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Can Everyone Make the Grade? Some Thoughts on Student Grading and Contemporary Classrooms

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Some Thoughts on Student Grading and Contemporary Classrooms

Today's increasingly diverse school age population poses some intriguing challenges for public school personnel. Among these is the challenge to find ways to meet a wide range of student developmental levels, abilities, and interests (Manning, 1993). Teachers facing the daunting task of modifying curriculum and/or instruction to accommodate individual student needs are being tugged relentlessly by two powerful forces. One is the call for "excellence in education" through more rigorous standards and increased accountability for student mastery of academics (Hendrickson & Gable, 1997). The other is the mandate to integrate students with disabilities into general education (i.e., inclusion movement) (Gable & Hendrickson, 1997). These two inherently conflicting expectations have brought numerous regular classroom practices to an unprecedented center stage—including policies on student grading.

Recent federal legislation (Amendments to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997), along with studies on grading practices (e.g., Drucker & Hansen, 1982; Rojewski, Pollard, & Meers, 1990; Struyk, Epstein, Bursuck, Et al., 1995), provide impetus for schools struggling to overcome the double bind of high standards and student accommodations in regular classrooms. We believe that reconciliation of these dissident demands will require schools to develop grading policies that reflect an increasingly heterogeneous student population. In the following discussion, we highlight the growing heterogeneity in schools. We urge school officials to consider alternative perspectives on grading and propose grading options that accurately and fairly reflect individual student performance. Finally, we encourage schools to collaborate with various stakeholders to develop policies on grading that ensure both objectivity and accountability for a diverse student population.

The Challenge of Heterogeneous Classrooms
A succession of government reports document

the burgeoning ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic differences among the current school-aged population. And, there is ample evidence that these differences will grow. By 2050, the Native American population is expected to reach 4.6 million, the African American population 39 million, and the Hispanic American population 31 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992; 1993). The significance of these statistics rest with the fact that increased diversity among young adolescents can have a significant impact on the teaching/learning process (Manning, 1993; Manning & Hager, 1995). At the same time, we are witnessing a steady movement of students with disabilities from more (self-contained classrooms) to less restrictive educational settings (e.g., resource and general classrooms).

The influx of over four million students with learning and/or behavior problems has had a profound effect on regular classroom instruction. Demographic shifts in the general population, along with the regular class inclusion of students with disabilities, has spawned classroom differences that pose tremendous challenges to classroom teachers (e.g., Arllen, Gable, & Hendrickson, 1995; Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990).

Alternative Grading of Students with Diverse Learning Needs

Grades have long been used to communicate a judgement regarding the extent to which students grasp subject matter and to document overall classroom performance (Gallagher, 1998). For students who earn passing grades there is promotion and graduation; for many secondary students, further study in two- and four-year colleges and universities follows (Gajar, Goodman, & McAfee, 1993). Conversely, students who receive failing grades usually have been either socially-promoted or retained—neither of which is conducive to later student adjustment in the workplace and community.

To some, student evaluation may seem a relatively minor issue as schools struggle to develop educational programs for the 21st century. However, teachers must have an

effective tool for motivating students, reinforcing the value of learning, and evaluating and communicating the outcome(s) of instruction. Notwithstanding significant changes in educational practices, grades likely will continue to function for the majority of students as they do today.

Alternative Functions of Student Grades

The growing diversity within secondary classrooms compel education personnel to explore innovative approaches to student evaluation. Part of the evaluation dilemma—especially as it relates to students with special learning needs, likely stems from confusion over the purpose of grades (Hendrickson & Gable, 1997). We often presuppose that grades correspond to an absolute standard of student performance when, in fact, grades can have various purposes as well as interpretations. For example, a positive grade earned by a student (e.g., A or B, 93 or 85) has several possible implications. It could mean that (a) the student has made progress toward a predetermined goal, (b) has demonstrated competence or achievement in a subject area, (c) compares favorably to same-age peers in some skill or knowledge area, or (d) has demonstrated a consistent, concerted effort to achieve. Even these four functions do not reflect the full range of purposes grades may serve. **Table 1** illustrates some of the purposes grades serve for different constituencies—administrators, counselors, teachers, families, students, and future employers (Hendrickson & Gable, 1997).

