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Rethinking Grading: Exploring High School Teachers' Experiences with Changing to a Nontraditional Grading System

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**Rethinking Grading: Exploring High School Teachers' Experiences with
Changing to a Nontraditional Grading System**

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A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the
Doctor of Educational Leadership Department
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Doctor of Education

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RETHINKING GRADING: EXPLORING HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH CHANGING TO A NONTRADITIONAL GRADING SYSTEM, a Doctoral research project prepared by SARAH E. LEONARD in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

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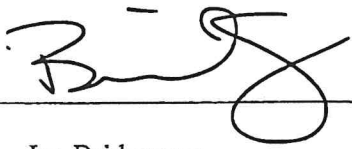
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ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study examined the experiences of high school teachers who made sense of and enacted a gradeless system in their classes. The study explored what led the teacher participants to make such a significant shift in their thinking and practice as well as what supports and/or challenges they experienced in the process of implementing a nontraditional grading system. The three participants constituted a unique case as they explored an alternative grading model quite different from the traditional 0-100-point model that tends to be the dominant system in public high schools. The findings revealed that the nontraditional systems they developed were grounded in student growth, proficiency, and demonstration of soft skills. As the participants worked to make sense of this system, their beliefs about grading and their past experiences shaped their implementation. They shared that support from colleagues and administrators was paramount to them enacting this change in their classes. This support helped them overcome the challenges they experienced along the way. Participants revealed an increase in student ownership and equity were outcomes that made the system worth using. Implications for scholarship and practice in the study focus on additional research being done on the nontraditional model and exhort educators to engage in introspection surrounding their grading practices as well as finding a supportive community as they move to a nontraditional model.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Acknowledgments	ii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
A Brief History of Grades and Grading	2
Subjectivity/Teacher Bias	3
Lack of Accuracy	4
Equity in Grading	4
Motivation	5
Problem of Practice	6
Purpose of the Study	7
Research Questions	7
Significance of the Study	7
Definition of Terms	8
Traditional Grading	8
Alternative Grading	8
Minimum Grading	8
Standards-Based Grading	9
Mastery-Based Grading	9
Soft Skills	9
Limitations and Delimitations	10
Organization of Study	10
Conclusion	11
Chapter 2: Review of Literature	12
Issues in Grading Systems	13
Traditional Grading Systems	13
Reliability of Grades	13
Communicating Student Progress	14
Subjectivity in Grading	15
Equity	16
Motivation	17
Grading Reforms: Authentic Assessment	19
Feedback	20
Alternative Grading Practices	22
Minimum Grading	22
Standards Based Grading	23
Mastery Based Grading	24
No Grading or “Going Gradeless”	24
Teachers’ Perceptions of Grading	27
Teaching Experience	27
Teachers’ Beliefs About Grading	28
Teachers’ Beliefs About Student Achievement	30

Teacher Change	31
Conclusion	32
Chapter 3: Methodology	33
Restatement of Research Questions.....	33
Research Design	34
Setting of the Study.....	36
Participant Selection Process	37
Data Sources and Data Gathering.....	38
Interviews.....	38
Artifacts.....	39
Data Analysis	40
The Researcher	41
Bracketing of Potential Bias	42
Trustworthiness and Credibility.....	43
Conclusion	44
Chapter 4: Findings.....	45
Teacher Participants.....	45
Amanda	46
Ken.....	46
Nicole.....	47
Emerging Themes	48
The Nontraditional System Itself.....	48
Growth	49
Proficiency	50
Soft Skills.....	51
Communication.....	51
Tools	52
The Teacher.....	54
Beliefs	54
Past Experience.....	56
What it Takes to Enact Nontraditional Grading Systems	59
Collaboration with Colleagues.....	61
Support from Principal.....	62
What Makes Nontraditional Grading Systems Worth the Work	63
Student Ownership.....	63
More Equitable.....	65
Challenges within Nontraditional Systems Work.....	68
Subjectivity	69
Sustainability.....	71
Conclusion	73
Chapter 5: Discussion	75
Discussion of Major Findings.....	76
Making Sense of and Enacting the Nontraditional System.....	76
Shift in Thinking and Practice	78
Supports and Challenges.....	79

