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# An Exploration Of Student Views On Grading And Learning In An Alternative School Setting

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An Exploration of Students' Views on Grading and Learning  
in an Alternative High School Setting

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor in Education

in the Foster B. McGaw Graduate School

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National Louis University

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An Explanation of Students' Views on Grading and Learning  
In An Alternative High School Setting

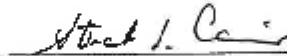
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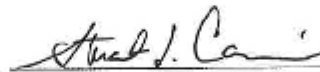
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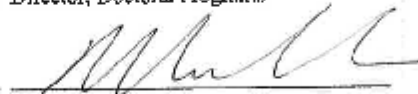
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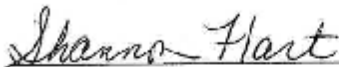
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## Abstract

Reducing barriers to learning is vital. High school teachers focus tirelessly on how best to engage students in learning; however, grading, which is a fundamental aspect of a teacher's responsibilities, may be a significant barrier to learning. This dissertation examines students' views on grading and learning in an alternative high school setting. The twelve students who are the focus of this research have experienced traditional school settings and an alternative charter school setting, thus they offer a perspective on grading and learning that is more widely informed than the majority of students in schools. This study is motivated by three research questions: (1) What are students' views on grading and learning and the relationship between the two? (2) What are students' views on the purpose of school? (3) How do students view school in terms of what is valued and what is meaningful? Previous research on grading and learning has focused on improving the way grading occurs; the dominant recommendation is to shift to a standards-based grading approach. More recently, the research has evolved to elevate the importance of reporting on learning; however, agreement on how best to do that is non-existent. The most important contribution to scholarship on this subject is the primacy of student voice in this research. Adults have shared their views and recommendations with little mention of students' opinions. Because students are the core of all we do in schools, it is vital to include them in this important conversation and capture their views regarding grading and learning. A qualitative methodology was used to explore how the participants view grading and learning; this included a survey and one on one interviews. The findings show that students view grading as detrimental to learning; however, they accept feedback that informs rather than judges as encouraging and productive. Recommendations are made for how to limit traditional and/or standards-based grading practices, which are fundamentally teacher-owned, in favor of increasing student-teacher partnerships that emphasize descriptive feedback and co-constructed learning goals and outcomes so that learning flourishes for all students.

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## **Chapter One**

### **An Introduction to the Study**

In 2015, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, public school systems employed about 3.1 million teachers to teach approximately 50.4 million students. These teachers, with noble goals and caring hearts, report to their classrooms and engage with their students in ways that promote, we hope, high levels of learning for all... but teaching and learning are complex. No one thing works for all students. Teachers are asked to personalize, differentiate, and adhere to district curriculum and state standards. Students are required to do what teachers ask, often with little voice or choice in the process. Add to all of this the need for schools and teachers to be accountable by producing proof of student achievement. It is clear that the fundamental aspects of schooling, teaching and learning, are deeply influenced and impacted by many forces. One such force is grading, a primary function of teachers and one that has both intended and unintended consequences on students. “Grading and reporting are foundational elements in nearly every educational system. Grading represents teachers’ evaluations – formative or summative – of students’ performance. Reporting is how the results of those evaluations are communicated to students, to parents, or others” (Munoz & Guskey, Phi Delta Kappan, 2015). Our world has changed, society has evolved, yet grading has remained a central component of schooling and an integral part of the student-teacher relationship. According to Dr. Thomas Guskey, a professor of educational psychology and an educational researcher in the area of grading, “few issues have created more controversy among educators than those associated with grading and reporting student learning. Despite the many debates and

multitudes of studies, however, prescriptions for best practice remain elusive” (Guskey, 2016). The relationship between grading and learning is worth exploring since this nexus is at the core of schooling and student success.

Young children, probably all children, have a natural curiosity and a desire to know more about their world and things in it. They like to explore and try out different ideas, and in doing so, they are learning. This may be learning in its purest form – driven naturally and authentically by the person based on what s/he is interested in. Teachers want to be involved in creating environments in which students are curious and engaged in topics they care about. They want to nurture children’s passions. Teachers spend hours constructing lesson plans that they believe will provide opportunities for students to grow and learn in ways that will be authentic and meaningful to them. So, what happens to interfere with rich learning environments in which teachers and students are teaming together to make connections, to deepen understanding, and to apply learning to new situations?

The cloud of accountability darkens the room. Teachers follow their training and their school district’s expectations and evaluate student work. They judge students’ learning. After all, it is important to know where students are in relation to learning expectations. Suddenly, learning isn’t about learning, but rather it’s about proficiency, grade level standards, points, letter grades, and credit. Learning gets relegated to an afterthought. How did schooling go so wrong?

Everything in education should be done for the betterment of student learning; after all, educators want all students to achieve their fullest potential. Educators work diligently with curriculum, instruction, assessment, and relationships in hopes that classrooms will be places where students are thriving and learning and growing. Educators also must monitor student proficiency, and grading is as engrained in our educational system as teachers, students,



homework, and tests. Since grading has been a constant in our educational system, it is not surprising that it has been a topic of educational conversations for decades (Guskey and Bailey, 2001, pg. 24). But what is there to discuss? Some grading-related topics include how to grade fairly, how to grade accurately, percentage grading versus proficiency grading, standards-based grading, grading on a curve, and even the elimination of grading. The purpose of grading is to communicate student achievement, and grading, in one form or another, has been a part of schooling since its inception. Authors Guskey and Bailey state beliefs about grading and learning: learning happens in the absence of grading; grading is not necessary for learning to occur (Guskey and Bailey, 2001, pg. 30). Cathy Vatterott, a more recent voice in the grading conversation, shares her view: “Grading. It’s the hardest decision I must make in teaching. Every semester I agonize about what is right. Is the grade truly indicative of the student’s performance?” (Vatterot, 2015, pg.1). Herein lies the dissonance: learning does not require grading, but grading is an expectation for teachers and students, and no clear understanding about the relationship between the two exists.

Historically, grading began with narrative comments from teachers on periodic reports in order to communicate about student learning at the elementary level. As formal education expanded to include secondary schooling and more and more students entered the system, grading transitioned to something more quantifiable - percentages and letter grades and point accumulation. For example, in the late 1700s, Yale ranked students into four categories. In 1877, Harvard’s practice included using percentages with five corresponding categories. In 1897, Mount Holyoke College rolled out a system that used letter grades, a descriptor, and a percentage (A=Excellent 95-100 percent). Efficiency was a key reason for this transition (Vatterott, 2015, pg. 8). There was a purposeful intent to sift and sort students into those who

were academically able and those who should seek immediate employment or a trade. Accountability in education increased and grading became tied to standards. Students are described as proficient or not based on their abilities tied to a set standard, and all students are expected to reach proficiency rather than be sifted and sorted in those worthy of education and those not. Now standards-based grading is common practice for elementary school teachers and students, with some of the same practices making their way to the middle school level. High schools remain relatively untouched by the standards-based movement when it comes to grading. Yes, standards drive the assessments at the high school level, but the grading has stayed “traditional” with teachers assigning A-F based on percentage of points earned (Brookhart, 2011, pg. 10). Many are still left wondering where learning fits in.

### **Problem Statement**

Does the current US high school grading system help move students forward in their learning? Do students feel differently about grades and grading than educators or educational researchers? I want to know what high school students think about grading and learning and connections between the two. In my opinion, something has to happen to allow secondary grading to reform. Learning needs to be prioritized if schools are to survive as necessary institutions in our society. Teachers must be responsible for teaching but, even more, they must be responsible for student learning. I believe the grading practices used in secondary schools significantly influences student learning. I would like this belief to be confirmed or negated by students themselves, students who experience the system as it is. What if all the talk amongst the researchers, the teachers, central office personnel, and others does not reflect in any way what students think? What if students think that schools are fine just the way they are? What if they see the current system as adequately preparing them for their futures? What if students are

motivated to learn using the current points-based, traditional system? Why care what students think?

Best instructional practices emphasize that students do better when they are involved in the learning process. The New Teachers Project, in its 2015 rubric for assessing teacher quality, values student-centered classrooms over teacher-centered classrooms, thus communicating the importance of student involvement in learning (TNTP, 2015). Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, which is used in many districts as part of teacher evaluations or growth plans, characterizes classrooms with high levels of student involvement, student autonomy, and student leadership as distinguished levels of performance (Danielson Group, 2013). Having students set learning goals, self-assess, peer assess, and reflect on their own learning are all important practices highlighted in educational journals and recommended practice in teacher preparation programs. Paraphrasing author Carol Dweck, from her book *Mindset*, "if students could see grading as learning, not as confirmation of inadequacy, they could use grading as a motivator" (Dweck, 2006, pg. 61). Would students agree? Student voice matters.

When culling through the significant literature on grading and assessment reform, seldom is the student voice present. To successfully prepare students as lifelong learners, schools must be places where teachers and students partner together in ways that involve students in their learning. It is vital for educators to know what students think about their schooling experiences in order to increase student participation in their learning.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

I began teaching in 1994 and if asked to identify primary features of my job, I would say that it was to assess students and issue a grade. The entire ebb and flow of the school year revolved around grades and report cards. Learning had a start and end point, which

corresponded exactly to grading periods. Teachers were given grading days, full days without students present, in order to calculate learning into a percentage and assign a letter grade. I struggled with grading immediately. I questioned how I could be so quantifiably exact when so many aspects of my curriculum involved that which is difficult to quantify – interpretation of literature, free flow of expression, playing around with words and phrases and meanings. When reading *Lord of the Flies*, students debated whether or not people are innately good and corrupted by society or innately bad and held in check by society. Right answers didn't exist. The conversation and exploration of ideas mattered.

Wanting to be a “good teacher,” I followed the lead of those with many years of experience. I assigned five-paragraph essays and counted the grammatical errors to determine a grade. I gave quizzes and tests on the plot of novels to make sure that students were reading and counted up points for correct answers to determine a grade. I created rubrics so that I could categorize a student speech or a project into parts and pieces that could be judged and rated to determine a grade. I went along, albeit uncomfortably so.

After teaching for a few years, my work with state standards and assessments led me to a new understanding about grading. I was deeply impacted by “Inside the Black Box,” an article written by Dylan Wiliam and Paul Black (Phi Delta Kappan, Nov 2001). In this writing, Black and Wiliam refer to classrooms as the “black box” – seldom studied or understood. The authors, peeking inside the black box in order to offer suggested strategies for improved learning, promoted formative assessment as an approach that would raise standards and success for students. Teachers could use frequent formative assessments to gauge students' learning and make adjustments based on the data from formative assessments. Of course, the formative experiences were leading to a summative test that would measure student proficiency.

Summative and formative assessments, along with the principles of backward design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005), completely changed my approach to teaching. Definition for summative assessment is assessment of learning, which takes place after students have been introduced to and practiced with skills, knowledge, and concepts. Effective grading practice supports that grades be based on summative assessment results since summative assessments do not take place during learning, but rather as an end of learning event. Conversely, formative assessments, defined as assessment for learning, are assessments that take place during learning and function as informational data for teachers and students regarding where a student is relative to a learning target during the learning process. Formative assessment results should help teachers design assignments that engage students in necessary practice that leads to proficiency in the desired learning target. Further, formative assessment results to help students understand where they are in their own learning in relation to the learning target. These definitions used by Wiggins and McTighe, and widely accepted by educational researchers and authors focused on grading practices. I didn't need to grade every assignment, I didn't need to test every Friday, and I didn't need every student to take the same amount of time to learn. I could offer clear learning targets aligned to standards, I could lay out formative practice opportunities for students to engage in on their path to the summative assessment, and I could base a grade on just the "end of learning" experience rather than grade throughout the learning experience. These new understandings set the table for my decades-long interest in and desire to improve grading and learning. And, even though I had an epiphany about grading and learning, I had not engaged in any conversation with my students about what would be done differently nor about what they thought about it. Student views need to be heard in order to completely understand the relationship between grading and

learning. Students are our reasons for doing what we do; without students, schools don't need to exist. Students cannot be left out of the very conversation at the core of schooling.

During my own educational experience, I never really questioned grades and grading systems because I did well and because I went through K-12 education at a time when few questioned the authority, the approaches, or the decisions of the teachers. Before entering Kindergarten, I was a reader and loved books. I was identified as “gifted and talented” in elementary school and was placed in ALP (accelerated learning program). By the time I was in fourth grade, my reading and math scores were multiple grade levels above my peers, so I “skipped” fifth grade. In junior high and high school, I did well without much effort. I did my homework, listened and took notes in lecture, read my texts, and scored well on tests. I was a pretty passive student who did what teachers asked and did not cause trouble or need things repeated. I do not know if I realized what a struggle school was for others because most of my friends did well and at that age, a teen's concerns rarely extend beyond self and immediate peer group. I cared about the grade I would receive and never thought much about actual learning attached to the grade. It was more often about completing the tasks and earning the points than reflecting at all on my growth as a learner. In fact, I cannot recall one conversation with other students or with teachers about meaningful learning. I do remember being told what to know (content) and how I'd be expected to show that I knew it (assessment), but I don't recall ever being told the why (other than “learn it for the test”). As long as I had an A or a B, I was happy because my parents would be happy.

Now as a parent myself, I see my daughter struggle with grades and grading. For example, in elementary school, she was regularly expected to complete 50 math problems in two minutes – in second grade, it was addition; in third grade, it was subtraction; and in fourth grade,

it was multiplication. She understands how to add, subtract, and multiply, but she could not complete 50 problems in two minutes. These timed tests occurred weekly and affected her self-image as a learner. She felt dumb. Her grade in math was always “at” or “below” grade level on report cards and teacher comments always mentioned her lack of “automaticity” with math facts. Interestingly, she scored proficient, verging on advanced proficient, on the WKCE math assessment given in fourth grade. My daughter still loves going to school and she gets excited about some of what she’s learning. But she is not me and will not have my “school is easy” experience. She will, however, have me as a supportive parent who understands that grading and learning are not always related and that she is not defined by grades.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study is to bring to the forefront student voice in the grading/learning conversation. We need schools that serve students well, meaning students are active and engaged learners, thus we need to know what students believe promotes learning or stifles learning. We need to question the status quo because currently too many students are ill-prepared for post-secondary schooling or, sadly, not completing high school with a diploma. Based on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results released in April 2016, only 37% of high school seniors showed proficiency in reading and only 25% showed proficiency in math. Both of these scores showed a slight decline from the 2013 NAEP results. Maybe even more troubling is that students scoring below basic increased by 3% in math and reading. From the 2013 results for math, 35% of seniors scored below basic and this rose to 38% in 2015. Similarly, looking at results for reading, 25% of seniors were categorized as below basic, growing to 28% in 2015 (Camera, US News and World Report, April 2016). A positive trend is that more students are graduating from high school; 82% of students in the

2013-14 cohort nationally received a high school diploma, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (May 2016). This still means that 18% of students nationally are not graduating high school, and if the data is disaggregated, much lower rates of graduation occur for students who are economically disadvantaged or who have a disability or who are students of color. Furthermore, when viewing the graduation statistic in tandem with the NAEP data, one might quickly question the value of the high school diploma when so many students lack basic proficiency in reading and math. Very few bother to question the status quo. Traditions like age-based enrollment decisions, 36-week school calendars, and diplomas based on credits earned all become just the way we do business in education. Tradition, once established, remains.

Grading policy and practices in US public schools at the secondary level are no exception. As summarized by Guskey and Bailey (2001) and by Vatterott (2015), when schools were first created, teachers used narrative reports as a way to communicate student learning. This was manageable since school was only attended by a small segment of the population; therefore, teachers knew their students well, knew their strengths and weaknesses, and had time to compose the narratives. This changed as compulsory attendance laws changed. Between 1870 and 1910, high school enrollment increased from 500 to 10,000 students (Guskey and Bailey, 2001, pg. 24-25; Vatterott, 2015, pg. 8-9). When enrollment in public schools boomed, teachers resorted to a more efficient way to communicate student learning. According to Mark W. Durm, in “An A is Not an A is Not an A: A History of Grading,” published in *The Educational Forum*, letter grades were first used in the US during the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Mount Holyoke, in 1897, used percentages to determine grades as follows: A Excellent 95-100; B Good 85-94; C Fair 76-84; D Passed 75; E Failed Below 75. Durm (1993) further adds that in 1898 a slight adjustment was made to include F as well for failing; E reverted to a barely passing



grade (pg. 297). Colleges and high schools used letter grades and percentages by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Soon, the traditional A-F system, paired with the 90/80/70/60 percentages, was in place and widely used by teachers.

