, my students, my students' families, or even my own young children. However, I do not single-handedly represent the majority of educators. Perhaps I am one

of few who feel the way that I do. Similarly, I must explore whether standardized testing is a good fit for the majority of students. Are such tests an accurate measurement of student knowledge? Finally, in order to determine the usefulness of portfolios and the possibility they carry in terms of being used as a large-scale, authentic measurement of student learning, I must explore how portfolios have historically been used.

Attitudes Toward Standardized Testing

High-stakes, standardized tests affect a multitude of people: parents/guardians, teachers, and students, to name a few. The sheer number of people touched by a single test begs the question: How does each group perceive standardized tests? Are they deemed valuable and useful? Is it felt by these groups that the data provided by said tests ends up being used in the classroom? This section will seek to explore the answers to such questions by examining the attitudes of parents/guardians, educators, and students toward standardized testing. The first portion of this section will examine the attitudes primarily of parents/guardians. The second portion of this section will examine the attitudes of educators. Lastly, the third portion of this section will examine the attitudes of students toward standardized testing.

Attitudes of parents/guardians. The attitudes of parents/guardians toward standardized testing are problematic since, as Mulvenon, Stegman, and Ritter (2005) point out, many parents seem to be ill-informed about what standardized testing actually entails: what the test is like, what results indicate, how parents can support their child in an environment of testing, etc. (p. 44-45). However, with that being said, according to a study conducted by Mulvenon et al. (2005), the majority of parents studied supported

standardized testing—believing that it was important and the results were interesting and relevant. Alongside this information, the majority of those parents surveyed believed that the climate of testing was not overly anxiety- or stress-inducing for either the students or their parents. Rather, any issues noted consisted of communication, or a lack thereof, between parents and teachers concerning test results and their meaning (p. 45-47). Finally, according to Mulvenon et al. (2005), those parents most likely to feel pressure were those parents whose students had performed poorly in the past: "This suggests parents are aware of low performance and feel compelled to assist their children" (p. 48). So, while some anxiety from parents toward test-taking does exist, Mulvenon et al. suggest that it is not as pervasive as some—particularly media outlets—would have society believe. Meredith (2015) disagrees—citing a poll conducted by the Indiana State Teachers Association in 2014 in which parents stated that a focus on testing was, generally, a top problem facing communities and schools.

Lay and Brown (2009), on the other hand, postulate that the view of parents toward standardized testing depends heavily on the backgrounds of said parents—particularly the ethnicity or socioeconomic status of the parents. Those parents with backgrounds which have been traditionally honored by the government, such as mid-to-upper class white citizens, typically agree with a need for standardized testing. However, as an opposing example, Lay and Brown (2009) state: "...there is reluctance about the accountability movement, including high-stakes testing, among many African Americans. Many do not believe their children are in school environments that enable them to learn effectively..." (p. 432-433). Contrastingly, Lay and Brown (2009) also

assert that parents of Latino origin remain largely optimistic about the possibility of their student's success (p. 433).

Many parents who are against standardized testing are *strongly* against it. After all, high-stakes, standardized testing is a polarizing topic. One mother, a self-proclaimed reformer, tells of her decision to resist the standardized testing movement as part of a collection of essays written by those rising up against high-stakes testing. Deutermann writes:

> "My decision to act was in fact brought on my by witnessing firsthand the changes in my then eight-year-old son. These changes began a few months before the third-grade tests and continued until the day he was informed he would not be taking the fourth-grade exam...He became a child who cried at night over difficult homework, had frequent stomachaches...and begged not to go to school in the mornings." (2014, p. 195-196)

Reformers are so because they believe that they are doing the best for their children and that "the best" does not include such tests. They may believe that there should be more time for play or for authentic learning, or they may be more concerned about their anxiety-prone child. However, at the heart of the matter, all parents involved—whether for or against standardized testing—simply want to provide the best education possible for their students.

Attitudes of educators. What was most surprising—or what was most *un*surprising—was that teachers are, predominantly, the most likely to be opposed to standardized testing. Rebora (2012) reports that a study conducted by Scholastic and the

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation of more than 10,000 teachers found the following: "...28 percent of educators see state-required standardized tests as an essential or very important gauge of student achievement. In addition, only 26 percent of teachers say standardized tests are an accurate reflection of what students know" (p. 14). Rebora (2012) goes on to note that the study also found that teachers do believe that student growth should be monitored; however, they prefer other methods to do so. Similarly, the synthesis written by Mulvenon et al. (2005) notes that much of what has been written about teachers and their view of testing includes concerns about a lack of teacher creativity due to testing, a loss of time to test preparation and testing itself, increased student anxiety, decreased student self-confidence, and a neglect toward higher-order thinking (p. 49).

That being said, it is worth noting two items. First, the study completed by Mulvenon, Stegman, and Ritter (2005) found no correlation between negative teacher attitudes and low test scores. So, while teachers largely perceive standardized testing as a negative undertaking, that perception is not yet affecting students. Second, teachers' negative perceptions are largely covered by the media. Another source that I reviewed was published in a local newspaper, the *Indianapolis Business Journal,* as an opinion piece written by a local teacher who was also the president of the Indiana State Teachers Association, and it led with the headline, "Testing blizzard makes teachers, students feel weary" (Meredith, 2015). Opinions such as this one are what the public sees of teachers and their views; what message does this send to parents? To students?

Attitudes of students. Lastly, the most important subgroup relevant to standardized testing is that of students. Kearns (2011) states that the attitudes, opinions, and perspectives of students are often not taken into account when the discussion of standardized testing comes about (p. 114). In a qualitative study, Kearns (2011) chose to do just that: interviewing sixteen students from urban Toronto who, at one point, had failed a standardized test. Kearns sought the answers to questions about school, about testing, about the government, about their hobbies, etc.; the answers given about standardized testing were chilling. By and large, students seemed to be shocked and surprised that they had failed; in many cases, the tests did not reflect their grades from school. Others noted that they were stressed and humiliated—that the test was not helpful and also created feelings of self-doubt (p. 117-121). Kearns (2011) writes that one student in particular responded, "I enjoyed English, but my self-esteem really went down after the test...I really had to think over whether I was good at it or not" (p. 119). There is something fundamentally wrong with a test that challenges and casts doubt on a student's love of learning. However, this statement corresponds with another work of literature, where students refer to tests as "zombifying" (McKay, Regunberg, & Shea, 2014, p. 135).