Unexpected Findings	81
Implications	82
Implications for Scholarship	82
Implications for Teachers.....	83
Implications for Administrators	84
Recommendations for Further Research.....	86
Content Area Research.....	86
Research on the Student Perspective	86
Student Achievement Research	87
Limitations	87
Conclusion	88
References	89
Appendix A	97
Informed Consent Letter	97
Appendix B	99
Interview #1 Protocol.....	99
Appendix C	100
Interview #2 Protocol.....	100
Appendix D	101
Guiding Questions for Interviews.....	101
Appendix E	102
Example of a Letter to Parents Explaining Gradeless Classroom Plan	102
Appendix F.....	105
Examples of a Discussion Slides for Students.....	105
Appendix G	107
Examples of Rubrics Used in Participants' Classes	107
Appendix H.....	109
Example of a Progress Tracker	109
Appendix I	110
Examples of End of Semester Reflection Survey	110
Appendix J	114
Characteristics of an "A" Student Document	114

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	37
Teacher Participants' Educator Demographics.....	37

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	31
A Model of Teacher Change.....	31
Figure 2	60
Process of Implementing a Nontraditional Grading System	60

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I started the 2020-2021 school year sitting alone in my classroom before two computer monitors. As I was preparing to teach synchronously online during a global pandemic, I was questioning every aspect of my teaching practice. How would I keep my students engaged? How would I foster class discussions? How would students do their assignments online? How would I grade their work? The latter question particularly dominated my mind when it came time for me to issue progress reports and reports cards, tasks that crippled me as I neared the end of the first semester. For the first time in my teaching career, the majority of my students were facing failing grades in my class and other classes. Knowing how entangled their grades were with the obstacles of comprehensive distance learning, combined with increased stress, made me question everything about my grading practices. It felt amoral to register my students' learning with a letter grade under these circumstances.

Many of my colleagues were also struggling with these grading dilemmas when it came time to do report cards. Most of my school used the traditional grading system of 0-100-point scale, where 0-59 equates to an F, 60-69 a D, 70-79 a C, 80-89 a B and 90-100 equals an A. A student's overall grade was calculated as an average of the points they have earned out of the total points assigned during a term. As a staff, we discussed the trends we were seeing across our gradebooks. Students who regularly completed assignments, even if they were only partially completed, were passing their classes. Students with many missing assignments were at the low end of the F range, and very unlikely to have sufficient time to complete all the assignments necessary for a passing grade.

I noticed that students who were passing were doing so because they produced some work and turned it in. It did not necessarily mean they were proficient at the skills I had taught. I

also noticed that some students who demonstrated proficiency during lessons were not passing since they were not completing their work. Both of these student situations led to last ditch efforts where students would try to accrue any number of points they could to raise their grade. They tried to do what small assignment they could to raise a 59% to a 60% in order to earn credit. Even students with typically higher grades did the same thing. The need for an A- over a B+ led them to make up any small assignment to gain enough points to tip their 89% to a 90%.

These observations and experiences caused me to reflect on my own grading practices and start digging into the entire concept of grades and what they represent. COVID-19 has presented a unique opportunity for educators to deepen an ongoing discussion about the importance and purpose of grading.

A Brief History of Grades and Grading

Grading in public education has taken many different forms over the last hundred years. In the early 19th century, grading looked like teachers making home visits and discussing a student's progress with their family (Brookhart et al., 2016). These home visits were replaced by narrative reports that were still individualized and lacked standardization. At the turn of the 20th century, many universities and high schools began using the 0–100-point scale to make grading less time-consuming. To decrease the variability of grading, the 100-point ratio scale led way to the ordinal letter grade scale. The subjectivity and lack of grading criteria in these systems led to the evolution of a system centered around a set of grading criteria. Teachers assess students based on proficiency-based criteria. This system is known by various terms, including standards-based grading, proficiency grading, or competency-based grading.