Some Thoughts on Student Grading Options

Today, the challenge is to gain perspective on grading policies and practices that apply equally to students with and without diverse needs or disabilities. As schools explore various options, it is important to clearly articulate the philosophy behind the system and to fully involve various stakeholders—including parents, in developing a flexible grading policy. Under most circumstances, school districts would develop a policy that is equally applicable to all students, across grade levels.

While there are a variety of grading systems, it

| Person/Position | Purposes/Functions |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Administrator/ Counselor | <p>indicate student has passed or failed, should be promoted or not, will graduate or not</p> <p>provide accountability & outcome data</p> <p>provide course/curriculum evaluation data</p> <p>convey student rank and competency information to other education agencies, employers, and so on determine student eligibility, predict future performance, & facilitate advisement</p> <p>provide a permanent record of student performance</p> |
| Teacher | <p>document student progress/competency</p> <p>provide feedback to students & families</p> <p>evaluate student in relation to self and peers</p> <p>document instructional effectiveness</p> <p>enhance communication for advisement</p> <p>serve as a means of assessing IEP appropriateness</p> |
| Family | <p>document student progress/competency</p> <p>provide feedback for short and long-term goal setting, course selection, and so on</p> <p>evaluate appropriateness of IEP</p> <p>evaluate transition planning activities provide objective data for long-term planning</p> |
| Student | <p>provide a progress monitoring mechanism</p> <p>document achievement, levels of mastery, and readiness for more difficult coursework</p> <p>reinforce sense of achievement and motivation</p> <p>offer realistic self-appraisal data</p> <p>test performance in real-life circumstances</p> <p>assist in formulating short and long-term plans</p> |
| Future Employer | <p>provide information on student aptitude, competence, job skills, and related variables</p> <p>provide data on relative standing of students</p> <p>use in planning worker/staff orientation & training programs</p> <p>demonstrate student progress toward levels of competence</p> <p>correlate with industry/business outcome data</p> |

Table 1. Purposes Grades Serve for Different Constituencies

is possible to subsume most under one of three headings: (a) percent, (b) criterion-referenced, or (c) norm-referenced grading (Gallagher, 1998).

In percent grading, a student's scores on various measures are summed, then multiplied by 100 to obtain a percent, which is converted into a letter grade (e.g., 80% = B). Within the context of the present discussion, one advantage of a percent grading system is that no one needs to fail, assuming that each student accumulates enough points (Gallagher, 1998). Accordingly, students can be given equal but not necessarily the same opportunity to earn passing grades; both quantitative and qualitative measures might be introduced.

By comparison, criterion-referenced grading reflects student performance on specific learning tasks, judged against a predetermined standard. Again, students do not need to fail, as long as their performance satisfies the specified criterion.

Finally, norm-referenced grading is used to rate student achievement, along a continuum of performance levels (Gallagher, 1998). Common practice at the secondary level, norm-referenced grading allows teachers to differentiate among individual students and to evaluate strengths and weaknesses within heterogeneous groups (Hendrickson & Gable, 1997).

In light of the changing character of secondary education, schools might think about incorporating various combinations of these approaches into a more flexible policy on grading. For instance, the use of student portfolios, a popular approach to evaluation, allows teachers to apply either percent or criterion-referenced standards; whereas, the use of pass-fail grading represents a grading option linked to a norm-referenced perspective. **Table 2** presents a more complete list of options that are compatible with one or more perspectives on student grading (Gallagher, 1998; Grading, 1997; Hendrickson & Gable, 1997). Regardless of which grading standard(s) apply, student expectations should be

described in writing and in sufficient detail so as to be unambiguous. Finally, school officials should subject the policy on grading to periodic review and be prepared to make any modifications necessary to accommodate a rapidly changing school age population.

Multiple versus unified grading system. Faced with the myriad challenges inherent in a changing student population, schools may be tempted to establish multiple grading systems. However, experience suggests that multiple systems—one for students with and one for students without diverse needs—only contributes to confusion for teachers, parents, and students. There is growing awareness that alternative grading practices are appropriate for students with special learning needs only to the extent that they are nondiscriminatory (Grading, 1997). That is, grading systems available to students with special learning needs should be available to other students as well. For example, if an asterisk (*) is used to indicate an alternative grading procedure on a report card of a student with a disability, then an asterisk should be used for any student for whom a different standard is applied. In this way, a special symbol recorded on a report card does not single out a student as receiving special education (Grading, 1997).