The worry often put forth by adults is that standardized testing directly increases anxiety in students. Mulvenon et al. (2005) sought to examine whether students were perceptive to pressure and anxiety based on testing:

> "...the results from this study suggest that students' own anxiety has negligible effects and that it is the climate of the school that affects student

> performance. The main factor influencing test scores was found to be student perceptions of a negative pressure surrounding standardized testing." (p. 43-44)

In other words, standardized testing affects the overall climate of the school—which, in turn, affects anxiety-levels of students. After the results of this study were released, others chose to research whether this anxiety and negative pressure resulted more from standardized, NCLB-style assessments rather than day-to-day classroom assessments. Segool, Carlson, Goforth, von der Embse, and Barterian (2013) found the following: "In the current study, students reported significantly more test anxiety in relation to the high-stakes NCLB assessment than to classroom tests" (p. 495). There is something about standardized testing itself that drives students—even *young* students—into a negative mindset. In time, this mindset creates a disdain for learning—something that is detrimental to our society as a whole. Looking at all three subgroups, attitudes toward standardized testing are problematic; no subgroup is completely positive regarding their feelings toward standardized testing—there is a want for more information, better communication, and more alignment with what students are learning on an everyday basis. So, does the effectiveness of the tests outweigh their public perception?

Effectiveness of Standardized Testing

A standardized test, by nature, is a "standard" test meant to measure the knowledge of all students. However, is it possible for one test to measure the knowledge of all students? What is the effectiveness of standardized testing in terms of accurately measuring student knowledge and growth with regards to standards? How can a

standardized test measure *teacher* performance in addition to measuring student performance? Does a standardized test accurately measure the learning of *all* students? This section will seek to explore the answers to those questions.

Surface-level testing. By and large, educational literature critiques the nature of standardized testing on a number of fronts. One such critique is that high-stakes, mandated, standardized testing drives only surface-level, shallow thinking. For example, Morgan (2016) asserts that the amount of credit given to the results of such testing pushes teachers to teach through ineffective drilling and memorization strategies: "Students' scores may improve, but they often fail to develop higher-level thinking skills….In Texas, for example, high school teachers noticed that...students could not apply what they learned to content other than that appearing on the state test" (p. 68). If students have an inability to apply the skills and content learned due to a "teach-to-the-test" mindset, something is problematic. Gallagher (2015) concurs with this general idea by stating that teachers often end up emphasizing only those standards addressed on the test, therefore narrowing the curriculum. He posits that this creates a dangerous cycle: when a curriculum is narrowed to teach only to the standards honored by the test, student thinking is correspondingly narrowed. With the arrival of new testing, new dangers are posed toward student thinking (Gallagher, 2015, p. 186-187).

If standardized tests are narrowing the curriculum, what is being left out? What is not able to be accurately measured by such a test? In *Readicide,* Gallagher (2009) insists that such a narrowing of the curriculum drives away the ability to teach students to think deeply; after all, it is easier to test a student's memorization of facts than his or her ability

to analyze and evaluate a historical event. To further this notion, in *In the Best Interest of Students*, Gallagher (2015) writes, "Teachers were thus stuck in No Man's Land: should we provide our students with the deep writing experiences we know they need, or should we gear our instruction toward raising test scores?" (p. 2). Similarly, since tested areas typically only include math and reading/writing, other skills such as creativity, public speaking, or debate are often neglected and ignored (Morgan, 2016, p. 68-69). This limitation of the curriculum also leads to less stimulating, inferior teaching—missing chances to engage students and protect endangered students from dropping out (Au & Gourd, 2013, p. 18).

In particular, a narrow emphasis on those standards addressed in high-stakes testing leads students away from the development of those skills needed to become a lifelong reader. Gallagher (2009) states that many schools, though they suggest that they value reading, do not emphasize the skills needed to become true, lifelong readers: "'Valuing reading' is often a euphemism for preparing students to pass mandated multiple-choice exams, and in dragging students down this path, schools are largely contributing to the development of readicide" (p. 7). Miller and Kelley (2014) concur, "While students' standardized test performance, fluency checks, and use of comprehension strategies indicated whether they mastered basic reading processes, none of the data tell me whether my students are readers beyond a school-based definition" (p. xviii). Are we creating test-takers at the expense of lifelong readers? Lifelong, creative, authentic learners? What is more important? What does (and *can*) a test really measure?

Standardized test data. An additional critique offered by opponents of high-stakes, standardized testing lies in the usefulness of the data measured by testing. It must be acknowledged that no standardized test is perfect; therefore, no data is perfect. To begin with a review of the critique, Ravitch (2010) states:

> "Tests vary in their quality, and even the best tests may sometimes be error-prone, because of human mistakes or technical foul-ups….Sometimes questions are poorly worded. Sometimes the answers are wrongly scored. Sometimes the supposedly 'right' answer to a question is wrong or ambiguous." (p. 152)

Moreover, the margin of error on a standardized test can be quite large due to the variation in students themselves. A student's test results may vary from day to day based on the amount of rest he or she receives, what is going on in his or her life outside of school, what distractions he or she is facing, and more (Ravitch, 2010, p. 152).

On top of this unpredictability in students, Au and Gourd (2013) declare that the statistical logic behind standardized testing is flawed: "...the statistical logic of standardized tests require that some students fail….if everyone passed a standardized test...the results of that test would immediately be called into question…" (p. 16). Hagopian (2014) supports this idea of the fundamental flaw of standardized testing; due to the fact that typically, standardized tests are norm-referenced tests, students are always compared to every other individual student taking the same test. Then, scores are reported as percentiles, and the pattern of results is always the same as previous years: 10% are always in the top 10% of all test-takers while another 10% are in the bottom (p. 14). Is this an appropriate type of testing for children? A test designed for some students to fail?

Other flaws include the amount of testing that is done each year: with many state tests offered only one time per year, the possibility of random variation increases (Ravitch, 2010, p. 154).

Furthermore, as stated earlier, critics of testing point out that standardized tests typically only test one or two areas: typically math and reading/writing. By testing only these areas, is a focus being turned away from other, non-tested areas? Ravitch (2010) paraphrases Rothstein when she writes, "By holding teachers accountable only for test scores in reading and mathematics...schools pay less attention to students' health, physical education, civic knowledge, the arts, and enrichment activities" (p. 161). What is being missed by focusing only on reading and math? Is a lack of testing impacting other subject areas?