As school enrollment increased, the need to control student behavior increased (Vatterott, 2015, pg. 10-11). How could teachers teach and students learn if distractions were ever-present? Students had to fit the prescribed mold of “good student”: passive, polite, and compliant. Since this was long before the federal No Child Left Behind legislation and tracking of graduation rates, those students who didn’t conform were put out of the classroom. If a student didn’t fit the structure, the structure did not bend – the student was sacrificed. Now, with increased accountability as a result of NCLB, students cannot be sacrificed. Each one is carefully counted, expected to attain proficiency in reading and math, and earn a diploma.

Must teachers and other educators continue to insist on operating in the same ways as in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century? What role does grading play in the perpetuation of an irrelevant schooling experience? Do students see grades as a reward for compliance/punishment for non-compliance or as legitimate measures of their learning? In either case, do students feel involved and invested in their learning or are they simply making the best of a 13 year journey that they are required to endure? The topic of grading must be studied because the purpose of schooling has changed from sifting and sorting students to all students successful, and so the way assessment is done and the way grades are reported must change also to fit the new purpose of schooling.

An assumption underlying this research is that students will know best what will work for them in terms of a relevant schooling experience. Particularly at the high school level, students should have formed opinions of the schooling that they’ve received, including pros and cons of

the current system. It may be that students have been so discounted in the system that they have not given any thought to questioning it or dreaming of something better. However, conversely, it could be that students, specifically those who have left a traditional system for an alternative charter system, have reflected upon their experiences in school and have made some determinations about how they learn best and the conditions necessary so that learning can flourish.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guide this inquiry are as follows:

1. What are students' views on grading and learning and the relationship between the two?
  - a. Do students believe that their grades are accurate reflections of their learning?
  - b. Have they ever encountered a mismatch? If so, how did that impact their views on grading and learning?
2. What are students' views on the purpose of school?
  - a. Do students see school as a place that promotes learning or as a place where they get grades?
  - b. Do students believe school is about learning or about proving you are smart?
3. How do students view school in terms of what is valued and what is meaningful?
  - a. What do students think that their teachers value more from them – good grades or meaningful learning?
  - b. In an effort to manage the vast number of students in the system, did we lose the meaningfulness of school?

## **Research Methodology**

The methodology I used is a phenomenological investigation. According to Merriam (2002), “phenomenological methods can provide a useful tool for understanding human experience and meaning... In phenomenological research, you are striving to access the experience within individuals” (pg. 141). Creswell (2009) offers “phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (pg.13).

I used a combination of survey and one-on-one interview methodology in order to collect meaningful data from students attending an alternative charter high school regarding their views on grading and learning. The 10 question survey asked students about their experiences in school related to grading and learning. Following that data collection event, I used six prepared interview questions to guide the conversation with students, individually. The students were free to take the prompt in any direction; the length of the interviews was not predetermined. I hoped that a more “narrative” approach would ease their nervousness and send a message that no right or wrong answers exist. What is important is sharing their stories about grading and learning as they experienced them.

The students all attend a charter high school, which bases its pedagogy on project-based, thematic interdisciplinary approaches. All of the students had attended a traditional school for at least nine years prior to attending the charter school. It was important to this research for the participants to have had both traditional and non-traditional grading and learning experiences so that they could compare and contrast these two different ways of schooling, grading, and learning.

I am interested in the phenomenon of how students who have navigated two varied systems perceive grading and learning. I am particularly interested in their perspectives since these students, I assume, didn't see the traditional setting as a good fit for them or believed that an alternative setting, like a charter school, provided something more suitable than the traditional school could. Often, if we can find what works for the most marginalized among us, we can find what works for all. Designing schools "for the edges" rather than the majority middle might yield forward progress in schooling's endeavor to provide a quality educational experience for all. It is for this reason that it is important to focus attention on students who are "on the edges." I am looking for patterns and themes in their perceptions and will use that information to help lead change efforts around grading issues at the high school level.

### **Rationale**

The rationale for studying this topic is connected directly to the urgency for serving all students well. If our current schooling system, with its static approaches to grading and learning, is in reality a barrier to student success, then it is our moral obligation to alter the system. Schools must be about creating learners, but we cannot successfully accomplish this without understanding our students' perspectives. This research will assist with discovering an answer to the question "what do students think?" Because this research involves speaking with students who have experienced two different schooling systems, a lot can be learned from them sharing about the traditional system and the alternative charter experience; they can compare and contrast in ways that most students and educators cannot. Their duality of experience provides a deep pool from which to draw upon for insights and suggestions. This research can contribute in two ways: understanding more about student motivation and providing positive direction for

improvement; it can provide information about why and how to change our current system based on the suggestions and insights of those most intimately involved in the process – the students.

As mentioned earlier, the topic of grading has been discussed by many. There is an abundance of literature on grading practices, yet a dearth of student voice exists. Since students are the most important component of schooling, this research is necessary. Chapter 2 will review the significant offerings about grading over the past 15 years, while also contextualizing the conversation by addressing the role that the standards movement has played in grading and learning, grading reform recommendations, effects on motivation due to grading practices, and importance of student voice.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of Literature**

Many voices have described, commented on, and suggested improvements about grading and learning over the past century. Few have actually been student voices. It is not uncommon to have those in authority make decisions without consult with those most impacted. Parents make decisions about their children based on what they, as parents, believe to be best. Bosses make decisions about employees, and on an even larger scale, owners make decisions about companies without regard to those “at the bottom.” Following suit, educators and researchers offer their views on grading and learning most often unencumbered by what students think about the issues. The review of literature follows a natural progression that highlights an evolution on grading in our system. In addition, through the progression, I have categorized several key topic areas:

- Historical perspective

- Traditional System
- Movement toward change
  - Standards-based
  - Grading for learning
- Student voice

### **Historical Perspective**

Literature on the history of schools in America reports on the early advents of grading mechanism as sifters and sorters to standards-based approaches. The evolution in purpose of schooling is important to understand. Sarah Mondale and Sarah B. Patton share a comprehensive history of the establishment and evolution of public education in *School: The Story of American Public Education*. They address the original purpose of education (educating the elite) to compulsory education (common requirement to attend but not to attain) to recent educational changes due to accountability mandates like home schooling, the charter school movement, and the standards movement. Referring to the recent shifts in schooling, the authors share, “Once-flourishing progressive classroom approaches such as portfolios, project-based teaching, and performance-based testing that blossomed between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, for example, have since shriveled under the unrelenting pressure for higher test scores” (2001, pg. 180). After more and more students were required to attend schools and this influx caused some educators to reflect upon the how students were being served, causing some shifts in educational approaches described in the quote, the strong emphasis on accountability that began in the 1990s and increased steam in the 2000s, derailed those changes. A retreat to very traditional approaches occurred and any change in grading and assessment was simultaneously set back. The authors state, “Finally, where the bottom line matters in schooling – the classroom – no one knows for

certain whether all the testing, all the required courses, and all the penalties and rewards get teachers to teach better and students to learn more” (2001, pg. 182). Grading per se is absent from the text; however, equity and access to high quality curriculum is addressed. “Much of what developed under the guise of a democratic and differentiated curriculum was in fact a way to reinforce the kind of class, gender, and race prejudice that existed in society” (2001, pg. 112-3). Although not specifically about grading, the sentiment expressed in the quote ties to some of the key issues in grading – specifically are grading practices allowing all students to succeed at high levels or is there something in the way grades are formulated, whether it be structurally or personally, that allows bias to influence how students are evaluated. Certainly, publications focused on grading and reporting increased in the 1990s as school systems sought to address the standards-based movement of the time and which is still influencing us today.

As part of the Expert in Assessment series, published by Corwin Press in 2001, Thomas Guskey and Jane Bailey co-authored *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning*. This scholarship broadly reviewed grading and reporting from early practices to current approaches, allowing the authors to show a progression of changes in grading and reporting over time. In Chapter 2, the history of grading and reporting is focused on. According to Guskey and Bailey, in the US, grading and reporting traces back to 1850, when the one-room school house was no longer feasible due to the large influx of students into schools. Quoting Gutek (1986), Guskey and Bailey report that from 1870 to 1910, the number of public high schools in the US increased from 500 to 10,000 (pg. 25). The teacher, who before could orally share student progress with parents, had to find systems to communicate that were more efficient, and, thus, the use of a formalized grading and reporting system came to be. Guskey and Bailey point out that while elementary teachers still used narratives in their reports, high

school teachers used percentages and “other similar markings” to denote student achievement (pg. 25). In addition, an example is shared that as early as 1933, work had been done to improve grading and reporting systems and that even earlier, in 1912, flaws in grading had been brought to light (pg 24-26). In fact, author Mark Durm in his Educational Forum article from 1993 references this same early concern about grading. Durm quotes I. E. Finkelstein from a 1913 publication: Finkelstein writes, “We can but be astonished at the blind faith that has been felt in the reliability of the marking system. School administrators have been using with confidence an absolutely uncalibrated instrument.” Finkelstein continues, “Variability in the same marks given for the same subject and to the same pupils by different instructors is so great as frequently to work real injustice to the students” (Durm, pg 2, quoting Finkelstein from *The Marking System in Theory and Practice*; Educational Psychology Monographs 10). What emerges from this look at early grading practices is a picture of well-intentioned educators caring about getting grading and reporting “right” without any agreement existing about what constitutes right.

### **Current System**

Grades currently, in their pure form, are supposed to be indicators of academic achievement and student proficiency. An attempt is made to pass grading off as an objective enterprise when, in fact, grading is extremely subjective (Guskey and Bailey, *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems*, 2001). Furthermore, grades rarely represent learning, which is what school is supposed to be about. Educational author Rick Stiggins, in “Assessment for Learning” (Stiggins, Edge, 2006), says, “The role of schools has changed...Our assessment practices historically have been designed to promote accountability by separating the successful from the unsuccessful learners and highlighting their differences. However, given the new mission of ensuring universal competence, assessments must now support the learning of all



students so that all can succeed in meeting the standards” (pg. 1). Stiggins highlights the transition in purpose for school from the sifting and sorting that occurred so that the select few could reach high levels of education to the current mandates of education of all. Stiggins also references the standards movement in that a common level of education tied to common standards emerged to ensure that not only would all students be educated but that they would be educated to the same levels. The new-found importance of standards in education has not successfully been linked to grades and grading. Rather, grades continued to represent compliance and completion.

Repeatedly, by author after author, the flaws in the current grading and reporting systems used nationwide are readily identified and discussed. Standards-based grading became more prevalent as NCLB raised the accountability bar and intensified the scrutiny on schools’ effectiveness. Standards-based grading is a significant shift from the sifting and sorting that occurred for decades. Grades were used of indicators of who got it and who didn’t. No expectation existed that all would get it...ever. The Bell Curve was sought after by teachers as they recorded grades for decades (Vatterott, 2015, pg. 9). Intelligence was seen as “fixed.” Schools were about proving intelligence, not nurturing learning, for way too long. Thankfully, the standards movement has infiltrated that conversation, but to what extent? Does the core behavior of the classroom teachers as they grade feel any influence or reflect the standards-based, all can achieve paradigm? Guskey reports that four sources of teachers’ grading practices exist: 1) the policies and practices that they experienced as students; 2) their personal philosophies of teaching and learning; 3) district, building, and/or department or grade level policies on grading and reporting; and 4) what they learned about grading and reporting in their undergraduate teacher preparation programs (pg. 17). None of these sources appear to be

challenging the existing status quo in any significant way, particularly source #1 and #2, which can result in deeply entrenched beliefs about grading and thus influence any alternate views expressed by others in sources #3 and #4. This can help us understand why the status quo perpetuates so easily, even in the face of decades of research saying that the current grading and reporting system can be and should be improved.

For the last two decades, authors have written about how to improve grading practices, which almost exclusively involve teacher actions. The substantial changes center on what teachers do in their process of assessing students and judging their achievement. Most often, the recommendations are made through the lens of the teachers – what do teachers believe will be better for students and for themselves. First, it is important to note that the actual purpose for grading is most often described similarly to this: communication of student proficiency in relation to academic standards (Brookhart, 2011, pg. 15). Two other facets that seep in include a need to control student behavior by using grades as rewards/punishments and a need to evaluate students for post-secondary readiness. Further, there is common acknowledgement that formative grades can assist with planning for learning and student involvement in learning, but summative grades are most often associated with judging learning, not promoting it (O'Connor, 2002, pg. 106). It is important to emphasize that any relationship between grading and the promotion of learning has been a relatively new conversation, one that has only truly gained ground within the last 10 years. At first, the focus was on how to more accurately represent student achievement based on standards, which is very different than promoting learning.

In *Elements of Grading*, Doug Reeves (2011) identifies four essential aspects of grading systems that need to be addressed. He asks readers to consider how we can make grading systems accurate, fair, specific, and timely. He is quick to point out that perfection in grading

systems is not possible, but improvement is. Reeves states his main contention this way: “If a school system aspires to have a grading system that is accurate, fair, specific, and timely, then it must create grading mechanisms that focus more on the performance of students and less on subjective factors unrelated to student achievement” (pg. 4). It seems a bit amazing that in 2011 a book on grading is recommending focusing more on student achievement since that should have been a given in education all along. Reeves’s focus on the grading system shows the narrowness of much of the scholarship on grading – it’s about the actual process that teachers undertake when trying to communicate about student achievement. Reeves says that we can improve this process, and certainly he is right. But is important to be clear here about what Reeves is addressing. He is saying that we need to be more accurate, more fair, more specific, more timely about our grading practices. He is not saying that fundamentally grading is flawed and we need to raze the system and begin anew. Reeves wants to improve what is in place. This may be a truly solid approach to take if the core of the system works for students and for learning. Since the core system was set up to sift and sort and to judge who learned best, not promote learning, improvement “around the edges” may not be enough. Again, I wonder what students would say. If they received more specific feedback tied to very specific learning goals in a timely fashion, would they feel as though grades were fairly communicating their learning?

Thomas Guskey, a prolific author on the topic of grading, began publishing in the 1990s and his most recent publication, *On Your Mark: Challenging the Conventions of Grading and Reporting* (2015), encompasses much of what he’s come to know over these last few decades. In general, Guskey continues to advocate for educators to challenge the following grading practices: use of percentage grades; use of pluses, minuses, and half grade increments; bell-shaped grade distributions; computation of class rank; use of a single grade; and the use of

zeroes. Over time, Guskey has written extensively and lectured around the country on these topics as a whole and singularly. In this book, more specifically, Guskey comments on the current state of grading in relation to the current state of schooling. He says about schooling, “Instead of being concerned with selecting the talented few, we must be committed to developing the unique talents of all students” and then continuing on about grading, he shares, “In the modern educational reform initiatives that move us in this direction, grading and reporting remain the one element still pitifully misaligned” (pg. 4). About current practices and ties to motivation, Guskey points out “some practices are clearly better than others. We’ve learned a great deal about effects on students of different grading policies, particularly those that diminish motivation and confound the meaning of grades” (pg. 110). He offers this to those working to change grading: “To succeed in tearing down the old traditions associated with grading, you must have new traditions to take their place. But we must ensure that those new traditions are based on solid evidence of their effectiveness. In particular, we must be certain that our new traditions support student learning and enhance students’ perceptions of themselves as competent learners” (Guskey, 2011, pg. 6). Perhaps one of the most significant challenges in the grading reform work thus far has been a lack of any new traditions that will promote student learning. We have, unfortunately, tinkered around the edges of grading reform by eliminating zeroes or not awarding points for bringing in printer paper or tissues, but the core interactions between teacher and student and the basics for evaluation have not changed. We need new traditions and we need students’ voices to help us establish them.