The types of grading systems that have evolved over the history of education are only part of the discussion surrounding grading. Perhaps more important than the type of grading

system in use is consideration of why grades are used at all, and what they are designed to accomplish. Different educational stakeholders hold different priorities and uses for grades. Teachers often use grades as a communication tool for students and parents which can lead parents to rely on grades as a determination of their child's academic achievement (Brookhart, 2004; Randall & Englehard, 2010). Grades can also be used as an important source of data to inform individual students' educational opportunities as well as informing larger state and federal educational policies. Grades can act as a gatekeeping function for students to get into certain high school classes and influence their ability to apply and be admitted into certain colleges or universities (Brookhart et al., 2016; Resh, 2009). Local and federal policy makers use grades to predict dropout rates, college success, and accountability measures for school funding. These varying purposes for grades indicate the complexity educators face when considering how effectively grades function for their own purposes.

Subjectivity/Teacher Bias

In Brookhart et al.'s (2016) review of over a century of grading research, she uncovered concerns related to the variability and reliability of grades taking place as early as the late 19th century. From then on, countless research studies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries have identified and examined issues with the traditional 0-100-point grading model. One such example of a foundational study by Starch and Elliot (1912) found that when English teachers graded two identical student papers, scores varied from 64 to 98 on the first paper and from 50 to 97 on the second paper. When Starch and Elliot repeated their study with math teachers, they discovered an even wider range of grades. Time has not improved this issue in variability since only ten years ago, Brimi (2011) replicated Starch and Elliot's work and obtained almost equivalent results. Guskey (2004; 2013) has indicated how percentage grading systems (0-100)

based on averages lack reliability. With no grading criteria other than what each individual teacher believes is a “good” sample of student work, the margin for subjectivity is large. Another source of variability in this system is teachers’ degree of leniency on grading and how easily and unconsciously humans incorporate non-cognitive factors into an overall grade (Brookhart et al., 2016; Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Randall & Engelhard, 2010).

Lack of Accuracy

The traditional 0-100-point scale that averages assignment scores also creates issues with the mathematical accuracy of a grade. Guskey (2004, 2013) points out this system presents almost insurmountable barriers for students who score a zero on one assignment or test. The one zero score affects a student’s grade so significantly in the average calculation that “a student must achieve a perfect score on a minimum of nine other assignments” to recover their grade (Guskey, 2013, p.71).

Equity in Grading

A closer look also reveals how vulnerable student populations can experience additional challenges within grading systems that do not account for the circumstances under which students work for their grades. Students who experience poverty, violence at home, unmet basic needs, or lack of resources are often in situations outside their control (Dueck, 2014). When they receive zeros on homework assignments, they can lose their grade. To combat these inequities, Feldman (2019) argues that a grade must not include homework grades, extra credit, late penalties, behavior grades, or participation. Allocating portions of the overall grade to factors like extra credit and homework unduly impacts students who do not have the resources at home to complete those tasks. As another example, an emerging bilingual student should not be graded on participation considering they are in the process of learning a new language and may be less

likely to share out answers in class. The traditional 0-100-point grading system, grading policies such as the ones discussed above, and the averaging of assignment scores perpetuate historical inequalities for marginalized students that are nearly impossible to overcome (Wormeli, 2018).

Motivation

High school grades are high-stakes marks for college, which can lead students to focus more on the score or letter grade than the actual learning. Kohn (2011) explains how students are “responding to adults who, by telling them the goal is to get a good mark, have sent the message that success matters more than learning” (p. 29-30). In these cases, grading systems often become solely results based. When students are more focused on the results, they may not be as engaged in the learning process.

Awarding points for task completion is not the only way traditional systems try to leverage points for motivation. Traditional models also use the deduction of points as a motivator for students. Dueck (2014) discusses how punitive penalties for homework do not motivate students, do not accurately measure students’ learning, and do nothing to perpetuate equitable educational practices. Policies dictating graded homework can lead students to simply comply and put forth basic effort, rather than pursue deep learning. Carifio & Carey (2010) point out that “various models of motivation...all predict that common grading practices, such as grades for effort, using grades as rewards and punishments, and assigning punishingly low grades...produce results opposite from those intended” (p. 228). Points in the traditional grading system have become both the carrot and the stick when it comes to motivation. But using them in either way is detrimental to real learning and may inadvertently cultivate students’ compliance, rather than their initiative.

