The grading gradient: Teacher motivations for varied redo and retake policies

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ABSTRACT

Standards-based grading has emerged as a leading progressive mode of classroom assessment. Although standards-based grading has several core components, there is appreciable anecdotal evidence that one component is being frequently implemented in the absence of the others. Namely, by allowing students to redo and revise work without regard to deadlines, some teachers are assessing what students know at the end of the course rather than at pre-specified intervals. Here, we surveyed 429 secondary teachers to quantitatively assess their grading practices and evaluate their connection to standards-based grading. Whether teachers allow redo's/retakes was affected by school policies, teacher content area, and what the teacher's personal beliefs were about the importance of deadlines and student ownership of learning and accountability. Additionally, our findings suggest that there is a disconnect between best practices in grading and teacher beliefs. Teachers displayed confusion regarding whether or not their schools had implemented standards-based grading policies.

1. Introduction

Teachers rely on assessment to determine how much their students have learned. Methods of assessment have profound implications for students' futures, from the courses they are eligible to take later in their academic careers, to the colleges and universities they have the option to attend. Traditionally, grading is a system in which a single letter or percentage is provided at the conclusion of a grading period to summarize a student's competency covering a wide range of skills. In traditional grading, many nonacademic factors may be included, such as behavior, effort, and the ability to meet deadlines (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). As a result, traditional grading consistently evaluates only minimally on academic knowledge, and instead rewards engagement and persistence (Brookhart et al., 2016).

In response to this disconnect between academic knowledge and traditional grades, progressive educational reformers have proposed standards-based grading whereby students are only assessed on their mastery of state standards (Proulx, Spencer-May, & Westerberg, 2012). Standards-based grading is reflective only of academic factors and does not additionally assess students on compliance or other classroom behaviors (DuFour & Marzano, 2015; Guskey, Swan, & Jung, 2011;

Marzano, 2000; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; O'Connor & Wormeli, 2011; Reeves, 2008; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2016). In deemphasizing non-academic factors such as deadlines, standards-based grading incorporates multiple opportunities for student feedback during the learning process, and only assesses what students know at the completion of the course (Marzano, 2000; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; O'Connor & Wormeli, 2011; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2016; Reeves, 2008). One obviously identifiable feature of standards-based grading is allowing students to retake, revise, and redo assignments and assessments with no penalty to their final grade (Wormeli, 2011). The practice emphasizes what students know at the end of a course, rather than on test day.

Although these two systems can be distinguished by what they incentivize – work, for the traditional grading system, and actual learning, for the standards-based system (Varlas, 2013) – many teachers employ grading practices in the grey area between traditional and standard-based grading (Hancock, Kilgore, & Maxey, 2016). For example, many teachers permit some level of revision to student work, increasing the amount of their grade that reflects student knowledge at the end of the course. However, it should be noted that this is not true standards-based grading if the late or revised work is penalized in any

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way (Clymer & Wiliam, 2007; Marzano, 2000; O'Connor & Wormeli, 2011). Partial adaptation of standards-based grading principles has been reported previously (Hancock et al., 2016), but no attempt was made to understand the factors motivating individual teachers to stake out this position on grading. Stiggins (1986) described school grading policies as "hodgepodge" and listed three possible explanations for the discrepancy that existed at that time between recommended grading practice and reality: differences of opinion of best practices, day-to-day realities making recommended practice inappropriate, and teachers lacking sufficient knowledge and skills to meet recommended standards. We will now consider the three categories presented by Stiggins as potential obstacles to unanimity in grading policy.

1.1. Differences of opinion of best practices

Given the best available research, it is still not clear what the "best" approach is to grading student work. A wide variety of grading approaches have been documented (Brookhart et al., 2016), and while the effects of standards-based grading on students have received academic attention (Reys, Reys, Lapan, Holliday, & Wasman, 2003; Welsh, D'Agostino, & Kaniskan, 2013), the results have been mixed. Case studies have demonstrated a variety of outcomes when schools transition to standards-based grading. Some found no relationship between students' standards-based grades and standardized test achievements (Greene, 2015) and some found a weak connection (Welsh et al., 2013). Other studies have looked at the effects of the transition to standards-based grading on student grades. These also have demonstrated mixed success, showing an increase in overall student GPA (Fisher, Frey, & Pumpian, 2011; Reeves, 2008), or no effect on student earned grades (Hawks, 2014). To date, it appears that the academic community has not identified a superior grading option.