Cheating and test fraud. On top of statistical issues with standardized testing, several articles and texts point out that the placement of importance on standardized testing, especially with those who serve to benefit from increased test scores, breeds an atmosphere of cheating and testing fraud. For example, between the years of 1994-1998 in Texas, pressure was put onto teachers and administrators; principals who raised reading scores were often offered up to $5,000 in bonuses with additional bonuses being given to superintendents, etc. Gallagher (2009) explains that during the height of the Texas Miracle, special education students were not counted in test scores. In fact, the special education population doubled between 1994 and 1998, removing these students from overall testing scores. Morgan (2016) found similar corruption in Atlanta, where educators were accused of erasing wrong answers and correcting them to artificially raise

scores. With an atmosphere of increased pressure, it is no wonder that administrators and teachers have sometimes relied on less-than-savory means of achieving high marks.

Standardized testing and value-added assessment. Proponents of standardized testing are often also in favor of value-added assessment—a method of evaluation which directly ties teacher performance to individual student test scores. However, critics such as Ravitch (2010) see many potential problems with this. This method of assessment, created by a statistician, places the entirety of the responsibility for standardized test scores on the teachers themselves—disregarding the test or the students. Ravitch (2010) writes, "If the assessments were low-level, multiple-choice tests, and if teachers were intensely prepping their students for the tests, then could it really be said that these were measures of learning? Or that they were indicators of better teaching?" (p. 181). On that same note, Ravitch questions whether the presence of good scores in one year make a teacher effective. Can they repeat the same effectiveness every year? If students fail, is the blame entirely on teachers? If students pass, is the praise entirely on teachers? What about the students and their families? Ravitch (2010) continues, "One problem with test-based accountability...is that it removes all responsibility from students and their families for the students' academic performance... neglected to acknowledge that students... are not merely passive recipients of their teachers' influence" (p. 162). If students fail to eat breakfast, fail to get adequate sleep, are homeless, etc.—can those influences be overruled by a highly effective teacher? If not, should a teacher be punished for situations outside of their control? Questions such as these, and more, certainly remain.

Standardized tests and marginalized youth. One last critique of standardized testing that is often brought up is the effect of testing on marginalized students—students of color, students for whom English is not their first language, students with learning disabilities, etc. Do tests accurately measure marginalized students' knowledge of content and growth in tested subject areas? Many disagree—citing that such tests are not an adequate measurement. Before even speaking of students of color or students for whom English is a second language, Gallagher (2015) worries about the effects of testing on any students who do not fit into a standardized model: "When the curriculum is narrowed into a sameness, when we adopt a 'one size fits all' approach, creativity suffers and students whose talents are not valued by the tests risk being marginalized...our students are travelling in herds" (p. 187).

Kamenetz (2015) joins this argument, citing the effects of high-stakes, standardized testing on students with disabilities or, on the other end of the spectrum, gifted and talented students. Kamenetz states, "Under a high-stakes system both parents and schools have good reasons to push for an official [learning disability] diagnosis for any student who has trouble sitting still for ninety minutes every day for three weeks at a stretch" (p. 25). She precedes this statement with a fact: in 2015, over 13% of schoolchildren were labeled as having a learning disability (LD). However, with an influx of students into special education, special education systems and departments often suffer; teachers and case managers are overworked and overbooked—often managing caseloads of fifteen or more students. Is this fair to those students who truly need one-to-one attention? Similarly, those students at the high end of the spectrum end up

short-changed as well: "...there is evidence that...students who score well above or below proficient get less individualized attention because teachers instead work intensively with the students who are just below proficient, or 'on the bubble'" (Kamenetz, 2015, p. 25).

However, perhaps what is most important is the impact of testing on students who are traditionally marginalized based on gender, social class, race, etc. One criticism of standardized testing provides a reminder of the origins of such testing. As stated in the *2016 State of Students of Color and American Indian Students Report* (Minnesota Education Equity Partnership, 2016), "...standardized tests have their historic roots in increasing and maintaining White supremacy in the early 20th century with IQ tests designed to keep people of color out of the military and the eugenics movement" (p. 38). Another common criticism of testing is that it reproduces inequalities already found in the school system. Kearns (2011) writes:

> "...educational researchers have consistently identified economic factors as having a positive or negative impact on student achievement...those with lower SES [socioeconomic statuses] are more likely to leave school early, fail standardized tests or not write them, or be behind in school levels." (p. 114).

Typically, students who have the benefit of growing up in wealthier districts—districts with more resources, access to private tutors, nutritious food—score more highly than those students from lower-income districts. "The...truth about standardized tests is that they are a better indicator of a student's zip code than a student's aptitude….This is why attaching high stakes to these exams only serves to exacerbate racial and class inequality" (Hagopian, 2014, p. 15).

Why is it that students from lower-income districts often underperform, exactly? Morgan (2016) lists a number of possible circumstances, similar to those of Hagopian (2014). However, Morgan also points out the following: "Since teachers face pressure to improve scores and since poverty-stricken students generally underperform on high-stakes tests, schools serving low-income students are more likely to implement a style of teaching based on drilling and memorization that leads to little learning" (2016, p. 67). When one looks at the trend it is clear, as poverty goes up, often scores go down. As scores go down, so do expectations, and students can quickly fall prey to a self-fulfilling prophecy of low standards and low expectations (Au & Gourd, 2013). Is this how we, as an educational system, best serve students? Or, rather, are we experiencing a systemic failure?

Support for standardized tests. Though it is more difficult to find, there *are* those who support standardized testing. Schmoker (2000), in particular, repeatedly asserts the following, "Even imperfect tests—and all assessments are imperfect—can promote life-changing improvement and better, richer assessment systems" (p. 62). Schmoker, despite opponents' claims, maintains that standardized tests do reliably provide data about students, teachers, and schools, are able to test high-level skills such as analysis and interpretation of texts, and provide focus and urgency for schools (2000, p. 63-64). In addition, many *opponents* of standardized testing state that testing should certainly not be the only means of accountability for students, teachers, and schools—not that they should not be used at all (DelliCarpini, Ortiz-Marrero, & Sumaryono, 2010; Morgan, 2016). This

call for additional measures of accountability opens up the conversation to other, more authentic, means of assessment.