Problem of Practice

The body of research on grading methods makes it clear that the traditional grading systems still in use today are plagued with issues related to a lack of reliability (Brimi, 2011; Brookhart et al., 2016; Starch & Elliot, 1912, 1913a, 1913b), subjectivity, and accuracy (Brookhart et al., 2016; Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Guskey, 2004, 2013; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). Grades can also negatively affect students' learning process by conditioning them to be hyper focused on grade outcomes instead of their learning (Carifio & Carey, 2010). These issues negatively affect all students, but disproportionately impact students of color, students enrolled in special education, students who are language learners, and students who come from low-socioeconomic households (Dueck, 2014; Feldman, 2019; Wormeli, 2018).

Educational researchers and practitioners acknowledge that grades act as a form of communication between teacher and student; grades are used as feedback on students' academic achievement. Educational research demonstrates that descriptive feedback is extremely beneficial in providing students with the information they need to inform their learning experiences and actions (Kohn, 2011; Percell, 2017; Wiggins, 2011, 2013). This form of feedback orients students towards the process instead of towards the outcome. If a traditional grading system hinders student learning while quality feedback promotes it, then further research on feedback-based systems is important. Of particular interest is a study such as this one, which proposes a close examination of teachers who challenge these traditional grading systems by reaching for something altogether different, such as gradeless classrooms. Examining teachers' experience in enacting something so different can yield insight into what it takes for teachers to do this work and what teachers know about how gradeless classrooms shape student learning.

Purpose of the Study

While there is an extensive body of research on types of grading systems, how they measure and shape student achievement, and teachers' beliefs about grading, there is considerably less research on what happens when teachers actively challenge and change these systems. This study sought to move beyond simply identifying teachers' beliefs about grading systems to study a group of teachers who were actively seeking a new way. The purpose of this research study was to explore this alongside a particular group of educators who were purposefully working to develop and enact a gradeless classroom model. This research also investigated the complexities and difficulties of doing something completely different, and the considerations these teachers made regarding the various stakeholders in the conversation. It sought to discover what questions arise when the old is made new.

Research Questions

This qualitative case study explored the following research questions:

How do high school teachers make sense of and enact a gradeless system in their classrooms?

- a. What led them to make such a big shift in their thinking and practice?
- b. What supports/challenges did they experience in the process of making the change to a gradeless system?

Significance of the Study

Researchers have reported on the many flaws and injustices embedded in traditional grading systems (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2019; Wormeli, 2018). Yet these systems have persisted for many decades, with only a few small pockets of educators seeking a different way. My proposed study could offer insight into what moves educators to reevaluate their beliefs

about traditional grading models and take up a new way. Discovering how this group of educators go about implementing a gradeless classroom model can contribute insight into what it takes for teachers to embrace grading reform. This could help fellow educators navigate their own process of challenging and changing beliefs around grading, and ultimately help find a better grading system to better support student's growth and learning.

Definition of Terms

The terms necessary for understanding the context of this study are defined below.

Traditional Grading

The tradition grading model is based on students accruing points throughout the grading period. At the end of the grading period, the points are added up and calculated as a percentage earned over the total number of points possible (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). This percentage is then matched with a corresponding letter grade from the A to F scale. In some versions, an average of all scores accrued during the grading period is taken and then translated into a letter grade (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011).

Alternative Grading

Alternative grading encompasses a variety of different grading methods and systems. The most prominent ones are defined in depth in the literature review chapter. For the purposes of this study the general term of "alternative grading" will refer to any grading system that varies from the traditional, points-based system (Percell, 2014a).

Minimum Grading

Minimum grading is an alternative practice that is often used in combination with the traditional grading system. Minimum grading sets a minimum grade students can achieve on an assignment, usually 50% (Carifio & Carey, 2013; Guskey, 2004). This prevents the students

from falling into an extreme deficit that is often mathematically near impossible to climb out of (Carifio & Carey, 2013; Feldman, 2019; Guskey, 2004).

