

Validity of Grading Practices in Elementary Education

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Research Topic

The pressure for successful performance on high-stakes tests has increased the necessity for valid measures of academic achievement that is accurately communicated to parents, teachers, and administrators. The most relied upon source of student performance communication is the assignment of report card grades by teachers. This generates the question: Do teacher assigned grades validly measure and communicate student academic performance?

Introduction

History of Grading

The history of grading suggests that before 1850, most schools grouped students of all ages and backgrounds into one cluster in a one-room schoolhouse. Grades were reported to parents orally during a home visit. Grading and reporting were unheard of in U. S. schools at this time (Guskey, 2013). In the late eighteen hundreds schools began to use formal progress evaluations. These were primarily narrative reports where teachers described the skills the student had mastered and where additional work was needed. The main objective of these reports was to communicate mastery of current level and readiness to move to the next (Edwards & Richey, 1947).

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The shift to percentages was gradual and seemed natural due to the increased demands on high school education. In 1913, Daniel Starch and Edward Charles Elliott challenged the reliability and accuracy of percentages. The research found wide differences in assigned percentages to identical English papers. The teachers focused on different elements of the paper. Thirty different percentage grades were assigned to a single paper and scores had a range of more than 40 points (Guskey, 2013). The study was repeated with geometry papers and the researchers found even greater variation in grading. The math papers ranged in grades from 28% to 95% (Guskey, 2013). History has shown that the validity in teacher grading practices has been questioned for over one hundred years. This paper will examine the research that addresses grading validity concerns and outline what research indicates to have a positive impact on student assigned grades.

Purpose of Grading

Grades are significant in American education systems. They are used to determine class placement, retention practices, college admissions, and scholarships. Today's report cards are used to sustain state funding, generate positive feelings between school and community, assist teachers in increasing students' self-esteem, used as a reward for student likeability, and create a chance to receive college funding (Stanley & Baines, 2004). Grades should simply reflect academic performance towards learning goals (Randall & Engelhard, 2010). The problem arises when grades are not just limited to communicating student achievement; they include self-esteem boosters, attitude, participation, and rewards (Stanley & Baines 2004).

The pressure for successful performance on what would be considered high-stakes testing has increased the necessity for valid measures of academic achievement that is accurately communicated to parents, teachers, and administrators. There is agreement in the education

community that teacher assigned grades can be a reliable and valid tool for communicating a student's academic progress. Guskey (2007), found that diverse stakeholders perceive validity of achievement indicators differently. Administrators view state, district, and national standardized assessments more valid, where as teachers perceived classroom observations and homework more valid than administrators.

Guskey (2007), also investigated the purpose for grading by teachers, parents, and students. His findings can be classified into six broad categories: (1) to communicate the achievement status of students to parents or others, (2) to provide information for student self-evaluation, (3) to identify certain pathways or instruction in education, (4) to provide learning motivation and incentives for students, (5) to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs, and (6) to provide evidence of student effort or inappropriate accountability. In 2007, Guskey also sought to determine similarities and differences in all three stakeholders: parents, students, and teachers. Guskey wanted to determine their perceptions on the purpose of grading and reporting. Stakeholders ranked the six major purposes of grading mentioned above. Each group ranked "communication to parents" and "feedback to students" as the most important purpose for grading. The two least important purposes were "evaluation of instructional programs" and "lack of effort and accountability".

Standards-Based Grading

Traditionally, grades have been constructed on assessment methods designed by educators and aonaa q 0.24 0 duon toueareog a indicideatysihdentnwhohha

achievement. With the adoption of state and national student performance standards, grades that are based on standards will allow educators to use a criterion-referenced approach in assessing student achievement (O'Connor, 2009).

To combat grading issues and misinterpretations of grades, Ken O'Connor (2009) outlines a criterion-referenced grading system based on standards. Standards-based grading is where grades are strictly based on learning outcomes or performance standards that create a clear portrait on what students should know and be able to do. These standards create greater equity on learning outcomes for all students through consistent communication about student achievement among stakeholders (Schmoker, 2000).

A strong standards-based grading system includes many attributes. It views grading as a process. Quality criterion-referenced performance standards should be the reference point to determine student grades. Value or judgment attributes should be limited, and not all student work samples should be included in grades. Students should be allowed to work towards mastery, keeping grades written in pencil for the possibility of improvement. All grading

Annually, students in grades 3 through 8 are tested in the areas of reading, mathematics, and science on the academic achievement standards. Student performance on the state mandated tests is ranked into two high levels and a third lower level. All students are expected to reach a level of proficiency. NCLB requires the total student population and specified subgroups to meet “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) by reaching the proficient level, which is defined by attaining the two higher level rankings on the mandated state tests. If schools and districts fail to meet AYP for two or more years, they are then classified as schools “in need of improvement” and face such consequences as school transfer options, supplemental services, replacement of staff or administration, or a plan of restructuring (Great Schools, 2015).

NCLB directives hold states and schools more accountable for student academic results. State mandated tests have high-stakes consequences which cause these tests to grow in significance. Because the tests are standardized assessments given under uniform conditions, they are considered to be a meaningful basis for evaluating performance (Coladarci, 1986).

Summary of Findings

The Effects of Grading On Students

Grades have been linked to having a strong and lasting impact on a student’s attitude, behavior, and motivation for learning (Brookhart, 1994). Researchers refer to three consistent effects that arise when an emphasis is placed on the importance of letter or number grades.

Assigning an arbitrary letter or number grade tends to: (1) reduce the student’s interest in actual

achieved the highest scores. Comments were given instead of letter or number grades (Kohn, 1999).