Conclusion

With the growing diversity of the secondary population, traditional policies regarding student grading are the subject of widespread, sometimes contentious debate. There is mounting sentiment that adherence to current practices places schools at risk of educationally short-changing a significant number of students. Nationwide, school personnel are beginning to reconceptualize existing policies so that student grades are at once flexible, realistic, and nondiscriminatory (e.g., Grading, 1997; Hendrickson & Gable, 1997). Recent federal legislation has served as a catalyst in that effort. The 1997 Amendments to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasize the role of the general educator as an active member of a multidisciplinary team serving students with

IEP-based Grading

Grades are based on goals and objectives articulated in the IEP. The student's strengths and weaknesses are taken into account and testing accommodations and grading criteria are specifically described. The accommodations and criteria are based on input from members of the IEP team.

Individual Contracts

Grades are awarded in accordance with a written agreement between the student and the teacher(s). The learning activities, quantity and quality of work, and time allotted to earn a specific grade are specified. A contract can be an extension of criterion-referenced, IEP-based grading.

Multiple Grades

Several separate grades are earned. For instance, the student may receive a grade for competence or mastery of content, demonstrated effort, and/or progress toward a final objective. A single grade may be calculated based on ability, effort, and growth of the student. This grade may be norm-referenced (i.e., compared with others' performance) and/or criterion-referenced (i.e., judged against a specific standard).

Shared Grading

Grades are collaboratively determined between the general and special education teachers, based on pre-established percent, criterion, or normative standard. Grades earned by the student the resource classroom and general education classroom may be averaged.

Checklist Evaluations

Specific skills and/or knowledge is described in narrative statements, often presented sequentially or in a task analysis format. After each statement there are columns (or a Likert-type scale) where the skill/knowledge can be checked off (rated) as being completed/mastered, in further work, and/or yet to be attempted—according to a specific performance criteria.

Portfolio Systems

Work samples representing various stages of skill development (e.g., writing assignment), curriculum-based evaluation data and products, self-evaluation statements, or multiple scores can be evaluated against either a percent or criterion-referenced standard.

Narrative Reports

Written statements kept chronologically or on an evaluation form with various headings generally are employed by teachers to report a student's effort, progress or growth, and level of achievement. Students can be evaluated on a percent, criterion-referenced, or norm-referenced basis.

Parent/Family Conferences

Regularly scheduled meetings with parents/family and the teachers and student can be used to: review student progress, discuss educational issues, examine student work products/performance, and discuss strengths and weaknesses. Conferences can be used to supplement other forms of student grading.

Table 2. Grading Options for School Systems to Consider

Point Systems

The student may earn a grade or grades based on total points earned for completing various assignments and assuming various responsibilities. For example, homework assignments completed may be worth 10 points, weekly quizzes worth 20 points, and so on. A student's total number of points for the day, week, or other period of time are converted to letter or numerical grades. Pass-Fail Grading The student is expected to complete a minimum level of competency for a given course to pass. The "pass" requirement can be tied to percent or criterion levels of attendance, work completed, accuracy of work, participation in class, and/or reflect a normative perspective.

Weighted Grading

Student performance, effort, participation, and/or other variables are graded independently and weighted differently in arriving at a final grade.

Self-Comparison Grades

The student is evaluated based on the relative amount of gain from one point in time to the next. Learning/performance trend lines can be used to determine if the student is achieving within, below, or above an acceptable range.

Table 2. Grading Options for School Systems to Consider (Continued)

disabilities. Team responsibilities include curriculum, instruction, and evaluation of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Fortunately, surveys show that many general educators support making accommodations to meet diverse learner needs—including using alternative grading systems (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 1997). We feel strongly that general educators, special educators, administrators, and parents must work together to establish grading policies that fit the needs of a changing student population. In that there is no perfect grading system (Gallagher, 1998), more adaptable policies are a logical extension of the legislative mandate to utilize quality practices to evaluate students with disabilities in regular classrooms.

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