Teachers so focused on fairness issues they overlook best practices in grading

Teachers are so focused on fairness issues when they are grading students that they often don't follow recommended grading practices that emphasize student achievement, says a recent study in *The Educational Forum*.

Teachers' professional judgment will always be important in grading because no set of policies or directions could possibly address all the situations teachers encounter in grading. To improve grading practices schools need to provide teachers with more guidance and education in this area, say authors of the study which compared teachers' awareness of grading principles and their grading practices.

The 77 teachers who participated in the study completed questionnaires asking them to rate their awareness of 4 grading principles and to provide information about their own grading practices. Among the results:

* 29% reported considerable awareness of recommended grading principles
* 40 % reported some degree of awareness of grading principles
* 17% of teachers said they had only very little awareness
* 13% said they had no awareness of the grading principles.

When asked how much they used these principles in their grading practices,

* 23% of teachers agreed that they followed the principles
* 43% somewhat agreed that they followed the principles
* 10% said the principles did not apply to them
* 13% somewhat disagreed that they fol- lowed the principles
* 3% disagreed that they followed the prin ciples and 10% felt they did not apply to them.

In a standards-based system, it's important for teachers to stay focused on assessing a student's achievement against standards, the study says. However, teachers persist in taking into account a hodgepodge of other factors such as student effort or whether the student hands in work on time, according to the study on the grading beliefs and practices of 10th-grade math teachers in Ontario.

These factors should probably be separately addressed in report cards because many teachers struggle with overlooking a students' work habits in assigning grades, researchers write.

**The fairness problem**   
Even when teachers were aware of best practices in grading, teachers didn't necessarily adhere to them.

>“This study focused on teachers' grading practices in a standards-based educational system; it did not attempt to study the issue of fairness,” the researchers write. “However, the participants repeatedly referred to ‘being fair' in their comments and explanations about grading.

“It seemed that teachers were driven in their practices by a sense of what was fair for students, which may have included a host of unexamined assumptions, rather than a sound understanding of grading principles. For students' grades to accurately reflect student achievement, teachers needed a better understanding of essential principles and clearer definitions of key concepts. . . .”

For the study, the authors developed 4 essential principles for grading in a standards-based system that were synthesized from the guides of several organizations such as the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation.

The 4 principles that formed the framework for the study were:

1. Grades should be referenced to the curriculum objectives or learning expectations (criterion referenced)
2. A grade should be an accurate representation of achievement and non-achievement factors should be reported separately
3. Results from multiple assessments should be combined carefully with weighting that reflects learning expectations
4. Information about grading should be clearly communicated so that grades are justified and their meaning is understood by students, parents, and other teachers.

The study was part of a larger nationally funded study on teachers' grading practices in the provinces of Saskatchewan and Ontario. One goal of the study was to determine how teachers calculated students' final report card grades in 2 educational systems with differing assessment policies.

**How teachers grade for improvement**

Some 95% of participants agreed or somewhat agreed that their grading was based on the degree to which their students had met learning expectations. This suggests that criterion-referenced grading was not controversial among the participants, researchers write. A much smaller percentage of teachers agreed with statements that grades should follow a bell curve (35%) or that grades should indicate students' ranking in relation to their peers (27%).

When teachers were asked about student improvement and grading, 75% indicated they took into account how much a student had improved during the course. “This meant that, although the idea of criterion-referenced grading generated strong agreement, students' grades were sometimes also based on their improvement (self-referenced).”

Most participants (82-87%) said they did not consider students' attitude, motivation, or participation in calculating grades. But there was much less consensus on student effort. Nearly one-third of participants reported that they considered students' effort in calculating grades. “If a student has struggled but tried very hard, I will raise the mark at times—by a few percent, maybe 5%” says one teacher.

Several participants suggested that teachers might be more open to changing grading practices if effort and students' work ethic were separately addressed in report cards. When students showed too little effort, only 9% of teachers said they lowdered grades. “Assignments that are not completed are included in their marks—but I would never lower a mark based on effort,” a teacher writes.

The most common reason for lowering grades was incomplete assignments (49%). Less than 12% of teachers reported that they lowered grades for late assignments. The use of zeros in grading followed a similar pattern.

Teachers were more likely to use zeros for incomplete assignments (61%) than for late assignments (8%). The researchers note that the teachers may be more lenient about late assignments because of a recent Ontario Ministry of Education policy discouraging the use of zeros or a reduction of grades for lateness. Several participants indicated that accepting late assignments without penalty conflicted with their sense of professional responsibility.

When asked which results they were likely to drop when determining a student's overall grade, 13% of teachers said they dropped the lowest results, 27% said they dropped inconsistent results, 8% dropped the earliest results and 4% dropped the highest and lowest results.

Almost half of teachers said they included all assessment results when they calculated students' grades. This runs counter to the principle of combining results to accurately reflect achievement in relation to learning expectations, the researchers write.

Participants' explanations about why and how they combined assessment results indicated that they did not always follow a particular formula or grading principles, but relied instead of their understanding of particular students or circumstances, says the study. Some 84% agreed that, at least in part, they used professional judgment in calculating final grades, yet 35% indicated that they were not entirely confident in their use of professional judgment for grading.

Almost all participants agreed, or somewhat agreed, that they shared the process of how they calculated grades with their students. They were much less unanimous about how much of the process they shared with parents. Some 56% of teachers agreed that they shared the process of determining grades with parents, but one-third only agreed somewhat with that statement.

“Surprises aren't part of the game,” one teacher wrote. Students “need to know exactly what my expectations are.” Another teacher noted that his conversations with students had changed since he had begun communicating the process to his students. In the past the discussions had focused on top performers and now they discussed strengths and areas for improvement. These comments indicate that communication about assessment can support the learning process, the researchers write.

“In sum, the majority of participants reported that they usually focused on academic achievement in calculating students' grades, but many were concerned about the long-term consequences of overlooking non-achievement factors,” says the study.

*“Being Fair: Teachers' Interpretations of Principles for Standards-Based Grading,” by Robin Tierney et al., The Educational Forum, 2011, Volume 75, pps. 210-27.*

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