Portfolios as Assessment

Classroom portfolios are currently used in a variety of ways: to show knowledge of reading or writing, to prove the attainment of state standards, to display students' growth over a school year, to collect work done over a period of time, to promote self-reflection among students, etc. The possibilities are truly endless; therefore, there also exists numerous possibilities to use portfolios as a means of both informal and formal assessment. Given the varied attitudes toward traditional, high-stakes standardized testing as well as the questionability of the effectiveness of such testing, the possibilities afforded by portfolios begs this question: is it possible that portfolios could be used as a means of formal, statewide assessment in addition to or potentially even in lieu of high-stakes, standardized testing? *How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?*

Current uses of portfolios in the classroom. The potential uses of portfolios in the classroom today are numerous and diverse. Wiggins (1998) notes the following about the wide variety of portfolios: "Portfolios can primarily serve instruction or assessment; they can be focused primarily on documentation or evaluation; their contents can be defined by the student or by the teacher..." (as cited in Burke, 2008, p. 298). Working off of Wiggins' definition, it is clear that the possibilities afforded by portfolios are plentiful—almost overwhelming. One could use portfolios to show growth, to show a student's interests, to show which artifacts a teacher is most proud of, to show which

artifacts a *student* is most proud of, as a partial collection of student work, or even as a complete collection of student work over a defined period of time.

Burke (2008) indicates that he uses a portfolio as a culminating assessment for his high school students. His portfolio consists of asking students to create an anthology of what they consider to be their best work—weeding and revising as necessary, pushing students to reflect on the work they have done throughout the year, and sharing students' work with parents and guardians (p. 298). Similarly, Gallagher (2015) asks his students to turn in an end-of-the-year portfolio which includes a beginning-of-the-year writing sample, a reflective letter, and several of their "best" pieces: their best on-demand writing, their best narrative writing, their best poetry, their best argument piece, etc. (p. 123-125). Such end-of-the-year use of portfolios asks students to save and work through their writing from the year—asking questions such as: *What am I most proud of? Which writing best showcases a certain skill? How do I pull all of these pieces together?* Spandel (2005) insists that students need to ask themselves such questions, "Students need to review their work in just this way, searching out the pieces that best capture who they are as writers and who they are becoming. We can help, but the choices must be theirs" (p. 46).

If speaking of digital portfolios, Hicks (2013) contends that the use of electronic portfolios (or "e-portfolios"), in particular, pushes students to take their learning in a direction that is more authentic: "Helping students understand how they are building their digital footprint is incredibly important, and being able to gather their best work in one online space will become increasingly useful as they prepare for college and career" (p.

41). Portfolios no longer have to consist of hole-punched papers filed in a binder—re-printed and re-filed after revisions. Rather, digital portfolios can showcase student learning while also helping students to see that portfolios can have real audiences and purposes in today's digital world.

Coming from a different angle, Gorlewski (2010) argues that, among their other uses, portfolios have two main purposes: "...a basic working portfolio in the ELA classroom can be used in two ways: to help teachers develop a keener understanding of their own program *and* to assist students in the self-assessment process" (p. 97). After lamenting about the typical end-of-year sight in school hallways (that is, garbage cans overflowing with student work), Gorlewski (2010) states, "...the combined work of teachers and students...is a plentiful source of information about the habits and dispositions of *teachers* as well as individual *students*" (p. 97).

Following this manner of thought, if one were to save all student work in portfolios, a great amount of data would exist which could help teachers gain insight into their own teaching. What are they doing well? What are they *not* doing well? With the knowledge gained from portfolios, teachers can immediately change their teaching to reflect the results (Simmons, 1990) as opposed to waiting for delayed results from the testing companies (Meredith, 2015). What is more is that, during the portfolio process, teachers can continue to teach as normal (Simmons, 1990). No variances from the day-to-day routine need to occur; this is, of course, directly in opposition to the hours that are frequently spent preparing students for the typical multiple-choice, standardized

testing. Therefore, in addition to showing student growth over time, portfolios could have numerous implications for both teaching and learning.

Self-assessment. In addition to providing students and teachers with a different means of assessing teaching, progress, and achievement, many have noted the capability of portfolios in helping students to self-reflect on and self-assess their learning. As shown, Burke (2008), Gallagher (2015), and Spandel (2005) all note the importance of self-reflection in the creation of portfolios. Similarly, Gorlewski (2010) insists that for the most effective use of portfolios, students must be given some of the control: "...'taking charge of one's literacy' is a highly active process in which teachers invite students to be partners in the classroom...Without student self-assessment, literacy, like evaluation, becomes something we do to students, not something we do with them" (p. 100).

These skills of self-reflection and self-assessment are especially important in today's world as 21st century skills include both critical thinking and problem solving; students must be able to apply these skills to the lessons that they learn as well as to their *own* thinking and learning. Using portfolios as a means of practicing self-reflection and self-assessment is yet another way to provide these students with authentic learning and practice for the future.

Potential use of portfolios as formal, statewide assessments. As discussed earlier, there have always been opponents to "traditional," high-stakes standardized testing—those who question what standardized tests really measure. As an additional example, Callahan (1997) attests that better scores are not equivalent with student growth in terms of learning; rather, better test scores often indicate that students have grown in

terms of their test-taking abilities (p. 300). Similarly, Bures, Barclay, Abrami, and Meyer (2013) posit the following, "...there is no guarantee that standardized tests will reflect what the student has learned, or what real abilities they can demonstrate in context" (p. 4).

So, are portfolios a possibility as a means of alternative assessment on a large scale? Can portfolios be used in such a way that the results are trustworthy, meaningful, and consistent? Given the various uses discussed earlier, it would seem to many that portfolios may be a more authentic way of measuring learning and growth. For example, Bures et al. state: "They [portfolios] allow students to display multiple forms of literacy...Allowing learners to represent their understandings in multiple ways by including voice and audio recordings better reflects our daily lives where balancing media is increasingly common and required" (2013, p. 3). Since this type of assessment is more authentic, it will more likely carry into students' worlds outside of school—assisting them more in the long run than a multiple-choice test.

In addition, portfolios step away from the idea that a standardized testing is a mere "snapshot" in time. Rather, portfolios are a means of showing the process—as opposed to merely the end product. Lam (2016) describes portfolios as a window into student development: "...[W]riting portfolios also provide students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders with a window for witnessing learners' efforts and achievements through their learning development" (p. 1901).

