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Newsletter

Not Even the Pandemic Could Change It: A Q&A About Grading

Grading. It's so ubiquitous, such a longstanding feature of education that it often goes unnoticed. Many people find it difficult to conceive of a world without grading, often believing that students would stop doing school work absent the omnipresent carrot and stick of the A or the F. Witness the handwringing that occurred in the spring of 2020 when some educators proposed eliminating or altering their grading systems in the midst of a worldwide pandemic that shuttered schools from one day to the next. During the summer's racial justice demonstrations that followed, students and educators alike pointed out inequities in current approaches. Given the potential for reform created by the convergence of a health crisis and a national anti-racist movement, did grading actually change?

Not so much, according to National Education Policy Center Fellow Jack Schneider, an associate professor of education at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. In the Q&A below, Schneider, who is working on a book about grading, sheds light on this pervasive practice.

Q: When it comes to grading in K-12 schools, what are the common philosophies or approaches? In other words, why do educators grade, how, and what outcomes do they believe will stem from the grades? What are the pros and cons of these approaches?

A: Educators grade because they have to—it's both a cultural expectation and a structural necessity. Imagine the reaction if a teacher simply decided to stop grading student work. It might be better for student learning, sure. But most families would be horrified; in "real"

schools, grades are given. And consider the rippling systemic consequences of such a decision. What happens to student GPA? How will the valedictorian be chosen? Too much of the system depends on this kind of data.

Ultimately, then, the professional beliefs of educators are pretty marginal to the process of grading. They may have their own philosophies. But the best they can hope for, in most cases, is to tinker around the edges and do damage control. That isn't to say that they are completely powerless—there are better and worse approaches to take. Yet they certainly lack the kind of discretion one might expect professionals to have.

Q: To what extent, if any, do current approaches to grading help or hinder equity-related goals?

A: Again, it is important to recall that educators really have their hands tied here. Consider the radical alternatives we might propose instead of A-F grading. We could, for instance, simply jettison grades altogether, in an effort to emphasize the intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) value of learning. Or we could replace the symbols of A-F grades with improvement-oriented narratives. And though some of those more radical alternatives have been adopted, it has been in a limited number of outlier cases. By and large, we see very small degrees of variance from class to class and school to school. Does that smaller variance matter? Yes. Can it advance equity-related goals? I'd say so. But I'd also say that it's a bit like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

Working within the traditional grading system, teachers can do a number of things to advance equity. One is to offer students the opportunity to revise their work. As they build their mastery of content and skills, their grades should change to reflect that. Another is to be more careful about what is included in the calculation of grades. Grading students on factors like attendance is going to benefit some students and harm others. A third is to be more deliberate about communication. Students with lower grades, for instance, often see a "D" or an "F" as a sign that they should simply give up; how, then, can the process of grading be adapted to send a message of support and map a path forward?

Q: How, if at all, did you observe grading change in response to last summer's racial justice movement?

A: Certainly, there was more awareness of the non-neutrality of grading. Because grading is a part of what David Tyack and Larry Cuban call the "grammar of schooling," it tends to be invisible. On most days, most teachers don't think too much about this grammar, such as the fact that they are up at the front of the room, putting things on the board, using handouts and textbooks, giving tests and quizzes, or issuing grades. That's the water in which they swim. Now, I'm not a believer in the narrative that our schools were modeled after factories and that they've been churning along unchanged for the past 100 years—that simply isn't true. But it is important to view systems, structures, and practice with a critical eye. Why are we doing what we're doing? And what is the impact?

The uprisings of last summer undoubtedly prompted educators to look at their schools and their classrooms in new ways. Yet how much power do they have to transform the status quo? Grading is something of a collective action problem, meaning that the limited autonomy that

educators have is not sufficient to make real change.

Q: How, if at all, did you observe grading change as a result of the pandemic?

A: The pandemic was a massive shock to the system. Schools simply couldn't issue grades, in many cases, because they weren't even operating in the spring of 2020. Other schools faced ongoing challenges with regard to getting kids online. The most common response, then, was to de-weaponize grades. It may not ever make sense to use grades in the high-stakes manner that we do in this country. But that was particularly true during the pandemic. So schools and districts, and sometimes state offices of education, responded by trying to bring the temperature down.

Pass/Fail was perhaps the most common approach. It was already on the shelf as an alternative, and many simply reached for an easy solution. The problem, of course, is that it isn't a solution. A-F grades are so baked into the structure and culture of American education that there were real consequences associated with shifting to Pass/Fail. One was student effort. We can all agree that intrinsic motivation is preferable to extrinsic motivation—that students will learn more if they are driven by innate interest and curiosity, rather than by a pursuit of tokens and credentials. But simply removing grades won't create that interest. Many students, not surprisingly, simply lowered their levels of effort.

Q: Many colleges are moving away from using standardized college entrance exams as admissions criteria. How might this impact the emphasis placed on high school grades or the grading practices themselves?

A: Standardized entrance exams are highly imperfect instruments. There are strong correlations with student background variables, and the evidence of predictive validity isn't particularly strong. So it seems like an obvious solution to just dump them. But in the real world, we need to recognize that this is simply going to raise the heat on grades. An ideal measurement system would be multifaceted, lowering the stakes associated with any particular metric. And that's simply not the system we have.

If college admissions are now placing more weight on GPAs, which is effectively the case when the drop SAT/ACT requirements, they are incentivizing gaming. Might we see more BIPOC students, low-income students, and first-generation students gaining entrance into selective colleges and universities? Sure. But the irony is that we might see less learning, since the value of grades as tokens will have increased even further—and those tokens can often be collected without anyone learning anything. It will also incentivize grade inflation, which is a perfectly rational response from teachers who don't want to be perceived as damaging future opportunity for students. Again, the ironic consequence is that it will further undermine the communicative function of grading.

Q: What, if anything, can research tell us about how grading might be improved?

A: Grades actually serve several purposes simultaneously. They serve a "short haul" communication function—telling students, their families, and educators how a student is doing. They serve a "long haul" communication function—telling future schools, employers, and

others at a distance what a student knows and can do. They serve a motivation function, insofar as they can be exchanged by students for various kinds of social and economic rewards. And they serve an articulation function, stitching various entities in our non-system together; they allow schools and other organizations to "work together" without actually changing their independent infrastructure. As Ethan Hutt and I argue in some of our work, students would be better served if these various purposes were separated out and addressed via different technologies. Fused together, these aims undermine each other. Separately, however, they can be fine-tuned. Imagine trying to combine a tractor-trailer with a Ferrari; you end up with neither.

Q: How have grading practices evolved over time? What, if any, changes do you expect to observe in the next 10 years?

A: For the first part of this question, I'm just going to point you to a book chapter and an article that I co-authored with Ethan Hutt.

And for the second part, I'm going to offer a pessimistic historical take: In ten years, almost nothing will change. We need to think in something closer to geological time here. Altering the grammar of schooling in a fundamental way will happen only via incremental change. A century from now, we'll still have grades, though hopefully they'll look and function differently than they do today.

Schneider's book about grading, co-authored with Ethan Hutt of UNC Chapel Hill, is due out in 2022 with Harvard University Press with the working title, "Evening the Score: How Tests and Grades Took Over Public Education, and How to Bring Balance Back."

NEPC Resources on Assessment

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