### **Grading for Learning**

The 1990s saw a handful of educators turned authors like Thomas Guskey, Richard Stiggins, Douglas Reeves, and Ken O’Connor proliferate the educational landscape with their

best thinking about grading and reporting. Eventually, the literature on grading began to include more intentional inclusion of learning as well. In *How to Grade for Learning (2002)*, by Ken O'Connor, a dozen quotes are presented at the onset of the introduction as a way to stimulate reflection on this topic before delving further into the issue. The quotes illustrate many key points on which current grading discussions revolve. A sampling of the quotes is as follows:

- “Schools use grades because it’s one of those things somebody once decided on and now everybody just goes along with it” (Littky, 2004, p. 154).
- “Schools have not changed [from] toxic and counterproductive grading policies” (Reeves, 2007, p. 231).
- “Students...see their schoolwork as a game they play for grades” (Winger, 2005, p. 62).
- “If I were asked to enumerate ten educational stupidities, the giving of grades would be at the top of the list” (DeZouche, 1945, p.339).
- “A profound cultural transformation [would be] classrooms in which both students and teachers focus on learning, not grades” (Shepard, 2005, p.70).

As evidenced by the previous quotes, many voices from the education arena show concern at best and utter dissatisfaction at worst when it comes to the K-12 grading system in place in American schools.

A need exists for more research on grading and learning, with an intense focus on how to change the paradigm. Perhaps, by elevating the voices of those most affected – the students – a force for change could gain traction like never before. O'Connor shares “That there has been no real change over a period of almost 100 years probably stems from the fact that relatively little pure research has been done on grading practices” (pg. 21). My study will add to the existing literature in a powerful way, as long as student voices are valued.

## **Extremes**

Some authors recommend ending grading completely (*Punished by Rewards*, Kohn, 1993). Why keep what doesn't have any true significance or reliability? The National Educational Association, in its publication *NEA Today* from August 2015 (Long, *NEA Today*,

May 2015), shared some views on the effects of grading. In “Are Letter Grades Failing Our Students?” written by Cindy Long, the prevalent suggestion is to move to standards-based grading rather than grading traditionally based on accumulation of points or percentages. A district in Colorado is considering eliminating Ds, while another district in Virginia is trying to standardize what an F means. Recommendation of a standards-based approach is not extreme, however. Alfie Kohn, who is quoted in the piece, goes a step further: Long writes, quoting Kohn, “the problems with grades – the way they undermine students’ interest in learning, preference for challenge, and depth of thinking – can’t be solved by just tweaking the details. In some ways, Kohn says, standards-based grading “may even make things worse by getting kids more focused on the details of how well they’re doing – rather than being engaged with what they’re doing” (pg. 1). This view that tweaking grading by converting to standards-based will just perpetuate the problem is a rarity.

ASCD, formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, publishes *Educational Leadership* (EL), a monthly magazine that addresses current issues in education from a variety of viewpoints. In November 2011, EL addressed Effective Grading Practices as the focus for its entire issue. Although this was a few years ago, the comprehensive nature of the articles and views expressed will serve well as a summary on current thinking tied to grading and learning. Moreover, it is the most recent *Educational Leadership* edition fully devoted to grading practices. The articles are penned by authors whose names should be familiar: Brookhart, Guskey, O’Connor, Vatterott, Dueck, Reeves. The topics presented in these articles are familiar too: obstacles to grading reform, no penalties for practice, starting a conversation about grading, reporting student learning accurately/consistently/meaningfully. Again, one voice among the many that deserves some attention is Alfie Kohn. Kohn has spent much of his public career

writing about education and the effects of educational practices on students. For example, he is a strong proponent of eliminating homework and external rewards from schools. In this EL issue, Kohn's article offers an extreme perspective – "The Case Against Grades" highlights how learning is undermined when grading occurs, so the solution is to stop using letters and numbers to report on student achievement. To support his assertion, Kohn refers back to early critics of grading from 1933 (Crooks) to 1945 (DeZouche) to 1968 (Marshall) and 1971 (Kirschenbaum, Simon & Napier) and says "They remind us how long we've know there is something wrong with what we are doing, as well as how little progress we've made in acting on that realization" (28). Continuing, Kohn mentions the educational psychologists of the 80s and 90s who have studied the effects of grades and three conclusions from that work:

- Grades tend to diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning.
- Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task.
- Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking.

According to Kohn, the whole conversation on grading needs to be shifted. He tells this story to illustrate that point: "A student asks his Zen master how long it would take to reach enlightenment. "Ten years," the master said. But, the student persisted, what if he studied very hard? "Then 20 years," the master responded. Surprised, the student asked how long it would take if he worked very, very hard and became the most dedicated student in the ashram. "In that case, 30 years," the master replied. His explanation: "If you have one eye on how close you are to achieving your goal, that only leaves one eye for your task"" (pg. 30). All of the grading improvements that talk about clear targets and formative progress monitoring and regular feedback to inform learning are leading us further away from a meaningful learning environment. This is an interesting perspective and worth considering, even though Kohn's view is an outlier amongst the scholarship on grading reform. Kohn states, "Once we're compelled to focus only on what can be reduced to numbers, such as how many grammatical errors are present

in a composition or how many mathematical algorithms have been committed to memory, thinking has been severely compromised. And that's exactly what happens when we try to fit learning into a 4-point, 5-point, or (heaven help us) 100-point scale" (pg. 30). He asserts, "If we take research seriously, then the absence of grades is a necessary condition for promoting deep thinking and a desire to engage in it. It's worth lingering on this proposition in light of a variety of efforts to sell us formulas to improve our grading techniques, none of which addresses the problems with grading, per se" (pg. 31). It is vital that educators reflect on the purpose of schooling and what should be prioritized. Do we want deep thinkers? Do we value learning? And, when answering these questions, does the "we" include student voices? Would students have the same beliefs as teachers and parents?

Another extreme suggestion, this time related to student voice, is offered by ASCD in an Education Update publication from August 2015. Georgia Perry writes in her article "Are We Listening to Students?" about the primacy of student voice at the Diablo Valley School in California. This school is characterized as a "free" school, "which means it is run by students as much as it's run by adults. Students decide what they want to learn, are free to either show up to class or not, and even handle disciplinary actions by serving rotating terms on a judicial committee" (pg. 1). The author asks the question "should this radical model of student voice be scaled to public schools?" (pg. 4). The article goes on to describe incremental steps to strengthen student voice, like surveys, focus groups, and informal discussions. The article concludes that trust and mutual respect are necessary factors to increasing student voice. If we can trust and respect our students, and they, in turn, trust and respect us, significant benefits results, according to Perry.



## **Standards-based Grading**

O'Connor (2009), in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *How to Grade for Learning*, connects the current conversations about grading to the shift from a norm-referenced system in education to a criterion-referenced system. Students are measured academically on their achievement of standards rather than compared competitively to each other. The standards movement of the 1990s “holds great promise, if teachers are assisted appropriately in aligning curriculum instruction, assessment, grading, and reporting. It will also be easier for teachers to separate their dual classroom roles of coach/advocate and judge because of the clear focus on publicly articulated learning goals known to all” (O'Connor, 2009, pg. 12). Students' ability to attain proficiency on set standards was accepted in school systems without any acceptance of a compatible shift in how proficiency would be reported out. O'Connor states, “It is, therefore, necessary to move away from traditional grading and, as much as possible, use grading in the service of learning” (pg. 13). Further, O'Connor pulls in the emotional aspects of grading by purporting that “Grades are as much a matter of values as they are of science... Teaching is an interpersonal activity. How we feel about the individuals and the groups being assessed sometimes affects our judgment. Giving and receiving grades is not a purely objective act – it has a significant emotional component” (2009, pg.19). Acknowledging the emotional/subjective aspects of grading is important as is a shift from grading as something “calculated” to grading as something “determined” using teacher professional judgment. O'Connor concludes his book with a chapter called “The Way Ahead” and summarizes his intent with the following quote attributed to Burke (1993, p. viii): “The time has come to de-emphasize traditional grades and to demystify the entire grading process. We need to focus instead on the process of learning and the progress of the individual student.” In this final chapter, O'Connor reasserts that standards-

based grading approaches will do more to support learning and encourage student success than traditional grading approaches. Specifically, the eight guidelines established in the book, according to O'Connor, are better because they “demystify the entire grading process, focus on the process of learning, and focus on the progress of the individual student” (pg. 240-1).

O'Connor contextualizes his work related to others this way: “The guidelines and methods [outlined in *How to Grade for Learning*] go a long way toward providing the student-involved assessment advocated by Stiggins (2001b) and the honesty and fairness in grading and reporting that Wiggins (1996) has been advocating for many years. They also clearly acknowledge that grading and reporting must be directly related to learning goals and standards, which have become such a large part of education (Marzano & Kendall, 1996). O'Connor ends by stating that the suggestions “in this book requires significant changes in schools, especially high schools” (pg. 242). In many ways, O'Connor distills much of what grading scholars were opining in his eight guidelines. He understands the challenges these changes will face from teachers and from parents. However, what is not explicit in this work is what students think about these suggested improvements. The presumption is that because researchers and educators have deemed this standards-based grading approach as better for student achievement, it will be. And it very well could be, if ever able to be implemented within the entrenched traditional systems, but it would be beneficial to hear from students directly about what works for them.

Authors Thomas Guskey and Jane Bailey, in their book *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning* (2001), are philosophically aligned with Ken O'Connor and his views on improving grading practices. A brief, two-page section of the Guskey and Bailey book, which totals 194 pages, addresses “students’ perceptions on grading and reporting.” This section fails to include any actual quotes or references to specific students and their

thoughts. Rather, a generic student view is shared. At one point, the authors refer to students gaining an advantage with teachers by complimenting teachers and being polite. Guskey and Bailey state that students call this the “Eddie Haskell effect,” but very few, if any, students today have knowledge about who Eddie Haskell is. This reference shows how adults are interpreting student behavior rather than allowing students to speak in their own words. Clearly, a more in-depth conversation with modern students is necessary before we can say we understand the students’ perceptions on grading and reporting. Despite the minimal student views included, the authors offer clear reasoning for a change in grading and reporting systems and offer ideas regarding what those new systems could look like.

### **Grading for Learning**

In 2011, Susan Brookhart addresses directly the topic of this dissertation in her book *Grading and Learning: Practices that Support Student Achievement*. In her writing, Brookhart outlines a dozen standards-based grading practices that would be improvements over traditional grading practices. The twelve practices are as follows:

- Communicate clear learning targets.
- Make sure assessments are of high quality.
- Use formative assessment before grading.
- Inform students.
- Grade achievement and handle behavior issues behaviorally.
- Grade individuals.
- Grade on standards.
- State grading policy clearly.
- Keep standards-based records.
- Use multiple measures.
- Maintain standards-based meaning when blending evidence.
- Involve students.

Throughout Brookhart’s book, she highlights the necessity to frame all grading conversations and improvements around learning. She says, “In a perfect world, there would be no grades. In

a utopia, learning is pure good. Students learn because it's the right thing to do, both for themselves and for the society in which they live; students learn because it's fun and interesting; students learn to the best of their abilities and capacities; and everyone learns something useful, whether it's the same thing as their classmates or not. In a utopia, grades are irrelevant" (Brookhart, 2011, pg. 135). Brookhart then acknowledges that we don't live in a utopia and that grading is a part of schooling. She concedes that improving grading practices alone does not guarantee learning, but it's a start. She shares the story of one district's journey to improve learning by transitioning to standards-based grading practices. A leader from that district, in response to a teacher who was hesitant to change, said, "On our worst day in standards-based [grading], we're better than on our best day in the other system, because our grades then weren't meaningful" (Brookhart, 2011, pg. 140).

In *Rethinking Grading*, Cathy Vatterott echos Brookhart's writings about how a standard-based approach to grading more clearly describes the connections between grades and students' learning, thus is an improvement over traditional grading practices. "What if by changing the way we use grades we could ignite authentic high-level learning?" (2015, pg. 5) asks Vatterott. This question shows the desire of educators to prioritize learning rather than engage in sifting and sorting practices. However, Vatterott, as many other authors on grading, does not include any interviews, comments, surveys, or other data collected directly from students. Their premises both stem from what educators and researchers believe. Interestingly, both authors do address student motivation in their books. Vatterott discusses the use of grades to motivate students, with grades being used as rewards and/or punishments, and how this form of motivation to elicit certain behaviors from students results in compliance more than learning. She says, "To shift to a standards-based grading paradigm, we must acknowledge how traditional

grading practices obstruct the learning process, damage motivation, and cause teachers and students to fixate on grades to the detriment of learning. By using what we know about learning to rethink what we do, we can change our grading methods to support rather than judge, empower learners rather than control, give choices rather than mandates, and dignify failure as appropriate and necessary part of learning” (Vatterott, 2015, pg. 37). But would we really reach this new paradigm if we embraced standards-based grading? We can hypothesize the answer based on what researchers and educators see and feel. However, to really know this answer, we should talk directly to students and ask them.

Ken O’Connor focused more prominently on learning as it relates to grading in his 2011 publication, *A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades*. Calling his previous book “more theoretical,” O’Connor states his reasoning for this new book is tied to the increased role standards have played in education. He shares, “what I often see, especially in middle and high schools, is some emphasis on standards for curriculum, instruction, and assessment but very little standards-based grading and reporting” (O’Connor, 2011, pg. xii). At the time of this most recent publication, O’Connor had been writing about grading for 16 years (he first published an article on grading for NASSP in 1995). It is worth noting that as O’Connor evolved in this writing on grading, the most notable change pertains to attention given to the students and their role in the grading system as well as language describing grading to support learning, not just report learning. Of the 15 fixes, three of them directly address supporting student learning:

- Fix 13 – Don’t use information from formative assessments and practice to determine grades; use only summative evidence.
- Fix 14 – Don’t summarize evidence accumulated over time when learning is developmental and will grow with time and repeated opportunities; in those instances, emphasize more recent achievement.
- Fix 15 – Don’t leave students out of the grading process. Involve students; they can and should play key roles in assessment and grading that promote achievement.

O'Connor further describes each fix with additional details about how and why. It is with Fix 13 that student roles are most changed, he says, due to the need to "untrain" students from all work (summative and formative) being treated in the same manner – marked and graded. He advocates for students to be active in the learning process, with many opportunities to practice before being summatively assessed for a grade. In this way, O'Connor surmises, students will become learners and be willing to expend effort to progress. To further stress this point, he quotes Sir Richard Livingstone, president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 1941, who said "The test of a successful education is not the amount of knowledge that a pupil takes away from school, but his appetite to know and his capacity to learn. If the school sends out children with the desire for knowledge and some idea about how to acquire it, it will have done its work. Too many leave school with the appetite killed and the mind loaded with undigested lumps of information" (pg. 115). In the two subsequent chapters on Fixes 14 and 15, O'Connor continues to reiterate the importance of seeing learning as a process as the goal to be achieved. He quotes Howard Gardner, famous for his work on multiple intelligences, in regard to Fix 14, who stated "What matters is not what you have at the starting point, but whether and how well you finish" (pg. 123) and Costa, related to Fix 15, saying, "We must constantly remind ourselves that the ultimate purpose of evaluation is to enable students to evaluate themselves. Fostering students' ability to direct and redirect themselves must be a major goal... or what is education for?" (pg. 126). O'Connor has intentionally elevated learning in his recent writings, much more so than he ever had before. It is a positive sign that the grading conversations are showing a shift from how to capture student achievement more accurately with improved grading practices to how to promote learning more effectively with improved grading practices. This may seem like a subtle shift, but this shift is key.

## **Motivation, Learning, and the Brain**

When we specifically link grading and learning together and discuss the relationship between the two, the effects of grading on students becomes of utmost importance to examine. We want students to want to learn. We want them to be excited and engaged in their pursuit of new knowledge, new understandings, and new skills. We need students to be motivated to invest their time and effort in learning. If our grading practices diminish motivation and depress student effort, then it is paramount that we change those practices.