Challenges. As with any form of testing, the possibility of using portfolios in addition to, or in lieu of, traditional standardized testing poses its own set of challenges

and drawbacks. Some of the challenges are, in fact, the same as those challenges that arise with traditional standardized testing. For example, the use of portfolios in lieu of standardized testing would not save states money overall; the costs incurred to distribute information and score portfolios would be similar to the costs incurred for the current standardized tests (Simmons, 1990, p. 265). However, some of the challenges are unique to the use of portfolios.

First of all, the varied and wide nature of portfolios becomes difficult in terms of assessment/grading. Student work can be inconsistent, and the same can be said for the quality of teaching, the support level from teachers, and the curriculum. With this wide variety, how can an accurate judgment be formed without being familiar with the nature of a class or with the nature of a teacher? (Bures et al., 2013, p. 15-16). Bures, et al. go on to question, "What score does one assign a 'mixed bag' such as the portfolio?" (p. 17).

Similarly, portfolios—due to their extensive nature—take a significant amount of time to organize, explore, and assess. When the writing portfolio was a new statewide initiative in Kentucky, teachers struggled with multiple aspects of the process, noting that there was rarely enough time and money for teachers to adequately assess student portfolios. In addition, the state of Kentucky had not finalized multiple parts of the process; therefore, the constant change and chaos handed down from the state bred frustration and anger at multiple levels (Callahan, 1997). Yet, is it possible that these challenges could be worked through?

Summary

The purpose of this literature review was to explore topics, opinions, and studies revolving around the question: *How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?* This question was then further broken apart into three main topics: the attitudes of various subgroups toward standardized testing, the overall effectiveness of standardized testing, and the possible uses of portfolios as a means of assessment. Without a thorough exploration into each of these topics and their subtopics, it would be unknown whether or not the idea of a portfolio as a large-scale assessment of standards would be possible or even necessary.

After the review, it is clear that standardized testing is seen as both worthwhile and effective while simultaneously being seen as ineffective and unnecessary. Though no assessment is perfect, it is clear that there still remains room for improvement. In that vein, portfolios have a long history of uses and benefits; they have been used to showcase student work, to provide a means of self-reflection, and to offer teachers a window into their own teaching. However, historically, the time needed to score portfolios and the subjectivity found within scoring have provided difficulties when portfolios are used on a large-scale level.

The following chapter will detail the framework for a development of a standards-based reading portfolio and its potential implementation into an eighth grade English Language Arts curriculum. Using the information collected throughout the literature review as to both the strengths and shortfalls of current standardized tests, I will seek to honor the strengths and work against the shortfalls in the development of the

portfolio. Simultaneously, I will use the research put forth by others in terms of current portfolios; particularly, I will seek to address the issue of scoring.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

As stated earlier, in Minnesota, an eighth grade English Language Arts teacher has over seventy standards and substandards to include in their yearly curriculum. These standards include skills ranging from reading literature and informational text to media literacy (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). These teachers must constantly informally assess their teaching and the learning of their students: can a particular student determine a theme in literature? What about informational text? Can the student use Greek affixes to determine the meaning of a word? Can they engage in a range of collaborative discussions? Addressing the full range of these standards in a single year is challenging—particularly if one wants students to be engaged and fully interacting with the content of each standard.

However, according to the reading test specifications published by the Minnesota Department of Education (2017), the current MCA-III standardized assessment for Minnesotan eighth graders only directly tests thirteen of these standards: those standards addressing the reading of literature and informational text that can easily be tested in a multiple choice format. So, rather than teach all standards in depth, many ELA teachers, as well as many other content-area teachers, resort to one of two options: teaching only thirteen standards in depth and briefly flit over the other fifty-seven plus standards—"covering" them as required—or preparing students explicitly for the test

through rote memorization and drilling techniques (Morgan, 2016). I do not think this is what is best for students.

In addition, for the average Minnesotan eighth grade student, there are many subjects with which to occupy one's mind: relationships, fads, what is being served for lunch, extracurricular activities, and homework. However, very few of these eighth grade students are particularly concerned with standards. Do they know what is expected of them on the yearly standardized test? Do they know specifically which standards they will be expected to address? Even if they know, do they *care*? Are they able to read into the score provided by the test and see more than just a number or proficiency band? These questions and problems—among others—are what I hoped to address with my research question and corresponding project: *How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?*

In this chapter, I will provide my project description in three sections. The first section will be a brief overview of the project itself: a framework for a standards-based student portfolio. The second section will contain a description of the intended audience for this project. Finally, the third section will detail the specifics of the contents of the portfolio framework. This will include those authors whose work inspired the framework as well as the key components of metacognitive theory and Understanding by Design which drove the design of the framework.

An Overview of the Project

As an eighth grade English Language Arts teacher, my objective is, as Au and Gourd (2013) state, "...to use instructional strategies that inspire enthusiasm, creativity, and higher order thinking for teachers and students" (p. 19) so that my students and I will leave the classroom at the end of the year knowing that we have pushed ourselves to think deeply, to show compassion, and to make connections between our content and the world around us. Simultaneously, my curriculum is guided by state standards meant to measure progress and hold both students and educators accountable for learning (Burke, 2008; Morgan, 2016). In an effort to meet both of these demanding needs and provide an alternative assessment to the traditional standardized test, I designed the framework for a standards-based reading portfolio that can be integrated into any eighth-grade English Language Arts classroom in Minnesota as a means of showing students' growth toward and mastery of standards. In order to match the current MCA-III Reading test for eighth grade, the framework for the portfolio focuses on the same thirteen standards that are used for the MCA-III test per the current specifications provided by the Minnesota Department of Education (2017).

Audience

Though there are many potential alternatives to standardized testing, I chose to specifically create the framework for portfolios for the purposes of this capstone since portfolios can be easily accessed and utilized by educators in every content area. As I am focused on assessing Minnesota's eighth grade Common Core reading standards, the portfolio was designed primarily with Minnesotan eighth grade students—and their teachers—in mind. Therefore, the framework design contains three main components: a

"Getting Started" document, a folder containing instructions and information for teachers of eighth grade students, and a folder containing instructions and information for eighth grade students themselves.

In its current state, the portfolio is targeted at a small-scale audience; for example, it could be used in an individual educator's classroom, across a schoolwide department, etc. Though I believe in its validity and reliability on a large-scale level, a larger committee would have to be put together to complete tasks such as revising the documents and determining scoring deadlines. In addition, though it is currently targeted at Minnesota's eighth grade Common Core reading standards, slight changes would easily make this framework usable with other grade-level standards or disciplines, such as seventh grade Minnesota reading standards.