According to [REDACTED] (2011), traditional grading systems are inaccurate in conveying how students are performing in relation to learning standards. [REDACTED] bR2 (d b.2 (c) 0.2 1

solely on academic performance. Even teachers who agree with grading systems that only reflect academic performance struggle to keep non-achievement factors out of their grading practices. In reinforcement of this statement, eighty-one percent of teachers polled and seventy percent of students agreed or tended to agree with the statement that achievement should be reported separately from other factors (Cross & Frary, 1999). Even though a high majority of the teachers expressed a belief in the statement, their actions do not indicate agreement. Seventy-two percent of the teachers in the same study indicated they raised the grade of low-ability students based on other factors than achievement (Cross & Frary, 1999). Similar results were found when teachers professed to adhere to grading practices that were aligned with best practice research on grading; however, when they replied to a grading survey their responses indicated differently (Steidinger, 2011).

A student's characteristics have also been found to impact the validity of grades. A teacher's perception of a student's behavior can significantly influence judgments of his or her academic performance. Four major factors are considered by teachers when assigning a final grade: Student academic achievement, ability, behavior, and effort (Randall, & Engelhard, 2010; Südkamp, Kaiser, & Möller, 2012). A teacher's perception of a student's behavior can significantly influence the reporting of a student's academic performance (Hills, 1991). Even the neatness of a student's handwriting can influence a student's grade (Sweedler-Brown, 1985; Steidinger, 2011).

Brookhart (1993) demonstrates how value judgement and subjectivity can impact a student's grade. Teachers in a study were directed to assign a grade in two different situations. An average Algebra I student recorded grades on two tests for the grading period. On the first test he achieved an F and on the second test he achieved a low D. The teachers were asked to

assign the student an overall grade for the period. The choices were an overall grade of an F based on the average of the two tests or an overall D because improvement of performance was demonstrated. Seventy-three percent of the teachers chose the D. The second situation was similar, except this Algebra I student achieved a B on his first test and a low A on the second test. The choices for a final grade were an overall grade of B which was the average of the two test grades or an A with the consideration there was improvement. With an identical percentage, this time the teachers chose B as the grade (Brookhart, 1993).

In 2010, Randall and Engelhard shared their examination of factors that impact borderline decisions in grade assignment. A student with a report grade of sixty-nine percent that demonstrates low achievement and low ability, but offers good behavior with high effort, on average receives a grade of seventy-seven percent. This solidifies the thought that teachers reward lower achieving students at a higher grading rate due to good behavior and effort. This

systems. Post-training, a difference in perception was collective. The majority of survey participants indicated the marking systems clearly communicated the students' present levels, and they were in favor of retaining the current grading systems. Further noted, before training, vast differences in interpretation of both marking systems were evident. Greater consistency in assigning grades was achieved when teachers implemented a shared philosophy and defined criteria for assessing student achievement (Mehring et al., 1991).

percent of the student population is in transition, a good educational practice would be to provide consistent communication of student achievement. Research has revealed that student transfers from one education institution into another can cause academic regression (Straits, 1987). Student academic regression could be identified and addressed immediately, if performance scales and reporting system were consistent between educational institutions.

Inconsistent and unreliable grading practices can be immediately addressed through MOEC collaboration. MOEC experts should work together to create professional development and teacher preparatory classes that address (1) teacher beliefs and practices that contribute to validity of grading and (2) teacher training to

and philosophy for student grading. According to the research, a standards-based grading system strongly correlates with student achievement on high-stakes tests. No Child Left Behind

coursework for CADRE Project Teachers, Teacher Academy Project, and Mentor Project in the area of grading.

Universal Grading Practices

With mobility rates reaching as high as ten percent in the metropolitan area, consistency among school districts' grading practices is a concern (Nebraska Department of Education, 2015). There is no exact mobility data that quantifies student movement between state systems or out of state systems. Good educational practice should be consistent among all educational institutions. MOEC is a collaborative environment that could work together to create consistency of grading practices and a universal grading system. When one school district uses letter grades or percentages on a varying scale, or another district uses standards-based grading, it is difficult for educators, administration, and parents to correlate student performance. As a student transfers through a school system or across a school system, this inconsistency can negatively impact performance (Straits, 1987). Universal reporting would allow early diagnosis of regression and implementation of practices to alleviate dramatic decreases in student performance.

The MOEC community can use its combined expertise and influence to initiate state wide education reform on universal grading practices. This would be suggested in the form of a standards-based grading system that aligns with the State content and academic achievement standards. Schmoker (2000) explains, standards-based grading assesses student performance strictly on outcomes or standards; deriving a clearer picture of student knowledge and creating consistent communication among stakeholders.

Many states have proposed and implemented grading policies that are usually characteristics of standards-based grading. Such practices as a "no zero" grading policy or

policy that bans school districts from assigning a percentage grade lower than fifty percent support the concept that grading is a process leading towards student mastery. Implementation of these policies eliminates severe grading practices that perpetuate no chance of grade recovery for students (Guskey, 2004).

When grading practices as a result of the implementation of these policies are eliminated, the opportunity for students to achieve mastery is increased.

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Shannon Thoendel is a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She has 23 years' experience in the education field as a classroom teacher, mentor, and administrator. The past eleven years she has been an elementary principal, with experiences in a high impoverished urban district to a rural district quickly transforming into a suburban system. Shannon currently serves as a kindergarten through sixth grade principal at Pine Creek Elementary School. Pine Creek Elementary is located northwest of the Omaha metropolitan area in the Bennington Public Schools District. Bennington Public Schools is one of the fastest growing school District in the State of Nebraska. Shannon has had the opportunity to provide guidance and leadership as the District has transformed from one elementary to three elementary facilities in nine years.