Eric Jensen, a well-respected author on the brain and learning, offers, “Two rules of thumb come from the field of brain research and enrichment. One is to eliminate threat, and the other is to enrich like crazy” (Jensen, 1998, pg. 2). Unfortunately, grading in classrooms today is often about threats and fear. Common “motivational” phrases echoed throughout classrooms include “if you don’t do this, you’ll fail” or when students complain about assignments “well, it’s your grade that will be affected.” Fear as a motivator is used regularly, and enrichment is rarely seen. In *Disrupting Class*, Clayton Christensen (2008) describes teaching practices as “monolithic” because all students get the same. Enrichment would mean something different for some students; something different may mean that point totals would not be equal for all students. Since point totals are the basis for assigning grades, sameness becomes more important than individual student needs. Dr. Sharroky Hollie, during a lecture to WASCD members in October 2016 about culturally and linguistically relevant teaching practices, wonders “by making things manageable, did we lose the meaningful?” Teachers adhere to practices such as averaging scores from an entire grading period even when the early scores represent students’ first learning, taking points off assessments because of inappropriate student behavior, adding points on assessments because of effort, using zeroes for missing assignments when calculating grades,

assigning group grades, and including homework in summative grade reports. Why, in the face of all the mounting evidence of ineffective grading practices, does grading not change?

Myron Dudek (2014) encourages teachers, in his book of the same name, to *Grade Smarter Not Harder*. In the introduction, Dudek explains his rationale as it relates directly to learners. He says, “Confidence is critical to learning, and my students have demonstrated an increase in confidence since I started making changes [in grading practices]. They now feel empowered by the opportunity to meaningfully engage in their own learning and improve as lifelong learners” (Dudek, 2014, pg. 5). Dudek goes on to advocate for removal of behavior from grades, cessation of grading homework, clarity of learning targets shared with students, and allowing retests in ways that promote learning. Dudek’s last chapter is on creativity, which he defines as “a richness of ideas and originality of thinking” (pg. 120). This topic is unique in the literature and worth mention. Dudek’s supposition is that creativity is linked to engagement and an engaged student is a motivated student, thus teachers would do well to include more options for creative expression both by teachers and for students. He states, “Learning is greatly enhanced through individual creativity, ownership, and empowerment. When learners are given opportunity to explain and reason using their own creative skills, they are better able to demonstrate evidence of learning” (pg. 121). The way creativity is further discussed focuses on allowing for choice and multiple ways to show learning. This is similar to the foundational pieces of Universal Design for Learning (CAST.org), which include multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression for students as they learn. More access points into the curriculum and more ways to demonstrate learning definitely make teaching and learning less linear, but since each student is unique, these approaches would seem to be effective strategies to improve engagement and thus learning.



In recent years, perhaps the book most often referred to by educators is Carol Dweck's 2006 work *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Understanding fixed and growth mindsets and the potential impact on learning is common work in many, many schools across the nation, particularly as schools strive to close achievement gaps. Dweck states clearly the negative impact a fixed mindset has on learning: "What could put an end to exuberant learning? The fixed mindset. As soon as children become able to evaluate themselves, some of them become afraid of challenges. They become afraid of not being smart. I have studied thousands of people from preschoolers on, and it's breathtaking how many reject an opportunity to learn" (pg. 16). Mindset ties directly to motivation, which is essential for learning to occur. Many teachers complain that students are not motivated and then spend time planning how to motivate students. It may be that addressing mindset is at the core of addressing motivation. Dweck describes pre-med students in first semester Chemistry, a gateway class for medical students. Dweck shares about the different responses from fixed and growth mindset pre-med students regarding this extremely difficult class: "Students with a fixed mindset stay interested only when they did well right away. Those who found it difficult showed a big drop in their interest and enjoyment. If it wasn't a testament to their intelligence, they couldn't enjoy it. In contrast, students with the growth mindset continued to show the same high level of interest even when they found the work very challenging. Challenge and interest went hand in hand" (pg. 23). It appears that if students could embrace a growth mindset, then they would be more motivated to learn and they would sustain effort through challenging situations. However, teachers are also part of the equation.

Dweck looked at teachers with fixed mindsets and growth mindsets and their responses to a prompt. The prompt involved a hypothetical student who scored a 65% on a math test. Dweck wanted to know from the teachers how they would treat this student. She reports, "Teachers with

the fixed mindset were more than happy to answer questions. They felt that by knowing Jennifer's score, they had a good sense of who she was and what she was capable of. Their recommendations abounded" (pg. 28). Illustrating a different reaction, Dweck recounts a letter from a teacher who was angry about the prompt. The teacher, Mr. Riordan, says he cannot make any recommendations about the student based on one single score. Dweck says, "I was delighted with Mr. Riordan's critique and couldn't have agreed more. An assessment at one point in time has little value for understanding someone's ability, let alone their potential to succeed in the future. It was disturbing how many teachers felt otherwise, and that was the point of our study" (pg. 29). Teasing this out a bit, if teachers have fixed mindsets and are making quick judgments about students' potential ability to learn or lack of potential based on single test results, it is clear why schools are struggling to serve all students well. Those who are providing the service don't believe that all students have the ability or potential to achieve at high levels.

Naturally, it is important to know if mindset can be taught. It can be and the results are significant, according to Dweck. "One day, we were introducing growth mindset to a new group of students. All at once Jimmy – the most hard-core turned-off low-effort kid in the group – looked up with tears in his eyes and said, "You mean I don't have to be dumb?" (pg. 59). The messages our students have received from their parents, their teachers, and others about who is smart and who isn't and if effort matters all impact student learning. Messages are received differently by fixed and growth mindset children with the former hearing judgment and the latter hearing encouragement (pg. 184-185). Some examples of student responses are presented here:

Q: Suppose your parents offer to help you with our schoolwork. Why would they do this?

Fixed: The real reason is that they wanted to see how smart I was at the schoolwork I was working on.

Growth: They wanted to make sure I learned as much as I could from my schoolwork.

Q: Suppose your parents are happy that you got a good grade. Why would that be?

Fixed: They were happy to see I was a smart kid.

Growth: They're happy because a good grade means that I really stuck to my work.

Q: Suppose your parents discussed your performance with you when you did poorly on something in school. Why would they do this?

Fixed: They might have been worried I wasn't one of the bright kids. They think bad grades might mean I'm not smart.

Growth: They wanted to teach me ways to study better in the future.

Dweck sums up the lesson from those responses as “Don’t judge. Teach. It’s a learning process” (pg. 186). Although the children were responding to prompts about parents, the same answers could be predicted if the prompts were about teachers. Teachers face a worse dilemma than parents with respect to judging and teaching. It is a necessity to do both in their work. Clearly, the attitudes expressed by the children with growth mindset were more illustrative of successful learners than those with the fixed mindset. Grading will, undoubtedly, remain as a part of schooling, but if teachers and parents and students can nurture growth mindsets, the grades may not have the “shut down” effect so often seen currently. Getting students to persist in learning and be motivated to learn is key; the power of growth mindset is worth examining.

If asked about an author who addresses motivation, Daniel Pink readily comes to mind. He authored *Drive* (2009), which delved deeply into what motivates humans, the different kinds of motivational approaches, and the importance of matching motivation with the desired outcome. In the September 2014 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Amy M. Azzam interviewed Pink for the article, “Motivated to Learn: A Conversation with Daniel Pink” (vol 72, no. 1, pgs 12-17). The interview begins with a question about motivators. Pink describes “if-then” motivators (if you do this, then you’ll get that) and says these work in the short term with simple

tasks. He says the problem in schools is that the if-then motivators are used for everything, so if students are asked to complete tasks that are more long-term and complex, this motivation approach is ineffective. Extending this line of thinking, Pink refers to Dweck's work with performance goals and learning goals. He says, "a learning goal may be "I want to master Algebra" and a performance goal may be "I want to get an A in Algebra." The research shows that reaching performance goals doesn't necessarily mean that you have hit a learning goal." Thinking about schools and what students and teachers regularly set as goals, most fall into the performance goal category – an A in a subject, an A on a test, finishing a book, completing homework. Since high school teachers commonly identify student motivation as a problem, it would be beneficial to tease out further how the types of goals being set contribute to this. If more students were setting learning goals and if more teachers guided students toward learning goals rather than performance goals, student motivation should increase. Azzam also asked Pink about engagement. He responded that compliance and engagement are clearly two different things. Most teachers would agree that engagement is preferred but that engagement isn't the reality in classrooms. Pink recommends increasing autonomy as a way to boost engagement. He says that this doesn't mean "turning up the dial to 10, but increase autonomy the right amount at the right time" (pg. 16). By increasing autonomy for students and setting learning goals, "schools can create more optimal conditions for learning" (pg. 17). Ultimately, this is what we want for our students in our schools because compliance and performance goals aren't doing the trick.

What might students say if asked about motivation? Speaking with students about schooling is the basis of *Fires in the Mind* (2010) by Kathleen Cushman. The topic for this book centered on student views regarding motivation and mastery. Cushman details how students are

motivated; they will put in hours of practice necessary to reach mastery if it is something they care about. She states, “All too often that powerful engagement was happening largely in young people’s outside activities: arts, athletics, hobbies, games. When it came to academic knowledge and skills – the reading, writing, history, foreign languages, science, and math that citizens need in a democracy – their schooling seldom generated a comparable drive for mastery” (Cushman, 2010, pg. 97). Some of the elements of motivation that students wanted included clear learning targets (“let us see what we’re aiming for”), scaffolding (“break down what we need to learn”), multiple explanations tied to multiple modalities (“give us lots of ways to understand”), increased formative assessment (“assess us all the time, not just in high-stakes ways”), progress monitoring (“chart our small successes”), and application opportunities (“help us extend our knowledge through using it”). Again, these suggestions are not about whole-scale change but rather common educational strategies that make up effective practice. Truly, what students are asking for are skilled teachers who care about their learning and won’t settle for less than excellent from any one of them. Students are the majority of those in schools and the least heard from.

### **Student Voice**

It is often said that everyone has an opinion on how school should be because everyone has gone to school. There is certainly an abundance of criticism about schooling and, although not directly proportionate, a large number of potential solutions are offered as well. Fewer in number still are the solutions that come from students. It appears that we just don’t think about asking or bother to ask students what they have to say. This must change. Kathleen Cushman goes directly to the source in her book *Sent to the Principal: Students talk about making high schools better* (2005) by interviewing students about school. In Chapter Six, entitled “School

should be interesting,” Cushman reports about what happens if high school isn’t interesting to students. She says “And if classes offer only a steady diet of tedium, they would just as soon forget school and look to the media, the streets, or peer relationships for interest or stimulation” (Cushman, 2005, pg. 94). We certainly don’t want students forgetting about school. No educator wants to think that what is happening in class, what s/he has prepared, is worthless. Teachers believe in the importance of what they are offering. However, students quite often don’t view things the same way. The students that Cushman interviewed offer some suggestions to improve student interest in learning:

- Include us in determining course offerings, especially electives
- Relate academics to things we care about
- Introduce us to inspiring role models
- Connect us with opportunities for work and learning in the community
- Treat non-academic activities as important to our learning and development

These ideas are not radical school reforms. Students are not proposing wide-swept changes here. In reality, the students don’t seem to mind most of the school set up. They will go to classes, but make them interesting and provide them a voice in determining what is offered. They will be involved in activities, but value that involvement. They will learn from others, but let them see role models who inspire. Worth noting is that none of the comments are tied to grading. Students did not say that grading needed to be eliminated for them to be more interested in school. Grading touches every class, every teacher, and every student. It is because of the far-reaching influence that grading should be discussed directly with those most impacted: the students.

Author Alfie Kohn, who has made his mark by challenging the status quo in education, continues to share controversial opinions in his book *Feel Bad Education and Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling* (2011). At the outset, Kohn details “twelve obvious truths that we shouldn’t be ignoring.” His fifth truth ties directly to student involvement and student voice in learning. Kohn states as a truth, “students are less interested in whatever they’re forced to do and more enthusiastic when they have some say” (Kohn, 2011, pg. 5). He elaborates, “If choice is related to interest, and interest is related to achievement, then it’s not much of a stretch to suggest that the learning environments in which kids get to participate in making decisions about what they’re doing are likely to be the most effective, all else being equal” (pg. 5). Kohn’s consistent criticism of current schooling practices may cause him to appear anti-education. However, throughout *Feel Bad Education*, he speaks frequently about joy in learning and nurturing inquisitiveness and the importance of education, in a general sense. Kohn ultimately believes that the system needs improvement, and honoring students’ voice is a step in that direction.

Michelle Rhee took the education establishment by storm when she became chancellor of Washington D.C. public schools. She saw flaws in the system, yet felt that she could make a positive difference for students and improve what was a significantly underperforming school district. In her book *Radical: Fighting to Put Students First*, Rhee devotes a chapter to student voice. In “Listening to Students,” Rhee tells the story of a student, Brandon, who contacts her about how to improve the district. She writes, “Brandon wrote to me because he thought there might be too many people giving me too many ideas about how the school district needed to change. ‘I think you need to hear straight from students’ he wrote. That sounded like a fine idea to me” (Rhee, 2013, pg. 221). Rhee elaborates, “One thing I know for sure is that children are

quite capable and willing to articulate what needs to happen in order to fix our public education system. Time and time again, throughout my tenure in D.C., students confirmed that fact to me. And they're often very reasonable in their solutions, unlike a lot of us adults!" (pg. 221). Specifically, when meeting with Brandon, Rhee says he and his fellow students shared a long list of things that needed to be improved, from cafeteria food to textbooks. Rhee asked him to choose one thing that would make the most difference; Brandon chose this: more great teachers. Rhee reflected, "As adults, we assume what students care about in school is cafeteria food or more recess. We don't expect them to be able to articulate their desires for a great education. But students know how to improve their classroom experiences, and given the chance, they can describe what works" (pg. 226). With my research, this is my intent as well: give students the chance to describe what works.

Pedro Noguera address equity issues in education frequently in his writing. He understands the necessity of a high-quality education for each student in every school, and he sees valuing student voice as a means to accomplish this. His writings in *The Trouble with Black Boys and Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education* (2008) include a chapter entitled "How Listening to Students Can Help Schools to Improve." To set the stage, Noguera states, "Despite the growing chorus of calls for change, until recently, the organization and structure of most high schools remained largely unchanged and trapped in traditions that had long outlived their purpose" (Noguera, 2008, pg. 61). He continues, "this chapter examines how schools are confronting the challenges that beset them not by seeking answers from a well-regarded think tank or policy center but from students themselves" (pg. 63). In summary, Noguera concludes, "The goal of presenting these ideas here is to show that solutions to some of the problems confronting our nation's high schools may not be as out of reach as they have



seemed, particularly if we have the wisdom and courage to listen to those who bear the brunt of our schools' failures" (pg. 63). I wholeheartedly agree with Noguera's assessment of the importance of student voice. Too often the adult voice is primary, if not solitary, in the solution conversation. We pat our students on the head and say 'trust us' as we go about strategizing about fixes to the dilemmas in schooling. Flipping this dynamic and prioritizing student voice needs to happen. And, although, this research is focused narrowly on the issues tied to grading and learning, any educational issue would be more fully informed with the inclusion of student voice.

The questions posed early as the basis of this research showcase the utter importance in elevating student voice as we seek to find answers:

1. What are students' views on grading and learning and the relationship between the two?
  - a. Do students believe that their grades are accurate reflections of their learning?
  - b. Have they ever encountered a mismatch? If so, how did that impact their views on grading and learning?
2. What are students' views on the purpose of school?
  - a. Do students see school as a place that promotes learning or as a place where they get grades?
  - b. Do students believe school is about learning or about proving you are smart?
3. How do students view school in terms of what is valued and what is meaningful?
  - a. What do students think that their teachers value more from them – good grades or meaningful learning?
  - b. In an effort to manage the vast number of students in the system, did we lose the meaningfulness of school?



## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Methodology**

There is no educational practice more deeply engrained in schools than grading. From times when students were sifted and sorted and dropping out didn't carry a significant stigma to more current times with strong accountability and an increasing focus on equity so that every student can succeed, grading and reporting remain very consistent. Also deeply engrained is our human need to tell our stories and be heard. *The Mahabharata* is one of two major Sanskrit epics of Ancient India. Its author, Vyasa, tells the poetical history of mankind to a boy whom he meets. To the boy, Vyasa says, "If you listen carefully, at the end you'll be someone else." A result from this research, after listening carefully to students' stories about grading and learning, is to open avenues for educators to be impacted and changed for the better and become "someone else" in their work tied to grading and learning. Vyasa understood the power of stories and, in education, we must understand the value of listening to our students.