Standards-Based Grading

Standards-based grading (SBG) is a grading system where students work to meet proficiency on a learning standard (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Students' progress at achieving the standard are evaluated on either a 0-4 or 1-5 scale (Feldman, 2019). Individual standards are scored, and a student may reattempt the assessments until they have reached proficiency (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Their individual standard scores are not averaged together to make a cumulative grade (Feldman, 2019).

Mastery-Based Grading

Mastery-based grading (MBG) is similar to SBG however there is a distinct difference. Students work towards achieving mastery of a skill or standard, however their progress is classified as either "achieved mastery" or "not yet" (Armacost & Pet-Armacost, 2003; Bloom, 1968; Guskey, 2010; Percell, 2014b). MBG does not differentiate the different levels that a student may be at using an ordinal scale before they achieve mastery (Armacost & Pet-Armacost, 2003; Bloom, 1968; Guskey, 2010; Percell, 2014b).

Soft Skills

Soft skills also known as professional skills are skills or competencies that allow a person to "manage, organize, and negotiate relationships" in a social setting such as a classroom or workplace (Ellis et al., 2014). There are many of different types of soft skills however they can generally be grouped into four categories: problem solving skills, communication skills, work ethic, and interpersonal and teamwork skills (Ellis et al., 2014).

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study are centered around my sample and data collection. Covid-19 created some limitations in my data collection. Visitors' access to schools was unpredictable due to the pandemic. Getting to meet the teachers in person for interviews and observe their classrooms and classes with students in person was dependent on ever-shifting disease protocols. It is also likely that the effects of Covid-19 may have impact my participants' perspectives of their work.

The delimitations of this study centered on the sample of the study. The study focused on one high school, Pacific Northwest High School (PNHS-pseudonym) in Oregon. The school was selected for several reasons: a) more than a handful of teachers have enacted the gradeless model there, b) strong administrative support, c) gradeless is a growing trend in the school, and d) this work is supported by a professional learning group that meets regularly to discuss grading practices. Choosing one school was intentional to make data collection manageable. PNHS was within a close enough distance that I could easily make the drive there and back in one day and make multiple trips to the site. Because there was a group of teachers pursuing the gradeless classroom model, I was able to focus on data collection instead of having to spend more time travelling from different schools across the state to speak to one or two teachers at each school.

Organization of Study

The remainder of this study is organized into five chapters; in this chapter, I have discussed the background and problem of practice as well as the significance of this research. Chapter 2 sets forth a review of the literature by analyzing this historical context of grading in education, the purposes of grading, and common grading practices. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology as well as the researcher's interest and considerations. Chapter

4 includes analysis of the data collected and a discussion of the findings. Chapter 5 contains conclusions drawn from the analysis as well as recommendations for future research on the topic. The study ends with appendices containing supplemental materials relevant to the research.

Conclusion

Grading practices are not only a passion of mine but an integral part of my daily practice as a teacher. Despite decades of research on the problems with traditional grading systems (Brookhart et al., 2016), it is so endemic to educational systems that finding new ways is challenging. This research explored what educators who accept this challenge believe and do as they participate in that process. My study focused on examining the experts, the educators, and the ways they made sense of a new way.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies of teachers' experiences with grading reform and alternative grading models have many implications for the research on teacher change and grading practices. This literature review situates the proposed study in a discussion of what educators know about grading and the issues within grading systems, what research says about authentic assessment and alternative forms of grading, and finally, what it takes for teachers to change their grading practice.

Literature in this review consists of research studies and articles published in peer-reviewed journals as well as professional texts published by well-known educational researchers. Several seminal articles by Starch and Elliot (1912, 1913a, 1913b), Wiggins (1989), Guskey (1994), Wormeli (2018), Brookhart et al. (2016), Brimi (2011), Hattie (2003) offer major constructs for the problems with grading systems. This review also contains information from current practitioners of what is known as the "gradeless classroom model." As research on this alternative grading model is scarce, this portion of the literature review contains some emerging and anecdotal evidence from teachers who are on the forefront of this movement.