Specific Contents

As part of the framework design, I included the most important component: the online template for the portfolio in which students will submit evidence of each standard. However, I also included guidelines for both educators and students written in accessible language—much of which is repeated in both sets of guidelines to create a common vocabulary for students and educators to use. In addition, I also incorporated assessment rubrics for scoring, helpful checklists, and examples of both implementation and scoring. When considering the design of each of these elements, a great deal of research was pulled from Chapter Two. As portfolios have long been a staple of education, there was much to be said in terms of "what works" as well as what does *not*. The informed writings of both Burke (2008) and Gallagher (2015) were particularly helpful in

identifying needed guidelines for students and educators, determining what sorts of artifacts have historically been used in portfolios, and incorporating elements of student metacognition.

Likewise, Bures, Barclay, Abrami, and Meyer (2013) spoke to the types of scoring needed in order to represent student mastery of standards while accounting for the need for reliability, and Callahan (1997) provided the guidelines and rubrics once used by Kentucky's Department of Education for their statewide writing portfolio. Though previous shortcomings of large-scale use of portfolios have included difficulty with scoring, it was my belief that reliable scoring was possible—that scoring done by the classroom teacher could yield the same results as scoring completed by a stranger—and I worked to create easy-to-use analytic rubrics to provide the hoped-for results. After a portfolio is completed and scored, the data provided by said rubrics should provide both the student and his or her educators with specific scores detailing the student's level of proficiency in each of the thirteen standards.

The online template for the portfolio itself was built using Google's G Suite. The platforms which Google provides—Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Slides, and so on—allow for easy sharing, collaboration, simple editing, commenting, bookmarking, etc. In addition, the ability to have portfolios "follow" students as part of their digital footprint was appealing. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of G Suite prepares students for the sort of technology which they will be expected to know and use in a 21st century workplace. Standards were integrated into a Google Slides slideshow which

could be copied as needed; when students have work that meets the requirements of each standard, it can be submitted quickly and easily into the working document.

Metacognition. One element that was particularly featured in the framework of the portfolio was the ability for students to self-regulate and self-assess their work—the ability for students to use metacognition. Tracey and Morrow (2012) describe metacognitive theory as follows, "The goal of metacognitive instruction is to help readers become more aware of their own thinking during the reading process which, ultimately, should lead to increased text comprehension" (p. 73). As I designed the guidelines and requirements as to what students and educators must include in a completed portfolio, I did so with metacognitive theory in mind. For example, in the student guidelines, standards were listed in student-friendly language. This made standards more accessible for students while also providing students with the power and the knowledge to decide which artifacts they will submit to show mastery of a specific standard. The intention was to place students at the core of their own assessment—increasing engagement.

Bures, et al. (2013) write, "...as students build a collection of artifacts, they choose pieces for assessment, reflecting upon their work and the reasons for inclusion" (p. 3). In the creation of the student portfolio, I embedded slides not only for submission of evidence for each standard, but I also embedded slides for self-reflection concerning each standard. Students will be asked—using a series of prompts to guide them—to reflect on *how* the evidence which they submitted for each standard shows mastery as well as *why* they submitted it. This will not only aid in increasing student engagement but also place some of the responsibility for student learning back on the students themselves.

They will be in charge of understanding the standards as well as what can be submitted to prove growth toward and mastery of each standard.

Understanding by Design. Additionally, I incorporated the basics of Understanding by Design into my framework. McTighe and Wiggins (2012) state that there are three stages of Understanding by Design: identifying desired results, determining evidence needed for assessment, and planning individual lessons. This portfolio aims to help students achieve maximum understanding and growth, and that can only be done by beginning with the end in mind: i.e. the state standards. What do students need to know? How can educators help students to get there? What evidence can they provide of such learning? Therefore, the framework I designed will aid educators by providing them with the first two stages of Understanding by Design. In the guidelines for the portfolio, both the desired results—in this case, the standards—and evidence needed were detailed.

Summary

How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom? To answer this research question, I created the framework for a standards-based, reading portfolio that requires students to prove their knowledge of the same standards as assessed by the current MCA-III Reading test, involves elements of student metacognition, and allows for easy implementation and scoring. This portfolio allows for a true display of student learning, growth, and skills as opposed to the display provided by traditional standardized testing. In addition, the framework for this portfolio could easily be extended to include other standards,

disciplines, or grade levels. It could even be extended to incorporate the entirety of a student's learning throughout their schooling—truly displaying growth over time.

In the next chapter, Chapter Four, I will describe the conclusions I have made from the development of this portfolio framework. Additionally, I will describe any limitations this framework has as well as the implications this framework has on my own teaching and that of others.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

Introduction

Spandel (2005) posited:

> "When such assessment is designed with care and implemented with sensitivity, it can have immeasurable impact on the shape and force of writing instruction. A case in point is the assessment conducted by the state of Kentucky...Kentucky's assessment allows students extended time to plan their writing and gives them a sense of ownership because they select the writing for the portfolio and also prepare a letter to reviewers reflecting on their work." (p. 97)

The above passage—along with an instinctive feeling of unhappiness with the current state of affairs in terms of standardized testing—was what kickstarted my personal capstone process. After reading about the use of portfolios to test writing in the state of Kentucky, I found myself wondering if the same could be done to test reading. I was not sure where the combination of my own gut feelings and current research would lead; however, it ultimately led me to an exploration of this question: *How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?*

While pursuing the idea of using portfolios as an alternative to traditional, multiple-choice, high-stakes standardized testing, I explored three main subtopics:

- What are the attitudes of parents, educators, and students toward "traditional" standardized tests?
- Are traditional standardized tests an accurate reflection of student learning and/or student growth?
- How are portfolios currently used in terms of both informal and formal assessment at the school or state level?

Through research conducted under the umbrella of each of these subtopics, I found a need—and a *want*—for alternative forms of standardized assessment. Using the knowledge cultivated from this research, I developed the framework for a standards-based student portfolio which could be used to as an alternative means of assessing the 8th grade Minnesota reading standards. However, where do I go from here?

In the following chapter, I will reflect upon my capstone journey in three main sections. First, I will detail my learning experiences as a reader, writer, and researcher throughout this process. This section will also describe the utmost importance which my literature review played in the forming of my portfolio framework. Second, I will discuss limitations that exist within my project—proposing possible solutions to many of those limitations. Finally, I will include implications that my project may have within the greater educational community. This includes potential implications within the four walls of my own classroom as well as potential implications within Minnesota.