1.2. Day-to-day realities make recommended practice inappropriate

Administrators frequently encounter negative reactions from parents when considering transitioning from traditional grading to standards-based grading (Franklin, Buckmiller, & Kruse, 2016). Other impediments are the cost/time requirement associated with making the transition and the expectation from college admissions teams that students be graded on a 100 point scale (Guskey et al., 2011). Although challenges from parents and colleges exist, the largest source of pushback in the effort to transition to a more progressive grading standpoint comes from teachers (Erzen, 2013; Greene, 2015; Sailor, Stowe, Rutherford Turnbull, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2007). This may be due to Stiggins' third idea regarding the existence of hodgepodge grading: teachers lack sufficient knowledge and skill.

1.3. Teachers lack sufficient knowledge and skill

Although research describes highly effective teachers as those who support meaningful learning through the practice of allowing students to revise work (Noguera, Darling-Hammond, & Friedlaender, 2015), in general, teacher grading practices seem to be influenced by personal experience rather than research (Shippy, Washer, & Perrin, 2013; Stephens, 2010). Many teachers believe that allowing students to continue to edit work after a due date fails to develop a sense of responsibility and accountability (Greene, 2015; Wormeli, 2014). Analysis of more recent effective educational reform has shown that successful change occurs when capacity building (e.g. investment in teacher development) is the primary thrust behind change, rather than top-down administration (Noguera et al., 2015). Creation of a school culture where teachers feel respected, heard, and provided with meaningful professional development creates space for successful school reform (The Equity & Excellence Commission, 2013). Because teachers are the ones actually interacting with students and implementing classroom policies, they should be the focus of our examination of existing classroom practices. In this work we explore whether teachers lack sufficient knowledge and skill, or if they simply have a difference of opinion regarding best practice.

2. Context of the study

Partial adaptation of standards-based grading principles has been reported previously (Hancock et al., 2016); however, the factors motivating individual teachers to stake out their position on grading remain poorly understood. Grades are a key element of many college admissions decisions, which in turn may have profound effects on a students' future career path and lifetime earnings attainment (Binder, Davis, & Bloom, 2016), but relatively little is known about the process by which they are awarded, particularly for teachers who grade in the hybrid area between true standards-based grading and a traditional system that may include rewards for behavior, effort, and/or adherence to deadlines.

Here, we consider what motivates individual teachers to implement specific grading policies, as well as to define what exactly these grading practices are. We do this by surveying secondary teachers in one region in the southeast United States. Specifically, we asked the teachers:

1 Do you believe that your school or department has a standards-based grading policy?
2 What are your attitudes towards redo's/retakes by students and standards-based grading?
3 Do you allow redo's/retakes by students even if your school does not have a standards-based grading policy?
4 What are your classroom policies for redo's/retakes?
5 What are your justifications for your redo's/retake policies?

Many of the surveyed teachers operate somewhere between a strict standards-based grading framework and a traditional framework. Notably, only one of the seventeen schools studied has an explicit standards-based grading policy that is documented and disbursed to their staff. This school expects teachers to grade students in a standards referenced fashion; however, they still translate these grades to a 100-point scale for final grading. All other schools participating in this survey do not have an explicit policy on grading. This study also explores the motivations behind teachers' nuanced grading approaches. We propose that if grading policies are to truly be reformed, the target audience (teachers) must be understood. Professional development should acknowledge existing teacher beliefs and focus on increasing a shared vision between researchers and practitioners of what effective teaching looks like (Noguera et al., 2015).

3. Methodology

We developed a survey instrument based on a thorough review of the literature to determine how redo's/retakes are implemented (three yes or no and six multiple-choice items) and how the policy was implemented or perceived by teachers (21 Likert-scale items). The survey also contained five open-ended questions regarding redo's/retakes at their school. Additionally, the survey included five demographic questions comprising subject area, size of the school, years of teaching, level of education, and licensure. A desk review of the instrument was constructed by the researchers (Olson, 2010; Willis, Schechter, & Whitaker, 1999). An electronic version of the survey (see Appendix A) was disseminated electronically to 1573 secondary teachers at 17 schools representing 15 districts in the northwest region of Arkansas in May of 2017. All public secondary schools in the region were contacted. The survey remained open until the end of the school year.

3.1. Participants

Five hundred fifty-one teachers responded to the survey prompt