### **Research Terminology**

Throughout this study, when students are referred to, the students in question are high school students. The research is focused on the views of high school students, which is intentional for two reasons: 1) high school students are nearing the conclusion of their K-12 journey and thus have a wealth of experiences from which to draw, and 2) the alternative school setting in the district used as a counterbalance in this research to the traditional school system for points of comparison serves just high school students. Students are in high school, usually, for four years. Students are classified as freshmen when in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, as sophomores in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, as juniors during the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and as seniors for the 12<sup>th</sup> grade year.

When a school or school system is referred to as traditional, the reference relates to typical public schools and districts with large comprehensive high schools that offer a wide array of both required and elective classes to 800-1000 students or more, as is the case in the district in which the students participants reside. A traditional system is the system that most students experience, requiring credits in order to graduate with a high school diploma and with teachers specializing in one content area within the school and teaching that subject matter to approximately 150 students each year. Also, in a traditional high school setting, grading usually consists of equating grades to percentage of points earned in the course. For example, 94% of total points would garner an A grade. The percentage grades commonly follow a grading scale similar to this: 100-90 = A; 89-80 = B; 79-70 = C; 69-60 = D, and 59% and below = F. Conversely, when a school or system is referred to as alternative in this research, the school or system operates with the assistance of a charter, which allows many of the regulations that rule public schools to be altered or waived. For example, in alternative settings with charters, teachers may teach multiple subjects and the school size is often significantly smaller than in traditional settings. Also, classes may be more integrated, as they are in the alternative charter school that the student participants attend. Further, grading is most often not based on traditional points and percentages but rather on proficiency or mastery based measures.

The specific alternative charter school in which all the research participants are enrolled is described in this way, according to the charter application filed with the state of Wisconsin:

*The ultimate purpose of education, from our view, is to teach students to ask and answer the question: "How do I want to live my life?" We see our task as providing them with the tools they will need in order to answer this question as they walk their path in life.*

*The charter school uses a hybrid approach for enacting our vision. One part of the program emphasizes 21<sup>st</sup> Century content knowledge and expertise in core subjects (language arts, art, mathematics, social science, science) using a thematic, integrated curriculum (TIC) in a classroom setting. We feel that there is a great value in the classroom; many transformative*

*conversations and experiences occur there. Additionally, many students have huge gaps in their knowledge base and a classroom experience allows them to bridge those gaps. A TIC classroom is NOT solely teacher directed instead, a TIC classroom is student-centered, based on multiple intelligences and designed to be meaningful and relevant to the students.*

*The other part of the program uses a multifaceted project based learning (PBL) model wherein students use 21st Century skills to link areas of focus for their projects to future "paths" following graduation. We know that giving students control over their education is vital to their taking ownership over their learning and discovering their "path". PBL allows students to feel engaged and inspired by their learning. Students create, design, plan, investigate and present their own projects based on their interests and passions. PBL allows students who have often felt voiceless in the traditional educational system, to find and use their voice.*

*Both components of our charter school are integral in creating a sense of value, meaning and community. Students more than anything need to feel they belong in school and can be successful there. They want to feel smart, they want to learn, they want to feel hope. The charter school ultimately must become an educational community. Teachers and students must build relationships with one another that allow this learning community to flourish and grow. We seek to link the goals of the charter school with student achievement goals as we help students gain the "tools" they will need as they ask and answer the question "how do I want to live my life?" Our school combines what we believe are the best practices to reach and inspire high school age youth; a TIC classroom and PBL under a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills model.*

In this description, it is helpful to understand that the students spend at least half of their instructional day working on projects due to the project-based learning (PBL) pedagogical approach that guides their learning. Also, worth noting is that the thematically integrated curriculum (TIC) classes is another difference from traditional high school experiences. TIC classes are taught in ways that intertwine and connect learning from multiple disciplines during the learning. Conversely, in a traditional high school, classes are most often taught in an isolated fashion with very few connections or overlaps occurring with content.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research, according to John W. Creswell, is "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem...Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a

situation” (adapted from Creswell, 2007). Creswell authored *Research Design*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (2009) and describes in detail qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches to research. Even this most general definition of qualitative research stated above provides rationale for using a qualitative approach in this particular research study on grading and learning from the students’ perspective. The primary purpose of this research is to learn from the students themselves about their experiences and the meanings that they place on the “problem” of grading in our school systems, a hallmark of qualitative research. Further, the research begins with a question and through the research process builds to a theory; this is without question honoring the inductive approach, another aspect of qualitative research. The questions to be answered in this qualitative research study are as follows:

1. What are students’ views on grading and learning and the relationship between the two?
  - a. Do students believe that their grades are accurate reflections of their learning?
  - b. Have they ever encountered a mismatch? If so, how did that impact their views on grading and learning?
2. What are students’ views on the purpose of school?
  - a. Do students see school as a place that promotes learning or as a place where they get grades?
  - b. Do students believe school is about learning or about proving you are smart?
3. How do students view school in terms of what is valued and what is meaningful?
  - a. What do students think that their teachers value more from them – good grades or meaningful learning?
  - b. In an effort to manage the vast number of students in the system, did we lose the meaningfulness of school?

## **Phenomenological Research**

More specifically, this research takes a phenomenological approach to inquiry, which is appropriate due to the focus being on the phenomenon of grading and learning as experienced by students in an alternative high school setting. Creswell states, “Phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, pg. 13). The students from the alternative high school setting describe their experiences with grading and learning, thus allowing the researcher to glean insights into the essence of the experiences. With another view on qualitative research, Merriam, in *Qualitative Research in Practice* (2002) addresses interpretive qualitative research by saying “constructionism thus underlies what I am calling a basic interpretive qualitative study. Here the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved... From phenomenology comes the idea that people interpret everyday experiences from the perspective of the meaning it has for them.” Then quoting Geertz, Merriam continues, “What phenomenologists emphasize, then, is the subjective aspects of people’s behavior. They attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of their subjects in order to understand how and what meaning they construct around events in their daily lives” (Merriam, 2002, pg. 37). My research, at its core, is about students and their lived experiences pertaining to grading and learning. Ultimately, an outcome of this work is to improve service to students. I have always valued student voice, both as a classroom teacher and as an administrator, and purposefully used strategies like holding listening sessions, inviting students to participate on interview teams, and administering end of course surveys to gather student input. This valuing of student voice influenced my research work. Student voice is necessary in the conversation about grading and learning. This statement is grounded in my

experience as a district curriculum director. In my role, I am responsible for creating conditions for effective student learning; thus, I must know what my students are thinking about grading and learning so that I can better serve their needs.

Storytelling as an aspect of qualitative research is described by Merriam (2002) in a section on Narrative Analysis. Merriam, quoting Chase (1995, pg. 1), shares, “Although informed by a myriad of disciplines and theoretical perspectives, “most scholars...concur that all forms of narrative share the fundamental interest in making sense of experience, the interest in constructing and communicating meaning”” (pg. 286). Elaborating further, Merriam says, “The story is a basic communicative and meaning-making device pervasive in human experience; it is no wonder that stories have moved center stage as a source of understanding the human condition” (pg. 286). Student voice is powerful and in this research, students are asked to share their perspectives on grading and learning by sharing their stories. The participants are able to consider examples or illustrations of instances that reflect their views on grading and learning. The personalization of their responses through stories will allow rich context to inform the research findings.

Creswell, pertaining to research questions, says, “in phenomenology, the questions might be broadly stated without specific reference to the existing literature or a typology of questions. Creswell cites Moustakas (1994), who talks about asking what the participants experienced and the contexts or situations in which they experienced it” (pg. 130). The design of this research being conducted on grading and learning mirrors this exactly. The students who attend the alternative high school setting respond to broadly stated questions by sharing their experiences and the specifics surrounding those experiences. Since the students are drawing upon the entirety of their experiences in schools, some of their stories pertain to the alternative setting



while other facets of their stories refer back to their experiences in a traditional school setting. The ability to draw from two alternate settings brings forth illuminating insights for consideration, thus they are, as Merriam (2002) describes, a “purposive or purposeful sample” (pg. 12).

Referring again to Merriam (2002), interpretive phenomenological research has four key characteristics (pgs 4-5), which all describe the process and approaches used in this research:

- Researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and experiences; the analysis strives for a depth of understanding.
- Researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Because the goal of the research is understanding, the human instrument, which is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive, would seem the ideal means of collecting and analyzing data. The human instrument has shortcomings; rather than trying to eliminate these biases or ‘subjectivities,’ it is important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of the data.
- The process is inductive; typically, findings inductively derived from the data in a qualitative study are in the form of themes, categories, concepts, and tentative hypotheses.
- The product is richly descriptive. Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon. In addition, data in the form of quotes from documents, field notes, and participant interviews, excerpts from videotapes, electronic communication, or a combination thereof are always included in support of the findings of the study.

## **Context and Participants**

The setting from which participants are drawn is a suburban school district of 3400 students total. The district is comprised of six schools – three elementary schools, one middle school, one traditional high school, and one alternative charter high school. The district's demographic make up is mainly white, middle class families. There are approximately 18% of students who receive free/reduced lunch and approximately 9% of students who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) district wide. 16% of district students are students of color. The alternative charter high school serves students in grades 9-12 and its demographics mirror the district's with the exception of a slightly higher population of students who live in poverty. For this reason, the school is identified as a Title 1 school and receives some additional support to assist with reading and math services.

The students participating in the survey portion of the research are in grades 11 and 12 in the alternative charter high school; the student participants' demographics do not mirror the school's demographics. Six students participated in the one on one interviews, which follow a structured interview protocol, "where specific questions and the order in which they are asked are determined ahead of time" (Creswell, pg. 12). I chose to use a structured approach in posing questions, but students could take the interview in directions that were comfortable for them with their responses, and, at times, follow-up questions or clarifications were asked. Further, the open-ended questions used also allow participants to engage in any way each sees fit because no right answers exist. The participant experiences and reflection on those experiences, whatever that may be, is what is important. There was not equal participation in terms of gender, with five of the six participants identifying as female. In addition, four of the participants were juniors and two were seniors. All attended both a traditional school setting for many years and the

alternative high school setting for at least one year. Looking at more specific demographic data related to the sample, 50% of the participant population is students of color while the other 50% of participants are Caucasian. Further, 33% of the population completing the survey identified as Male and 67% identified as Female. The diversity in the participant sample for the survey is more racially diverse and more Female than the school district as a whole and more racially diverse and more Male than the smaller participant sample used for the one on one interviews. Regarding the six students who participated in the one on one interviews, 67% were juniors (four students) and 33% were seniors (two students). Five of the six students (84%) who participated in the one on one interviews are Caucasian and the same percentage identify as Female. All participants engaged in the research willingly and with parent permission if under 18. All participants are residents of the school district, a suburban district of approximately 3400 students.

### **Role of Researcher**

I am aware that the students who participate in this study will be speaking with me; my role in the district is that of Director of Instruction. My position as a district administrator could influence student responses, as they could see me as someone who has the power to make changes for improvement based on what they say or someone who has power over their teachers and school. The inherent power that comes with positions at the top of a hierarchical structure may be a factor. Students may not want to criticize the current system for fear that I value that system. Students may try to guess what I want them to say so that they can please a district administrator. I will have to let students know early and often that I am open to wherever their conversation takes us and that I am not awaiting a “right” answer. I will need to keep the conversations focused on their thoughts and be careful not to interject my biases about secondary

grading systems. I need to help students understand that what I am seeking is an accurate sense from them about how they experience grading and learning currently in their alternative high school setting as well as how they experienced grading previously in more traditional settings. Although the students have seen me in their school when I come for visits, my interactions have been cursory. I am not familiar with their stories or histories; they don't know much about me or, most likely, even much about my role in the district. However, as the Director of Instruction for the district, I was invited and attended the annual science symposium at the charter school. Each student, including research participants, completed a scientific inquiry and presented findings during the symposium. I was purely in the role of audience during this visit, listening to and appreciating the work that students had put in to their inquiry. In addition, as part of my role in the district, I assist site-based administrators with the requirements for Educator Effectiveness; specifically, I conducted mini-observations on teachers to assist the evaluating administrator complete all the components of summary year evaluations. The mini observations were not scored by me, but they provided additional evidence aligned to Danielson's Framework for Teaching that the evaluating administrator could use in the End of Cycle Summary scoring. I conducted two mini observations at the charter school for two of its teachers. These visits to the school were another way that students had some familiarity with me.

### **Selection of Student Participants**

The data source is high school students who are juniors or seniors in an alternative high school in a suburban school district. Each student has had experience in both a traditional school setting and in this alternative school setting, which provides perspective that not all students have. Because this research is a broad look at grading and learning based on students' experiences and not a case study of six students, the students' backgrounds stay limited to

demographic data such as gender, grade level, and race/ethnicity. The methods used include survey and interview; using multiple methods of data collection increases validity when information shared in one method is confirmed in another. The survey asked students to respond to four short answer questions, one bounded response question, and five Likert-based questions, with students rating their agreement with certain statements.

To conduct this research, I met with all junior and senior students as a group so that I could introduce myself, provide an overview of my research and of a participant's role, and ask for their consideration to become participants. There were twenty-two students who attended this introductory meeting. At that time, I distributed permission slips to the students so that parent permission could be obtained. Students were asked to return signed permission forms to me within a two-week window. I received twelve permission slips and thus those twelve students became the survey participants. The survey was distributed in a group setting to all twelve students; however, each student completed the survey individually. Some students completed the survey quickly, within 15 minutes. A few students took up to thirty-five minutes to complete the survey. One student took the survey with her to complete and submit later due to an appointment that required her to leave school before she was done with the survey. After completion of the surveys, all twelve students were contacted by email to set up a one on one interview. Based on the first email invitation, three students contacted me for interviews. I scheduled and completed those interviews. I sent a second email invitation to the remaining survey participants and received three more responses. Again, I scheduled and completed those interviews. The time of year was such that students were completing projects and focusing on an end of term; this is one reason why I chose not to continue to request interviews from those who had not yet responded. Furthermore, the data yielded by the already completed interviews were

compelling and rich. This was an additional reason why I stopped requesting additional participation beyond the six participants.

I am hopeful that students can and will contribute insightful and useful thoughts and opinions, but I will not know unless I engage in the process with them. Also, students from this alternative charter high school setting in a suburban district may not be representative of any larger group of students, so again generalization may not be possible. Since I have no direct bearing on student grades nor their day-to-day school experience, I hoped that students would be willing to speak to me. My approach to them was as one seeking assistance. I asked them to help me know about their experiences so that I may consider how to improve an overall school experience for all students. I stressed to them that they have valuable information to share and I would appreciate their honest and open participation. However, students may have thought that because I am a district administrator that if they say anything negative, it will get their teachers in trouble. I did let them know right away that they do not need to name specific teachers since I am more interested in understanding their experiences, not in blaming or rewarding teachers. The survey provided a chance for students to begin thinking about grading and learning before we engaged in one on one interviews. This “warm up” with a survey, even if taken a week or two in advance of the interview, provided a foundation for our interview and gave students time to think about the grading and learning during the time between the survey and interview. My hope was that the students felt empowered by the opportunity to speak.

I believe that the best way to illicit valuable information from students is through their stories. As mentioned earlier, Merriam (2002) outlined strengths of storytelling and legitimized the methodology in qualitative research. People like to talk about themselves and adolescents are no exception. Asking for information in the context of stories usually reduces anxiety by

creating a relaxed atmosphere. There is less of an interview feel to that type of conversation. Student participants were given choice of location for the interview. I could come to them in their school environment or they could come to me in my office. Interviews happened in both locations. The list of questions used to prompt student stories are as follows, along with alignment to the overall research questions:

1. What are students' views on grading and learning and the relationship between the two?

- How would you describe grading? How would you describe learning? What do you think the relationship between grading and learning is?
- Please share with me a time when you felt like you really learned something at school. Why did you feel like you learned? What made this a good experience?
- Tell me about a time, if one exists, when you experienced a mismatch between what you learned and a grade you received. Perhaps there is a time when you received a high grade but didn't feel like you learned a lot or vice versa?

2. What are students' views on the purpose of school?

- What have you experienced as the difference between your earlier school experiences and your current school experience when it comes to grading and learning?

3. How do students view school in terms of what is valued and what is meaningful?

- When you think about what teachers want for their students, do you think it is more about good grades or about meaningful learning? Why do you think that?