Learnings

As I began the process of creating the portfolio framework, I struggled to bring all of the necessary components together. My research yielded a great number of helpful tips

in terms of the creation of the portfolio and the rubrics; however, that same research also yielded a great number of pitfalls of which to be wary. Ultimately, it was one small thread of thought that helped me to begin pulling everything together: How would *I* want this portfolio to look if I were just using it in my own classroom? What would be most beneficial if *I* were handed these instructions? What information would *my* students need to thrive?

These thoughts served as a "lightbulb" moment for me and allowed me to continue moving forward through the capstone process. As the portfolio writer and creator, it was crucial that I kept these questions in mind while sorting through and re-reading the research. I did not create this portfolio for faceless students; I created it for the same students that I see in the hallways day in and day out. My hope, obviously, is that this portfolio can benefit other educators and students; however, I had to begin with thoughts of my own students in mind before considering how I could present it to others.

Once I began putting the portfolio framework together, I was quickly able to glean the information that was most important to my project. There were three main categories therein: those readings that spoke directly to the drawbacks of standardized testing, those readings that spoke directly to the benefits of standardized testing, and those readings which specifically discussed using and scoring portfolios.

Drawbacks of standardized testing. One of the largest critiques of standardized testing is that standardized testing requires only shallow, surface-level thinking which, in turn, drives the use of poor teaching strategies (Au & Gourd, 2013; Gallagher, 2009; Gallagher, 2015; Miller & Kelley, 2014; Morgan, 2016). In addition to this critique,

numerous researchers cited the flawed data which standardized tests provide—declaring that the data is too easily impacted by variables in students' lives, that they are statistically designed for some students to fail, etc. (Au & Gourd, 2013; Hagopian, 2014; Ravitch, 2010). Furthermore, many researchers pointed out that standardized tests negatively target marginalized students (Au & Gourd, 2013; Gallagher, 2015; Hagopian, 2014; Kamenetz, 2014; Kearns, 2011; Morgan, 2016). Finally, it was evident that negative attitudes toward standardized testing existed among parents/guardians, educators and students alike (Deutermann, 2014; Kearns, 2011; Lay & Brown, 2009; McKay, Regunberg, & Shea, 2014; Meredith, 2015; Mulvenon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2009; Rebora, 2012).

Two of these critiques are easily addressed by the use of portfolios. The first of these critiques—that standardized testing requires only shallow, surface-level thinking and teaching—is the one most easily addressed. After all, since portfolios are examples of daily student work, they are a direct reflection of teaching strategies and student thinking. If a teacher uses surface-level strategies, those strategies will be reflected in the body of student work and the data provided by the assessment rubrics. However, if a teacher pushes students to think deeply, make inferences, support claims, etc., those strategies will also be reflected. Similarly, as the portfolios are integrated into daily classroom work throughout the school year, my hope is that the negative attitude that is typically held by students and educators toward standardized testing will not carry over to this alternative form of assessment.

That being said, the possibility of imperfect and flawed data still exists; as portfolios require human scoring as opposed to computerized scoring, there is room for subjectivity and bias. This is one element that I took into consideration when creating the assessment rubrics. In creating the rubrics, I chose to use analytic rubrics that were directly adapted from the Minnesota Department of Education's (2014) document detailing the achievement level descriptors for the MCA-III Reading test. As explained in the "Educator Guidelines" portion of the portfolio framework, the rubrics—one meant for assessing Literature standards and the other meant for assessing Informational Text standards—break the criteria for each of the four proficiency levels down into parts. This allows a scorer to detail which aspects of the standard that the student has mastered as well as which aspects require improvement. Looking toward the potential for large-scale use, analytic rubrics have also shown high levels of inter-rater reliability; that is, multiple scorers score assessments with similar results (Bures, Barclay, Abrami, and Meyer, 2013, p. 14-15).

Other researchers declared that there were slight issues with standardized testing that simply needed to be fixed. The first of these issues was a lack of communication between educators and parents as to what standardized testing required, what standardized testing scores meant, etc. (Mulvenon, et al., 2009). Likewise, according to Kearns (2011), students seemed to experience a lack of communication between what they learned in class—what *letter grades* they earned—and their final scores on standardized tests. There is a need for better reflection of teaching and transparency with

students and parents as to what is being tested, why it is being tested, and how it is being assessed.

The assessment rubrics connected with the portfolios address this need for transparency; after scoring, students and parents will be able to look at the assessment rubrics and determine exactly how a student fared in terms of *each standard*. They may see that the student scored a "Does Not Meet Expectations" for some standards but a "Meets Expectations" for others. In addition, since the assessment rubrics split apart the criteria needed to achieve each level of proficiency, students and parents will be able to understand *why* a student did or did not meet expectations for each standard.

Benefits of standardized testing. During my research, it became clear that there *were* benefits to standardized testing that should be held onto when creating the alternative portfolios. To begin, multiple authors reflected a need for accountability and a way in which to monitor growth (DelliCarpini, Ortiz-Marrero, & Sumaryono, 2010; Morgan, 2016; Rebora, 2012). Schmoker (2000) also specifically declared the need for *focus* and *urgency* that standardized testing provides—standardized testing requires teachers to unequivocally prepare their students to show knowledge of specific standards. The requirements for the portfolio pull in all of these benefits: that is, they provide a means of accountability and focus.

Using and scoring portfolios. Most helpfully, several authors spoke directly to the potential uses of portfolios within a classroom (Burke, 2008; Callahan, 1997; Gallagher, 2015; Spandel, 2005). These were most helpful in determining what to include in the portfolio framework, how to provide guidelines for students and educators, how to

incorporate elements of student metacognition, etc. Many of those authors—and others—also spoke out about the procedures and pitfalls of scoring portfolios (Bures et al., 2013; Callahan, 1997). These readings were invaluable in the development of the portfolio framework.

Limitations

As with any project that has large-scale implications, I experienced a number of limitations. For example, as the portfolio framework was created in Google Drive, it not only works best for schools who utilize Google's G Suite, but it also works best for schools where the student to device ratio is 1:1. However, the largest limitations existed primarily in the areas of scope and potential for fraud.

Scope. Limitations exist in terms of the scope of the project. In order to make the results of this portfolio comparable with the results of the current 8th grade MCA-III Reading test, I created the portfolio framework with only thirteen standards in mind. These standards are those same standards assessed by the MCA-III Reading test (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). This allows for a direct comparison between the two means of assessment.