- If you could create your own school system, how would you approach grading and learning?

### **Plan for Analysis of Research Data**

Student participants generated data in two ways, through completion of a 10 question survey and participation in a one on one interview. The survey data will be analyzed more quantitatively since the results, especially those tied to the Likert-based questions, can be assessed numerically. The one on one interviews require qualitative consideration. These interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent. From the recordings, which were listened to repeatedly, I sought emerging patterns and themes. The purpose of this research is to ascertain from the students' perspectives on grading and learning how students make sense of their experiences in school and what could improve the experience. The research shows that adults believe that taking a more standards-based approach to grading will assist students in their learning. Do students speak about anything remotely resembling standards-based approaches as they share what they think works for them? What do they value? I will need to make judgments about what is relevant and irrelevant from the stories they share.

### **Potential Bias**

I fully believed that I would find that students learn a lot of significant things in school but grading probably doesn't serve learning in any significant way. Informed by my experience in education, working with high school students for over 20 years, I must share that most conversations with students about grading had negative connotations. In my work as a principal, both struggling students and high achieving students have shared their frustrations tied to grading with me. These experiences do have influence on how I understand school and its impact on students. Students learn and want to learn but also want to be successful in society's eyes and



that means good grades. Schooling then becomes for students more about grades than learning. For the participants in this research who chose to exit a traditional school setting, their insights about grading and learning in the alternative high school setting could provide important lessons that can be applied system-wide.

### **Potential Limitations**

It is important to address the limitations of this study. Admittedly, the generalizability of the findings could be questioned due to the size of and specific common schooling experience among the research sample. Lack of generalizability is a critique often cited regarding qualitative research. Creswell (2009) states, “In fact, the value of qualitative research lies in the particular description and themes developed in context of a specific site. Particularity rather than generalizability (Greene & Caracelli, 1997) is the hallmark of qualitative research” (pg. 193). There is value in understanding the participant students’ views on grading and learning and, even though contextualized, their expressed views and shared experiences can be used to confirm the findings presented in the literature review. Further, from my own role as both a high school teacher and a high school principal for over 20 years, I have judgments related to students’ views on grading and learning, which can also be confirmed by the participants in this research study, despite the size and specific common school experiences. All of the students’ alternative school experience involves attending the same charter school. This charter school, which operates using a problem-based learning pedagogy in tandem with some thematically integrated, teacher-led classes, has influenced the participants’ views on schooling. The commonality of experience tied to one single charter school may also further impact generalizability to a wider population of students or to school systems beyond the one these students attend, but since particularity is the strength of qualitative research, the limitation is minimal.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Research Findings and Analysis**

The research findings that follow are shared in two ways: a mix of quantitative and qualitative results summarized from the survey that was administered to 12 students and a qualitative approach focused on emergent themes, with liberal use of the participants' own language in order to capture as true as possible the authentic emotion and beliefs of the six participants who were involved in one on one interviews. For the survey results, the specific question will be listed, along with summarized student responses. Then, analysis of those responses will be shared. The questions fell into three types – open-ended, bounded response, and Likert-based. When possible, the results from the responses will be shared quantitatively. Pertaining to the one on one interviews, again the specific question will be listed, with student responses in their own words will be shared. An analysis of the students' views follows each question and response summary.

Question 1 of the survey asked participants to state how long each had attended a traditional high school setting and how long each has attended the alternative charter school. Each student had attended a traditional school for his/her K-8 schooling. 50% of participants were in their first year of attendance at the charter school; 33% were in their second year, and 17% were in their third year. The two students who were in their third year were 5<sup>th</sup> year seniors, while four others were 4<sup>th</sup> year seniors and six were juniors at the time of the data collection.

#### **Survey Results and Analysis**

The survey was distributed to the 12 participants in March 2016. A classroom located in the charter school was used as the location for students to complete the survey. As mentioned earlier, some students took 15 minutes to complete while others took as long as 35 minutes. The

survey is comprised of 10 questions, the first question asking how long the student has been in a traditional and an alternative setting. Having previously shared the responses to question 1, the remaining results will be shared relative to questions 2-10 here.

### **Open-ended Survey Questions**

Question 2 asks “In general, what do you like most about school?” This open-ended question garnered a wide array of responses. In the students’ own language but abbreviating the responses, the students shared these comments:

- school gets me out of the house; I like learning, expanding academically and personally
- the social and physicalness of it
- learning in a hands on way; being taught in a relatable way
- learning new things; finding passions
- art and music classes
- literally nothing; I really can’t think of anything. Well, band class.
- Debates and student-led lectures
- Sense of accomplishment
- I didn’t enjoy school much until I came to this school (alternative setting)
- Fitness or gym class
- Art classes and being able to be creative
- Face to face learning and interactions with teachers

Analysis of these responses shows that all students could find something positive about school; however, no respondent identified getting good grades or being graded as something s/he liked

about school. The closest reference made is “a sense of accomplishment” stated by one participant, which could have some relation to being evaluated successfully, but if so, the linkage is vague. Clarity is more readily achieved regarding other aspects of schooling. Four of the responses (33%) mention a specific type of class and 100% of those specific references are non-core classes that have much more student participation and creative expression as part of the curriculum. Another four of the responses (33%) specifically mention liking learning in general. Combining those who like a specific class with those who mention liking learning, 66% of respondents enjoy the act of learning or participating in learning in a class or school. This positive positioning of learning is good news since schools’ primary purpose is to facilitate learning and that is what emerges as what students like most about school.

Question 3 asks students “In general, what do you like least about school?” Again, this open-ended question resulted in a range of responses.

- the environment with unmotivated classmates
- the teachers and the students; lots of teachers never helped me and students would be mean to each other; not a good learning environment
- math, I’ve never been good at it
- the rules; sit here/write this
- tests; I go blank or I stress out
- everything except debates or student-led lectures
- the people, my classes, my teachers, most of the other kids
- large groups, some teachers, majority of my peers
- getting fed knowledge to memorize; big classes with no individual attention; not feeling like what I’m learning matters; not feeling inspired

- too much homework; not enough time to do it and then failing
- how they try to teach you but it's not actually for you; for me it was more negative and a waste of time
- early start time; teachers not understanding how to explain things to me or it took too much time

Analysis of these responses shows a significant theme involving human interaction. Seven of the 12 responses (58%) mention teacher or classmates or an interaction with either/both as what they like least about school. Within those seven responses, four specifically mention peer interactions as a strong negative, and six of the seven identify teacher as a negative, pointing out inadequacies like not being able to explain things well or not being inspiring or simply not being helpful. With nearly 60% of the negative impressions of school coming from interactions with others, it is clear that schools must focus on improving environments and relationships for the sake of learning. Specifically looking at connections related to grading and this prompt, no student said that grading or being judged was what s/he liked least. Interpreting two of the answers, “too much homework and not enough time to do it, then failing” and “math; I’ve never been good at it,” leads to a connection: both of these comments do relate to some form of judgment being cast upon them due to performance with something, which could be interpreted to be some form of grading. If that interpretation is valid, then two of 12 responses would be 17% of the total sample mentioning something “grade-like” as what they like least about school.

More notably, it can be stated that direct references to grading do not appear in either the best or worst parts of school for students. This may indicate that students feel more strongly about many other aspects of schooling, like learning and the environment. Are educators

spending too much time focusing on changing grading practices when, in fact, students identify other aspects of schooling as more important in positive or negative ways?

Question 4 asks students to say if they felt school was preparing them to do well in life after school. The students responded in the following ways:

- Yes, prepares me to work with others and gives me knowledge
- Yes, when it's personalized
- Yes, financial literacy class and classes that help me reach my goals
- Yes, in this alternative setting; I learned confidence and courage and how to do my taxes and career/job skills
- Yes, in alternative setting; the smaller school with more time to talk with teachers
- I'm not sure. A little bit. I know having a diploma is important.
- Yes, the alternative school; it has helped me open up more as a person
- Yes, at the alternative school
- Yes, this school has set me up to make decisions that will benefit me
- Yes, with the alternative school there is a point to coming. Career focus that I want to pursue; not in a box with everyone else.
- Yes, alternative school, I'm learning about a specific area of study
- Somewhat; not enough practical things like taxes

Analysis regarding this specific question shows that 10 of the 12 responses are affirmative; school is preparing students for their future. The two that were not "yes" responses were not "no" either – one said "a little bit" and the other said "somewhat." These responses, in total, are overwhelming positive and highlight clearly that students see benefits to school. Additionally, seven of the responses (58%) specifically mention the alternative setting. This is high praise for

the school that they currently attend since it shows how much they value the education and preparation they are receiving there. Hypothetically, if the students were never enrolled in this alternative setting, the affirmative responses could have dropped significantly. Relating this analysis back to the analysis of Question 3, the environment of the alternative setting, which provides more personalization and support, makes the difference for these students.

### **Bounded-response Survey Question**

Question 5 asks students to identify things that school provides that help them learn; students could check all that applied. Eight choices were listed, thus the response was not open-ended but bounded. Ten of 12 students signaled that “engaging teachers” help them learn and was the most prevalent answer among the eight choices along with “websites, videos, and other resources.” Seeing that teachers and educational resources are both instrumental in guiding learning, the student responses to Question 5 reinforce that students are interested in learning. Two responses very close to the top responses are “interesting classes” and “help from a teacher.” These four choices captured 71% of all the responses given by students. The specific data pertaining to Question 5 is as follows:

Resources	Number of students who viewed the resource as helpful
Tutoring	5
Interesting classes	10
Engaging teachers	11
Academic resource room	6
Help from a teacher	10
Quality textbooks	3
Websites, videos, other resources	11
Review sessions	3



While students rated textbooks, review sessions, academic resource rooms, or tutoring as less helpful, those are aspects of schooling in which significant resources and effort are expended. It is worth wondering again if perhaps educators are putting time and energy into low leverage things that don't resonate with students as helpful.

### Likert-based Survey Questions

Questions 6-10 asks students to respond using a Likert Scale with 1 as the lowest level of agreement and 6 as the highest level of agreement when considering each prompt. For each prompt, examining the median (middle response) and the mode (most common/frequent response) informs the analysis. In the publication “Analyzing and Interpreting Data From Likert-Type Scales,” featured in the Journal of Graduate Medical Education, authors Sullivan and Artino explain that the median should be used as the measure of central tendency for Likert Scale data as the median allows for the most reliable interpretation using non-parametric approaches, but a secondary measure can include frequency distribution, which is mode. Sullivan and Artino assert that in the medical field, which use Likert-type scales often, these approaches are most suitable when interpreting Likert-based data (2013, pgs. 541-542). The results associated with the five prompts are as follows:

Question Number	Question Statement	Mode	Median
6	“The grades I receive in school motivate me.”	3	3
7	“What I am learning in school is valuable to me.”	Bi-modal 4 and 6	5
8	“It is important to me to receive good grades in school.”	Bi-modal 5 and 6	5
9	“It is important to me to learn as much as I can in school.”	6	5
10	“I feel that grades are an accurate representation of learning; my grades match what I know.”	1	1

Analysis of these Likert-based questions focuses on the degree to which students agreed with the statements, with a score of 6 being the highest level of agreement. An even number was used for response options so that neutral responses would be minimized; students could not choose “the middle” but would need to at least “lean” towards lesser or more agreement. The response closest to the middle of any of the five prompts was seen with Question 6. Student responses fell most near a 3 on the 1-6 scale regarding “the grades I receive in school motivate me.” Five of the 12 responses were 3s, with 10 of the 12 responses corresponding with 1, 2, or 3, which are the lowest levels of agreement. These responses are showing that these students are either not motivated or may be somewhat motivated by grades, but certainly grades are not strong motivators for these respondents.

Question 7 had students show their level of agreement with the statement “what I am learning in school is valuable to me.” The median response is 5 and there is a bi-modal response with both 4 and 6 receiving four responses from students. Eleven of the 12 responses fell on the upper end of agreement, which confirms that these participants do see value in what they learn in school.

When asked about agreement with the statement “it is important to receive good grades in school,” which is Question 8, student responses showed the most distribution across all six possible responses. One student answered 1, two answered 2, two answered 3, one answered 4, three answered 5 and three answered 6. This was the only prompt with which responses fell in each of the possible choices. Still, 50% of the responses were at the high end of agreement; the mode was bi-modal with three students each selecting 5 or 6 as answers. The median response here was 5. What is most telling regarding these results is the wide distribution among all

possible answers. This indicates that students are not unified in their thinking about the importance of good grades.

Not surprisingly, the answers for Question 9 mirror closely the answers for Question 7; both of these questions ask students about learning – the value (question 7) and the importance (question 9). Again, the responses lean toward the end of stronger agreement, with a median of 5 and a mode of 6. No students responded with a 1 or a 2 regarding “it is important to me to learn as much as I can in school.” Students are consistently showing a positive recognition of learning in their responses.

Student response to Question 10 showed the most definitive and unanimous answer among the five questions asked. Eight of the 12 students (67%) chose 1 as the level of agreement to “I feel that grades are an accurate representation of learning; grades match what I know.” The strong lack of agreement with this statement crystalizes the importance of considering grading and learning from the students’ perspective. The participants in this sample did not see that the grades they receive accurately represent their learning. In fact, one student went as far as choosing 0 as an answer in order to show his complete disagreement with the statement, even though 0 was not an option given. None of the students responded with a 4, 5, or 6 on this question, showing no inclination toward agreement among any of the students. This was the only question that resulted in such a clear collective response without even one outlier among the students.

In summary regarding the Likert-based survey questions, those that referred to learning had the least distribution and most consistency of response, trending to the positive. The questions related to grading elicited responses that trended to the negative. Only the last question in the survey that combined grading and learning, asking if one was a good indicator of

the other, showed disagreement unequivocally. It appears that students do not see grading and learning as correlated in any way. Since the specific reason for grading is to communicate learning, this result is problematic and shines a spotlight on the flaws in our current practices. It certainly is not ill-advised to examine grading practices, but a larger, perhaps more important, question is “do we need grading at all in order to facilitate meaningful learning?” The one on one interviews with students that comprise the second data set delves more deeply into how students feel about grading and learning and the connections between the two.

### **Interview Results and Analysis**

Six of the twelve participants from the survey took part in one on one interviews. Some of the interviews occurred at the alternative school site and some took place in my office in the district, which is located in the same building as the alternative school but in a different wing. The location decision was left up to the student as was the specific date and time of the interview. All one on one interviews involved providing a written copy of the interview questions to the participants and audio-recording the responses so that students’ thoughts and language could be captured accurately and revisited as needed in order to tease out themes and consistencies as well as any unique or outlier responses. Interview data are shared here, question by question, by first presenting the question, then the response data, and finally analysis of that data. Themes and patterns are identified when they emerge from the analysis of the data. Without exception, the students showed themselves to be thoughtful in their responses, seeking to accurately communicate their feelings and insights related to the prompts. On average, the one on one interview with each student took an hour to complete. At different times in the interviews, participants were occasionally asked to clarify or expand on their thinking. Most

often, the interviews followed the pacing and direction set by the students without interruption from the researcher after the posing of each question.

**Question 1 – How would you describe grading? How would you describe learning? What do you think the relationship is between grading and learning? What should it be? Are both necessary?**

Minimal attempt was made to define grading but rather students immediately made emotional connections to grading. Common language related to grading included a sense of feeling bad. Students said “Grading makes me feel bad” and “I didn’t feel good about myself” and “Grading makes people feel bad.” Those who did attempt to define grading said “Grading points out mistakes and strong points; it tells how someone is doing” and “Grading is about evaluating learning.” Learning was characterized both by what it isn’t and what it is. Students were quick to point out that learning is not memorizing facts. Memorizing was mentioned by most of the students in their interviews. Trying to define the relationship proved a bit difficult to quantify for students. Comments included “Learning is necessary; grading isn’t,” “Learning and grading shouldn’t have to go together,” “Learning is a necessity and grading is to a point,” and “Learning can thrive without grading.” In some fashion, each participant verbalized the importance of learning and minimized the role of grading. One student bluntly stated, “I don’t believe in grading. Grading systems are set up to fail people.” Another shared the following:

“So... grading. Like I went to the high school my 1<sup>st</sup> year and I failed all my classes. I wasn’t motivated to learn about the things we’d been taught. So I guess I think there should not be a relationship between grading and learning. I feel this way personally because so many kids learn differently. I don’t believe a single person in this world can be categorized into how they learn.”

**Question 2 – Please share with me a time when you felt like you really learned something at school. Why did you feel like you learned? What made this a good experience?**

A theme that emerged from this prompt is that learning must be relevant to the student. The word “useful” was repeated frequently followed by words like “apply to life,” “interested in,” and “applied to everyday.” One student shared that her learning experience was positive because it was “not just book learning.” Each student identified something different as the thing they really learned – knitting, cooking, philosophy, Freida Kahlo, scientific concepts, and project-based learning. This range in topics shows that the content specifics are not what determine if something will result in successful learning. Relevance and application seem to be the contributing factors that distinguish meaningful learning for students. For example, one student shared this:

“Science. You can relate anything and I’m really interested in science, so maybe I’m more attracted to learning it. It’s easier to present your knowledge in different ways than a test. If you ask me what I know about Albert Einstein, it’s easier to talk to you one on one and explain and elaborate verbally. We can’t discuss what I write on a piece of paper because I’m not in the room when you’re grading that.”

This student coupled her response on loving to learn science and feeling it was relevant to grading. It is important to draw attention to the fact that many of the examples of successful learning corresponded to a situation that didn’t involve grading and/or involved a caring teacher who encouraged the students.

### **Question 3 – Have you ever experienced a mismatch between what you learned and a grade you received?**

Without exception, all participants described at least one time when a mismatch between grading and learning occurred. A majority elaborated on multiple examples that included times when little effort was expended and yet a good grade was given and then, conversely, times when significant effort was expended and a poor grade was given. Interestingly, students talked about “getting” grades, using derivatives of that: got, get, getting. However, most were not

blaming teachers for bad grades in their comments. The system was more at question. For example, one student said, “It’s the objective tests that cause a mismatch. Same tests with the same questions in the same way. I could verbally tell the teacher what I know and do better. Students should be able to use their strong suits to show knowledge.” Another student shared, “Usually, I can show what I know better if we talk about it. Tests don’t show that. I am too slow and then I don’t finish or I rush. My thoughts are more than I can write down.” These two students are expressing frustration with the narrow approach to assessment. While some students might do really well on objective tests, these students illustrated how that approach does not work for them. It relates back to the previous comment about memorization not being learning from Question 1. Students who can do well on objective tests, which primarily address lower order thinking skills, are usually students who can memorize well. These students in this alternative setting are different types of learners, and having some sort of choice in how they represent their knowledge would assist in reducing the mismatches between grading and learning that they have experienced. In addition, one student added a unique dimension to the responses by drawing in references to teacher expectations. This student offered,

“I was rushing things; throwing assignments together and getting an A. I feel like the teacher didn’t even read it. Low expectations reinforces [sic] low effort. But for a science symposium, I put a display together quickly without caring much. I wasn’t proud of that work. I didn’t get any credit. The end product wasn’t good. High expectations matter.”

It is interesting to note this student’s connection between the expectations of the teacher and the effort of the student. Along these same lines, another student shared this:

“I don’t believe that every teacher starts out this way but some teachers end up feeling I believe this way. That they just want to do their part and do their job, what they’re required to do and teach them the bare minimum. And don’t try to connect with the students or anything.”

The students were sharing a reality that it’s possible to do minimal work and get a good grade; for them, this sent a message that they don’t need to put in much effort. It’s worth repeating this student’s comment: high expectations matter. The student’s response touched on the relationship that the teacher plays in what students see as fair or a “matching” grade/learning pairing. Ultimately, there was not any predictable relationship that emerged between grading and learning or between effort and grades that could be determined from the students’ views. Many variables came in to play, such as the format of the assessment, the specific teacher and his/her expectations, and the student’s level of commitment. It appears that perhaps it is barrier to learning if students cannot reasonably rely on the following: if they work hard and if they are willing to keep at it, they will successfully learn and they will earn a good grade.

**Question 4 – When you think about what teachers want for their students, do you think it’s more about good grades or about meaningful learning? Why do you think that?**

The resounding pattern echoing in students’ responses to this question is that it depends on the teacher. In every response, students gave examples of teachers who really seemed to care about learning and about working with students so that they could be successful. Often, these positive relationships with teachers were occurring in the alternative school setting. This led to a follow up question about could these positive relationships be replicated in a traditional school setting. Again, students responded that it depends. Also, throughout the responses, a trend



toward more teachers only caring about grades did emerge. Replies such as “most seem to care about grades,” “traditional high school teachers cared about grades and said it reflected on them,” “The traditional teachers could do more; they just see students as students in class, not as a broader person,” and “traditional high school teachers don’t care as much; it’s the size and the time.” The students were not making these comments to insinuate that the teachers were bad, but, moreso, to express that large schools depersonalize students to teachers. Simply, there are just too many students to get to know well. For one student, this question provided an opportunity for her to praise the alternative school setting that she’s in. She shared the following:

“In the alternative setting, it’s meaningful learning. Society’s perspective is that good grades mean something. To go to college, it’s all about a fixation on grades, ACT, and GPA. It sucks. The only way to do good [sic] in life is to do good in school which means to get good grades. People think you’re a bad kid if you go to an alternative school. But little schools like this could change society. It’s the difference between education about jobs versus how to get a job; it’s book education versus life education.”

This student’s passionate commentary about her school included important reflection on how society judges its citizens with regard to schooling. The sense that anyone who does poorly in school is somehow inadequate pervades for this student as well as others. Unfortunately, what it means to do well in school is inextricably linked to grading, and grading practices are deeply flawed, as seen repeatedly in the research.

**Question 5 – What have you experienced as the difference between the alternative setting and the traditional setting when it comes to grading and learning?**

This prompt proved to be a bit difficult for students to capture in a larger sense; rather, the responses centered on very specific differences. For example, project-based learning and thematically integrated classes (TIC), which are the cornerstones for the alternative school

setting, were referenced repeatedly. The students really enjoyed working with their teachers and co-constructing their learning goals for their projects. Many of the replies contained references to the strong relationships that the students had with their teachers in the alternative school setting. The students were succeeding in school and enjoying learning because they had voice and they had quality relationships. Specifically, the students said, “With project-based learning and TIC, it’s not rushed; it’s at our own pace and we can learn about what we want to learn about,” “We are a community in the alternative setting; teachers don’t judge you and aren’t mad. It’s about relationships,” “We have a say in the classes we take. Interest matters.” And when mentioning traditional school settings, the tone changed. Students reflected, “Teachers can be too controlling, no patience with kids. No one wants to do the assignments, but they just do it,” “I’m not a fan of traditional learning. It’s not a productive way to teach students. It’s to pass a standardized test and it’s teaching out of a textbook.” Echoing what many of the other students said, one student captured the overall sentiment when she shared this about teachers in her alternative charter school:

“They are really good at making sure we’re comfortable in our learning environment and they make it so we feel that they’re being fair with us in the way that they talk with us or discipline us or teach us. They give us lots of options for the way we express ourselves and they care about what goes on in our lives after school. They aren’t going to just ship up off and forget about us.”

The difference in the alternative setting and the traditional setting came down to the relationships primarily. Clearly, the students see significant differences in grading and learning in the two school settings that they’ve experienced. A student shared the following on that:

“Regular high school has grades A, B, C, D. We have, I don’t know. In our classes we complete projects and we have a rubric that has 1, 2, 3, 4, so we don’t have grades. I’m not sure how to explain it. I had a very bad experience at the regular high school. The grades really don’t reflect your intelligence. If I didn’t like a class or if it was too hard, I just wouldn’t do the work. If you’re not getting good grades, you’re looked at as dumb

basically and so even if you're not, they're still just looking at your grades like that. It's how they define you as a person in high school."

It is interesting that this student saw grading as limited to A, B, C, D grades and did not see rubric assessment levels in the same way. Further, the value placed on grades as they relate to identity in the traditional high school was shared here, but supported by other students as well. The students offer more positive affirmations about the alternative school setting, and, although critical of the approaches used for grading and learning in the traditional setting, they do hold out hope. One student said, "But traditional schools could teach differently beyond testing." Another offered, "I think eventually all learning could be like the alternative setting. Teachers need to be educated about how things work here with community and relationships." This optimism expressed by the students is encouraging because it means that they have not given up hope that all schools could be better places for learning too.

### **Question 6 – If you could create your own school system, how would you approach grading and learning?**

This question was included in the slate of six because of its ability to allow students to dream big and be creative about schooling. Often improvements are stifled by current conditions and the ideas that certain things would need to remain or no one would change everything. However, if given a blank canvas, anything is possible. Students were allowed to take this response in any direction without limit. What ended up emerging in the answers can be described as more "retrofitting" than complete overhaul. Students voiced in response after response adjustments to the current system and not wholesale change. The specifics of their responses are summarily captured in these following quotes:

- "I would have teachers there to answer questions, and I'd have more work time with peers to collaborate and I'd have more process time. No grades. This would mean kids wouldn't be seen as smart or stupid." \*After giving this response, the participant

began to cry. She said it was hard to be seen as stupid all the time just because she doesn't get good grades.

- "I'd have project-based learning and use rubrics. I think I like rubrics. I like discussing them with the teachers and communicating about why."
- "I would try and take grading out completely. It's not fair. It's degrading. Don't give an F; give more time and support."
- "Project-based learning is a cool idea. Express learning by making things. Just have an essential question."
- "I like the way they do it in the alternative setting. Things are co-planned with student input. The teachers are genuine."
- "I would be more strict with the kids on behavior. Some have lack of effort and are taking advantage. The kids who are new to our school are not valuing what they have and being disrespectful."

In analyzing the responses for this last question, an obvious aspect to a new vision of grading and learning from the students perspective is to minimize, if not eliminate, grading. It appears that students, for the most part, would keep the basic premise of school in place: teachers, classes, students, objectives, and learning would remain. They would like closer relationships with their teachers; they would like more relevant classes in which they had input; and they would like respectful classmates who appreciate learning in a positive environment. The most often repeated sentiment, and the one that garnered the biggest emotional reaction, was eliminate grading. Although just one part of a student's school experience, the impacts and repercussions felt due to grading go deep for students. Since promoting learning in schools means creating environments that work for students and since these students are expressing that grading is a barrier to learning, we must consider carefully what this means going forward.

In chapter 5, the analysis from this chapter will be applied to the research questions so that what is learned from the research is clear. In addition, recommendation will be made regarding implications for schools pertaining to grading and learning.



## Chapter Five

### Research Judgments and Applications

In their book *Most Likely to Succeed* (2015), Wagner and Dintersmith, referring to educational reform, state, “Our challenge isn’t making incremental improvements to an education model designed in 1893. Our opportunity – and our obligation to our youth – is to reimagine our schools, and give all kids an education that will help them thrive in a world that values them for what they can do, not the facts that they know” (pg 222). This captures the key judgment that resounds based on this research study: don’t tinker around the edges of educational reform by considering fixes to grading; rather, fundamentally focus on improving learning.

Reviewing the three research questions and providing judgments for each, based on scholarship contained in the literature review and research findings from the student survey results and the one on one interviews will establish the foundation for future application in schools. I have organized the research judgments and applications by presenting the research question first, then the judgments drawn, for each of the three questions. Following this, I share some applications that can be considered in light of the research judgments. The research questions, with judgments added, are as follows:

#### **Question 1: Judgments Drawn**

What do students believe is the relationship between grading and learning? Do they believe that their grades are accurate reflections of their learning? Do grades affect their learning and/or motivation to learn?

The students did not see any valuable relationship between grading and learning. For students, these two aspects of schooling live side by side rather than share space. While they accepted that grading attempted to evaluate learning, students did not see grading as essential to

learning. Comments like “grades don’t reflect your intelligence” and “learning and grading shouldn’t have to go together” illustrate this. In fact, all of the students had negative connotations with grading. In the research, authors address how grades do not serve as motivators to all students (Guskey,2015; Vatterott, 2015; O’Connor, 2002). I have not encountered any scholarship that speaks about grading with the same degree of negativity that the participants in this research did, but neither did I find much scholarship that included any student voice at all. Why were the participants so disillusioned with grading? They felt that grading did not accurately capture their ability or effort, thus grading was demotivating. The grades they received often made them feel badly about themselves. Admittedly, they did not regularly do well in the high schools that they left. They all saw themselves as capable of learning and they expressed desires to learn, but they did not find that learning was happening in the traditional system for them. Grades were a barrier to learning.

### **Question 2: Judgments Drawn**

Do students see school as a place that promotes learning or as a place where they get grades? Do students believe school is about learning or about proving you are smart?

The students shared that the teacher was the key ingredient regarding whether or not school was a place that promoted learning. Their comments reflect that it was more the exception than the rule that they encountered teachers who partnered with them on learning. They stated that they sometimes needed more time or things explained in different ways and that didn’t happen regularly. Further, they spoke frequently about the difference a good relationship made in learning. They wanted their teachers to see them as individuals and to know them. They wanted to feel like they mattered and that teachers cared about them as people. In the alternative setting, they felt like known and respected. In the traditional setting, they felt like one

of a crowd, with everyone expected to do the same things. One student said, “They just see students as students in class, not as a broader person.” The literature on grading practices speaks to technical aspects of grading with very little, if any, mention of the way grading influences and affects personal relationships between student and teacher. The students spoke emotionally about grading, feeling devalued based on grades, with one student saying that “grades make me feel bad about myself.” Teachers who tend to see grading as just a technical part of the job and overlook the deeply personal impact that comes with judgment are jeopardizing their ability to be effective with students. Recently, a fellow curriculum director and I were speaking about curriculum renewal cycles. During this conversation she said, “all learning is personal; if we forget that it becomes about content and coverage.” I was really struck by that statement since it highlighted for me the absolute need to contextualize grading as part of a personal interaction rather than the objective evaluation of content knowledge. When students are not feeling personally invited in to their learning experience, they see schools as places where they receive grades for jumping through prescribed hoops. Learning must be personalized to include students as partners along with teachers.

### **Question 3: Judgments Drawn**

What do students think that their teachers value more from them – good grades or meaningful learning? In an effort to manage the vast number of students in the system, did we lose the meaningfulness of school?

The participants in the research, as mentioned earlier regarding Question 2, highlighted the influence of the teacher as a determining factor in whether or not learning was valued above good grades. They had more teachers, especially in the traditional school setting, who seemed to value student compliance with assigned tasks and then used that work to calculate a grade. One



student interpreted their teacher's beliefs this way: "get good grades because it reflects on me." Interestingly, the students did comment frequently on the school as a system. They did not hold teachers completely to blame for the standardized approaches to learning in their classes; they recognized the difficulty that came from large numbers of students and the school bell schedule that only allotted so much time for each class. One student said, "it's the size and the time." Regarding the traditional school, the students felt that memorization was required most often in order to do well, which was not meaningful to them. In contrast, they felt that they were more involved in planning their learning with their teachers in the alternative setting, with choice of topics and projects and timelines. This created a greater sense of meaning for them and helped them engage more fully in their learning. The research on improving grading practices, due to its narrow nature, did not focus on improving meaningfulness in what was taught, just on how to better grade the content that is current in schools. More recently, a trend towards situating grading in the larger context of learning is occurring. Although "grading scholars" still primarily keep the focus on the technical parts of grading, there is more attention paid to student involvement and ownership so that they are active in the process rather than passive. This trend mirrors what students valued in their comments. They want to be involved participants in their learning. They want some voice and control because they want their learning to matter to them. I am a firm believer that personalizing learning with students must happen.