However, there are numerous other reading standards that are *not* currently tested by the MCA-III Reading test—presumably because of the test's own limitations as a multiple-choice test. For example, according to the *Reading test specifications for MCA-III, grades 3–8 and 10* (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017), the MCA-III Reading test does not assess students' knowledge of Standard 7; rather, the test specifications indicate that standard 7 is assessed only at the classroom level.

Specifically, standard 7 requires students to do the following: "Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017, p. 64). Such a standard *could* be evaluated through classroom work that is placed into a portfolio. Yet, I did not include it in my portfolio framework for the reason stated above: I wanted to create a portfolio where the results could be directly compared with the results of the MCA-III Reading test.

That being said, leaving out standards does limit the scope of the portfolio's abilities. If a portfolio were to be used as a large-scale means of assessment—for example, if a portfolio were to be used to assess all eighth graders in the state of Minnesota—additional reading standards could be added. This would work to prevent the "narrowing" of curriculum, a concern held by many opponents of standardized testing (Gallagher, 2015, p. 186-187).

Additionally, the scope of this portfolio is limited in terms of the scale at which it could currently be used. As I worked as the sole writer and creator of this portfolio and all of the corresponding documents—such as the assessment rubrics—it would need to be reviewed by a committee before being used as a large-scale alternative to standardized testing. In its current capacity, however, it could easily be used by individual educators, by entire departments, or even as a means of auditing several schools each year. Are educators in those schools adequately reaching all standards? Do students in those schools understand the scope and sequence of the standards?

Fraud. The use of a portfolio also invites a possibility for both student and educator fraud. As I was designing the framework for the portfolio, the following question arose: how does one ensure that a student is submitting his or her own work? How does one ensure that they are not submitting the work of a fellow student or pulling content off of a website? To make matters worse, how does one ensure that an *educator*, in a potential act of desperation, does not tamper with the portfolio work of his or her students? As stated in Chapter Two, when the value of a teacher is tied to student performance, fraud has been known to happen (Gallagher, 2009; Morgan, 2016). While the possibility of such cheating exists with the use of a paper portfolio, the possibility becomes exponential when technology—in this case, Google's G Suite—is used. After all, Google makes it simple to share documents with a peer, and the act of copying and pasting is simple.

These are potential limitations within the realm of cheating and fraud; however, there are multiple solutions to said limitations. First of all, cheating and plagiarism are explicitly defined within the student guidelines—students cannot pretend to lack the knowledge of what these acts entail. As an extra precaution, when students share their portfolio, they are instructed to give educators the option to "comment" on their portfolio—as opposed to giving educators the other option of "editing" their portfolio. That takes away the ability of an educator to tamper with a student's document.

Similarly, educators and assessors could make use of the ability to view the "Version History" of a document during the assessment process; this would allow them to see if anyone other than the student made alterations as well as what sorts of alterations

are being made. Finally, if being used on a large-scale platform, websites or applications such as Turnitin could be used to check the portfolios for plagiarism—this would identify both plagiarism within the school district itself as well as plagiarism from outside websites. Yet, with these solutions in mind, it is still crucial to point out that educators and assessors must be aware that such limitations exist; after all, today's students are adept at bypassing technological rules and limitations.

Potential Implications

When I originally started exploring the idea of portfolios as an alternative assessment to traditional standardized testing, the notion was particularly appealing due to the opportunities that I could immediately see for the use of portfolios in my own classroom. An informal portfolio is something that could be started at any moment with any content learning. However, as I continued to delve deeper into the research behind portfolios, it became clear that the use of portfolios extends far beyond the four walls of my classroom—or even the limits of my school building.

Classroom implications. In my own classroom, the creation of the portfolio framework provides me with an additional means of assessing my own students—even if only on an informal level—as soon as the content work of the 2018-2019 school year begins. As the portfolio uses content already taught in class to assess student knowledge of standards, it will take little to no extra time to complete. However, it *will* provide me with a window into student thinking, evidence of student learning, and the ability to assess my own teaching of core reading standards. For example, as students submit evidence of a standard, I may notice that all students are missing one of the essential

pieces of criteria on the assessment rubrics. If it becomes a trend, it comments less on the students' learning and more on my own teaching.

Furthermore, the use of this portfolio within my classroom actually opens up the possibility of further research. For example, with the necessary approvals from parents and administrators, could the portfolios be compared against the results of the MCA-III Reading test? Do the portfolios yield similar results or drastically different results than that of the MCA? Did the implementation of portfolios feel more authentic to student learning (from both the student and the educator point of view)? Did the portfolios cause the same sort of negative mindset that traditional standardized testing tends to cause? Do the students—and their parents—feel that the assessment rubrics aid in transparency and communication of expectations? All of these questions, and more, could be studied—whether formally or informally.

Statewide implications. Implementation and research of the portfolio framework in the classroom could also directly result in statewide implications. If the portfolios prove to be, as I believe they are, valid and reliable methods of testing reading standards, there exists numerous possibilities for the portfolios to be used as a means of alternative assessment—or an *additional* means of assessment—on a more large-scale level. Already, schools in other states choose to opt out of testing and partake in other means of teacher and student assessment. For example, numerous schools in New York enroll in the New York Performance Standards Consortium. This consortium prides itself on thwarting traditional standardized testing and having an assessment system which, as

reported by Performance Assessment (2018), "...reflect[s] a fuller picture of what students know and can do."

Could Minnesota do something similar—piloting the portfolios in a small number of schools? Or, as stated earlier, could Minnesota use this portfolio as a means of auditing educator and student understanding of standards in select schools? I do not have specific answers for these questions, yet I see the possibilities ahead for myself and for other educators and students.

Summary

How can portfolios be used as an assessment of Common Core reading standards in an eighth grade middle school classroom?

Through my pursuit of the above research question, one fact has been made abundantly clear: the purpose of this capstone was not to prove that portfolios alone should be used when testing students' knowledge of standards. Rather, it was to propose and recommend an alternate solution to a system which is too often failing our students. It is not a question whether or not our students—and educators—need to be held accountable for their learning; the question exists in determining the best means to hold all parties responsible for learning. Portfolios are simply one means of alternative assessment. My hope is that, in the future, those in charge of educational policy will explore questions of a similar nature: always, always in the best interest of our students.

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