### **Improving Grading Practices Won't Do Enough to Improve Learning**

Throughout this research, examination of students' perspectives on grading and learning occurred. The students affirmed what the educators and researchers have vocalized throughout the past two decades on study on grading and that is that the system is flawed. The students shared in their interviews how grading made them feel badly and how low grades demotivated

them. They felt judged constantly. These reactions are certainly not the bedrock for engaged and enthusiastic learning. Every grading question that was asked, whether in the survey or during the one on one interviews, evoked negative reactions and emotional responses tied to student identity. The students sent a clear message that grading practices are detrimental to their learning and to their self-esteem. This unanimous response signals prioritizing change in grading. But should the change truly be focused on grading? Is isolating grading practices the avenue that will take us to improved learning? Many experts have answered yes, as shown in the scope of their scholarship on grading and reporting topics. The work of Guskey and Bailey (2001), O'Connor (2002), Reeves (2011), and many others focuses on improving flawed grading practices by making them more precise. For example, these authors have recommended removing zeroes from grade calculations since without any work to examine, a student's proficiency cannot be known (Reeves, Phi Delta Kappan, 2004). Also, eliminating behavioral aspects from grading is suggested, so penalties for late work and rewards for not using bathroom passes should not be a part of a student's grade (Guskey and Bailey, 2001). Further, practices like averaging all assignments and assessment together to determine a grade and not allowing for new evidence of learning to replace old evidence of learning are urged as ways to improve the accuracy of grading with respect to student proficiency (O'Connor, Repair Kit for Grading, 2011). Any time flaws can be fixed, it is a step in the right direction. This is true for grading practices. If we can make grades more accurate, more fair, more specific, and more timely (Reeves, 2011), then grades will be seen as more meaningful in the pursuit of learning. This is fine if we all agree that what is valued can be quantified. As a result of this research, after hearing from students about positive learning experiences, what became clear to me is that educational reform must entail not a narrowing in on more granular aspects of standards in order

to have precise articulation of what is valued, expected, and graded but rather a pulling back and expanding of what is valued and an opening up of curriculum so that student participation in learning is elevated.

Let's examine that statement more closely. The first part of the statement describes one approach to improving grading and learning that was shared repeatedly in the research and is currently valued as a reform measure in many schools and districts that I am working in and knowledgeable about. It involves being clear about what was expected and then having laser-like focus on that in the classroom. Summarizing this in my own words, this means posting a learning standard so that students and teachers know the target clearly, using a detailed rubric to communicate specific expectations, offering opportunities to practice repeatedly coupled with feedback so that students can improve from one attempt to the next, and ultimately assessing student proficiency one standard at a time with a great deal of accuracy due to the narrowed, isolated focus on a standard at a time. In this way, teachers can plan lessons and engage students in activities that are purposeful, with purposeful being defined as guiding students to successful proficiency in a stated standard. These incremental successes in standard after standard should build and compound over time and result in proficient students. I am reminded of a poem by William Wordsworth entitled "The Tables Turned." In it, Wordsworth is advising a friend to "quit your books" and learn from the world. The 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza is as follows:

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:  
Come, hear the woodland linnet,  
How sweet his music! on my life,  
There's more of wisdom in it.

Wordsworth's persuasion continues in stanzas 7 and 8 by stating that our mind gets too focused on the specifics and the facts of things and we lose the beauty of the "big picture."

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—  
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.

If applying this to the reality of standards-based education and standards-based grading and what the students who participated in this research are saying, the participant students describe classes that are too narrowly focused on that which is quantifiable. “We murder to dissect.” In our desire to define what it means to be educated, we have created standards document that define what is to be learned and prioritized standardized tests as indicators of that learning. Summarizing from the student interviews, students share that they are not involved in their learning; “education” is being done to them. We have lost what leads to engagement, enthusiasm, and joy for our students.

### **Focus on Improving Learning**

According to the student participants, a better school would include time to work with teachers, it would allow students to express learning in different ways including self-designed projects, and grading would be greatly reduced or eliminated. Author Kohn agrees that grading is detrimental to learning, thus would support this approach to schooling favored by the students. Grading can be done differently, with more direct ties to promotion of learning. Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin has for decades used a non-traditional approach to grading ([www.alverno.edu/grades/](http://www.alverno.edu/grades/)). The school’s website describes their approach to grading in this way:

“The purpose of grades is to measure your academic success. But a single letter doesn’t tell you whether you have mastered the content for a course and know how to apply the

theories in the real world. That's why we don't give traditional grades. Instead, teaching and learning at Alverno College are enhanced by assessment of your individual progress and by giving you meaningful feedback. Instead of a GPA, we give you something more valuable—it's a narrative transcript. It is documentation that showcases growth, painting a detailed picture of your accomplishments for parents, graduate schools and employers.

The results of an Alverno education are not just something to put on your resume. The results are in you. In your preparedness for the workplace. In your confidence of your abilities. In your potential for the future.”

The students are presented with eight core abilities in which they assessed throughout their years at Alverno, the direct opposite of assigning a letter grade for each class at the end of the semester. The core abilities focus on skills like communication, problem solving, analysis, and social interaction; while not content dependent, each course uses specific content to allow students to grow in these abilities. This approach can be thought of as a continuum of learning that allows students to continue to grow in these abilities year after year. Alverno has used this approach for decades, yet this is not a common grading practice amongst universities. Tradition still trumps new approaches that may better serve learning. We are not alone in Wisconsin or in the US with trying to experiment with how better to elevate learning for students. In Germany, the Evangelical School Berlin Centre (ESBC) is embracing these same ideas as they “do nothing less than reinvent what a school is” (Oletermann, *The Guardian*, July 2016). The school's headteacher Margret Rasfeld sees students' ability to motivate themselves as the most important skill a school can instill. She says, “Nothing motivates students more than when they discover the meaning behind a subject of their own accord.” The school does not assign grades until students are 15, the classes do not run on timetables, and there are no lecture-style instructions. Since the school is doing very well and students are showing success (ESBC “ends up with the best grades among Berlin's comprehensive schools”), other schools are interested in replicating these methods. Rasfeld says, “In education, you can only create change from the bottom – if the

orders come from the top, schools will resist. Ministries are like giant oil tankers: it takes a long time to turn them around. What we need is lots of little speedboats to show you can do things differently” (pg. 2). It is fruitful to explore what “little speedboats” might be dotting the educational landscape currently so that we can see a path to improvement that doesn’t seem so daunting.

Authors Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith have written about education reform in their book *Most Likely to Succeed* (2015). Preceding each section of the book, the authors focus on one person’s educational story. These individuals are all millennials since the case the authors are making is that education must change to meet the new needs of students. Rebecca is the millennial interviewed at the start of Part 3. Frustrated with high school, which she describes as filled with busy work and arbitrary assignments, Rebecca started her own non-profit in while in high school. She shares, “I didn’t understand why I had to sit in school for eight hours, and not learn anything as efficiently as I could learn it myself, and then sit and do eight hours of homework that was basically just memorizing content” (pg. 186). Rebecca’s comments don’t sound unlike the comments of the students who participated in this research who also hated the emphasis on memorization in their classes. Rebecca ended up switching high schools and had thought about dropping out. She successfully completed school due to a teacher who allowed her to individualize her programming and focus on a semester-long project with her non-profit. Rebecca went on to attend Harvard and continued to question the relevancy of traditional schooling, even in that esteemed institution, which she saw as continuing to perpetuate low engagement and complacency among students. She offers, “If we can reach kids earlier and inspire them instead of pushing against them, maybe we could have hundreds of people who would try being entrepreneurs in their early twenties” (pg. 188). The value of hearing from

students who have had to navigate our current schooling system cannot be underestimated. Students, even high-achieving ones, see the flaws and want better. In Part 3 of Wagner and Dintersmith's book, the authors quote Kevin Mattingly, dean of faculty for Lawrenceville School, who notes, "An adolescent doesn't learn by listening. To really learn, a student needs to be constantly thinking, articulating points of view, and responding to and asking great questions" (pg. 199). It is clear that a focus on learning that includes active student partnership is what is required and it is now necessary to explore what it might mean to do that in our schools today.

### **Applications**

I began this research wanting to know what students thought about grading and learning. I was interested in knowing if they saw a relationship between the two and how that relationship, if one existed, could be improved so that learning could flourish. What emerged was an understanding that grading, in terms of judgment and evaluation, felt like a teacher-owned endeavor, the result of which was then cast upon the student. As a result of this research study, including the examination of current scholarship coupled with the information gleaned from students through their participation in the surveys and interviews, I have this recommendation. Stated simply, involve students more. Applied to both grading and learning, students must be partnering with educators in all ways. In more detail, with regard to improving grading, I see application including specific focus on 1) improving teacher preparation programs to include instruction on how to partner with students on assessment of learning, 2) adjusting administrative licensure programs so that principals and superintendents value teachers who effectively partner with students on assessment of learning rather than efficiently judge student learning in isolation and principals and superintendents know how to structure schools so that partnering on grading can occur, and 3) reformatting the grading materials and software so that collaboration can occur

between teachers and students. With regard to improving learning, application includes prioritizing certain pedagogical approaches that promote student choice, student ownership, and student engagement. It is important to note that although addressed individually here, none of these applications exist in a vacuum. All of the applications are intertwined in what could be termed a “feedback loop,” with work in one area informing and influencing the other areas continuously.

Students disengage when graded constantly or when graded in ways that make school seem like a series of disconnected tasks that must be endured. They don’t see any connection between grading and learning. Since the purpose of schooling is to help students learn and since grading does not assist with the accomplishment of that purpose, that barrier to learning must be removed.

To be clear, students shared that they desire feedback and they want to talk with teachers about learning goals and about progress and suggestions for improvement. One of the students mentioned that she liked rubrics and would keep those even in an ideal school of her dreams. Teachers and students discussing the expectations for learning, the quality of work, and the degree of success one is having along the way should yield more engaged students and higher levels of learning. The current scholarship repeatedly mentioned grading summative assessments only and using formative assessments in this non-evaluative, high-quality feedback way (O’Connor, 2011; Reeves, 2011; Vatterott, 2015). This is a step in the right direction but doesn’t go far enough. Too much is considered summative usually, including quizzes and projects and exams and papers, and even formative work like daily homework ends up graded but weighted less in the final grade calculation. Most problematic, the grading is primarily a teacher-based practice that is done without involvement of students.



## **Teacher Preparation Program Improvement**

In order to involve students more, changes need to occur in the schools of education with pre-service teachers. Because teachers teach in ways that they were taught, the cycle of grading everything will be perpetuated unless we can “unteach” that approach. This must be done intentionally. Pre-service teachers need to be explicitly taught a methodology that espouses evaluation and assessment of student performance done jointly with students. No part of teacher preparation programs should send a message that grading is done independently by the teacher. Preparation for becoming a teacher must involve instruction on how to partner with students on assessment, on evaluation of their own work, and on incremental goal setting so that a learning objective can be reached. Currently, teachers do already, at times, co-create rubrics with students. Unfortunately, the collaboration usually ends there. Students use the rubric to self-assess in isolation and the teacher uses the rubric to officially judge the work for a grade. I recommend we cease dabbling with student/teacher partnerships and embrace them fully to include the important grading conversations as well as all the work leading up to those final judgments of proficiency. Students reported that they value a strong relationship with their teachers; they want their teachers to know them as people and really care about them. Simply adding in opportunities for students and teachers to talk about student work, student progress, and student performance should lead to stronger relationships between teacher and student. Of course, part of the pre-service work will need to focus on how to build trusting relationships and collaborate versus taking turns offering independent judgments of performance.

## **Administrative Licensure Program Improvements**

Further, in administrative certification programs, aspiring administrators take courses in how to evaluate staff, looking for teachers who can accurately assess and monitor student

progress. The meaning of this must change, for it can no longer mean that the teacher in isolation is able to accurately assess student performance. It must mean that the teacher embraces strategies that allows for a rich and meaningful partnership with students about their proficiency, about their growth, and how students will progress in their learning. Nothing about how teachers are evaluated can still advocate for the teacher as the sole judge and arbiter of grades. The language on grading must reflect the components of partnership with teacher and student collectively assessing and evaluating student work and reaching understanding together about where a student is at in his/her learning. Currently, in Wisconsin, the Educator Effectiveness system from the Department of Public Instruction advocates that principals and teachers join together in teacher evaluation. The teacher in his/her summary year sets goals for student achievement and professional growth and then meets throughout the year with the administrator to discuss progress and receive feedback. Also, when completing the end of cycle summary, teachers self-evaluate and then discuss with administrators where they see themselves in relation to the Framework for Teaching (FFT) rubric. Repeatedly, DPI stresses that this evaluation work should be done collaboratively and the ultimate goal is growth. Katie Rainey, from DPI, says to teachers, “if EE feels like it’s being done to you, it’s not being done right” (personal communication, September 23, 2016). Students had this complaint about grading – it was being done to them. Perhaps this is more evidence that educators have not been doing grading right. If this new approach to teacher evaluation, which is in its third year, is good enough to grow great teachers, why cannot this approach be mirrored so that we are effectively growing great students? Consequently, implementation of a partnership approach between students and teacher for grading will mean that administrators must rethink traditions like ‘grading day’ in which students stay home and teachers work in isolation.

## **Reformat Grading Materials and Software**

Last, the tools teachers use to record grades must change. The electronic gradebooks that are commonplace today are designed so that traditional practices continue. Teachers are asked to enter summative and formative work into gradebook and update their gradebooks frequently because parents have access 24/7. These two expectations lead to constant grading done in isolation. In our current system, we have perpetuated a reality in which teachers alone hold the ultimate judgment on student proficiency. Students stand before their teachers asking, “Is this right?” and “Can you check this?” and “Is this what you wanted?” The students have been so conditioned to seek teacher approval for everything that it is not uncommon to see lines of students at the teacher desk and a teacher rapidly reviewing and responding to student work. At the end of the class, the students may or may not have received feedback or judgment and the teacher is exhausted. This system is broken. Recalling Daniel Pink’s conditions for motivation describe in *Drive*, students need autonomy and mastery and purpose. Unchaining students from the dependence on their teachers to check their work and tell them what to do next should increase student motivation. More motivated students can only be a positive in relation to learning. Empowerment of students to understand and guide their own learning with their teacher will lead to better results for students and for teachers. True progress could come in the form of a dual-entry learning portfolio, rather than a traditional gradebook. Consider a “gradebook” that allowed teachers and students to simultaneously share responsibility for reflecting on current learning and planning for ongoing learning. This can be created; technological advances as such that software can be designed to personalize gradebooks in just this manner. Google.docs are a staple in schools today that allow for collaboration. Teachers and students could use a similar approach to discussion about student learning, progress, and

evaluation of work. Actually, student/teacher full collaboration on grading and assessment of learning may not be a far reach since student-led conferences are becoming more and more common at parent/teacher conferences.

### **Priority Pedagogical Approaches**

The review of students' perspectives pertaining to learning shows that students are not seeking wholesale changes to schooling. Students did not say “no English classes” or “stop making us take math.” What they did say is that they wanted to be more involved in their learning. Specifically, project-based learning was touted as an excellent pedagogical approach that helped students feel connected to their learning. In addition, when students had choice in projects, both the design and the subject, they were motivated and engaged. They liked learning. My recommendation with regard to learning is emphasize student-centered inquiry and problem-based learning so that students are shaping and personalizing their learning in meaningful ways. Students are clearly saying that they would like to have ownership of their learning – how they learn, what they learn, how they show what they know. Providing autonomy to students would be a significant shift in pedagogy since the current model is based primarily on teacher control of content, of lesson and assessment design, and of students. If students don't show that they can manage self-directed learning or more autonomy, it is only because the system has not nurtured this in them. Based on the research results, students want to have responsibility for their learning and, from teachers, they want a supportive, mutually respectful relationship. I don't see this as too much to ask.

### **Applications to Researcher's Own Work**

Regularly, in my own work as a district curriculum director, I ask myself what I can do as an educational leader to positively influence grading practices and promote meaningful student

learning. One strategy involves prioritizing innovation over maintenance of status quo in our schools among our educators. I oversee the district's Innovation Grant process, which seeks proposals from our teachers that focus on "fundamentally altering the learner experience." Our grants are not for those who are looking to add new texts or different types of furniture to the classroom. Instead, we ask teachers to consider improving teaching and learning at its core and propose grants that significantly shift how our students engage in the learning process. One early proposal sought to change from the current elementary report card to a learning continuum. This proposal described how students and families would be more informed and more involved in understanding learning targets and progress towards them throughout the school year. The fact that this idea was given voice and then supported by the district highlights one way that I can influence the promotion of learning and improvement of grading practices in my own work.

In order to accomplish the goal of promoting learning, which is and should always be the core of schooling, students need to be engaged fully. The partnerships that should be standard between students and teachers as they set learning goals and discuss progress on the path to meet or exceed them must be non-negotiable in our school systems.

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