To explore the current state of grading reform and grading issues, this review focuses on research from the past decade. However, I also found it important to focus on a large grading shift in grading reform which began around 2000 when educators and researchers began examining standards, grading criteria, and proficiency-based grading in more depth. Since this represented a significant turn from traditional grading systems, it was imperative to include research from the last two decades. As I discovered foundational studies that were frequently referenced, I sought out those original studies, some from over 100 years ago. These studies from the early 1900s offered a rich history of grading structures and practices, along with systemic issues around grading.

Issues in Grading Systems

Grading systems containing unintended yet harmful consequences for students is not a new problem in education. Over a century of research (Brookhart et al., 2016) summarizes the many issues associated with grading practices embedded in a traditional 0-100-point system. These include issues with reliability, communication, subjectivity/bias, equity, and motivation.

Traditional Grading Systems

The traditional 0–100-point grading system that dominates U.S. educational systems evolved out of the country’s social, economic, political, and scientific changes during the early 20th century (Feldman, 2019). Schools needed a more efficient way to grade an increasing number of diverse students and the industrialized economy sought ways to sort the working class for rapidly increasing factory jobs. By the 1940s, the 0–100-point system had morphed into the A-F system, but this ordinal scale was still based on a 0-100 percentage (Brookhart et al., 2016). The traditional grading system is based on students’ accruing points on assignments, activities, or behaviors, then at the end those points are totaled, and a percentage score is awarded, or an average is taken from all the assignments and calculated as a percentage (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). The percentages derived at the end are then assigned a designated letter grade on the A-F scale (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Brookhart’s work indicates early research during the beginning of the 20th century on reliability issues with this method of grading, yet although it is a deeply flawed system, this traditional grading system continues to dominate in most schools across the country.

Reliability of Grades

From Brookhart et al.’s (2016) review of over a century of grading research, the educational community acknowledges one of the biggest issues with grades is their lack of

reliability. In discussions of reliability, most researchers point back to foundational studies done by Starch and Elliot in the early 1900s. Starch and Elliot (1913) conducted three studies examining the reliability of grades in high school English, Mathematics, and History classes. In their study of English grades, they found that teachers believed grade variability would range only 10 points, when the range was actually 35 to 40 points. At the time, critics of the research believed that variability in grades was because the studies were conducted in English classes, an inherently subjective subject to grade. Starch and Elliot (1913a) responded by replicating the study in a Mathematics class. This time their results showed even greater variability in the range of grades assigned. In their third study, they examined History grades, with similar results.

Starch and Elliot's (1912; 1913a; 1913b) results have been corroborated more recently (Brimi, 2011), demonstrating that the issues of reliability and variability are still present today. Brimi replicated their research in an English classroom, finding that the 73 participants who scored a single paper using a 100-point scale offered grades that ranged from 50 to 96. This was a range of 46 points for this single paper. Almost 100 years later, Brimi's (2011) results corroborate Starch and Elliot's (1912) call for attention to the subjectivity embedded in assessing student work.

Communicating Student Progress

Most educators and researchers agree that one of the main purposes of grades is to communicate to students about their academic achievement (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2006): "most high school teachers indicate that grades should describe how well students have achieved the learning goals established for a course...grades should reflect students' performance based on specific learning criteria" (Guskey, 2006, p. 672). However, Guskey (2006) notes that most teachers' grades do not reflect this purpose. Grades are often composed of several different

factors, each with a different weight, making it difficult for students to interpret their progress (Wormeli, 2018). Guskey (2006) refers to this as the “hodgepodge grade” (p. 671). Even when teachers explain the way they have conceptualized and enacted grading categories, weights, and calculations for their course, “the final grade remains a confusing amalgamation that is impossible to interpret and rarely represents a true picture of a student’s proficiency” (p. 671). Students cannot decipher a realistic picture of their academic achievement which counters one of the major purposes of grades (Feldman, 2019).

Subjectivity in Grading

The issue of subjectivity in grading is related not only to how reliable scores are, but also to the degree which other elements factor into that grade. Over the decades, research continued on the reliability of these grading systems. Researchers examined what teachers factored in when calculating a student’s overall grade as well as how teachers’ beliefs impacted grading. McMillan’s (2003) teacher grading decision-making theory grounded much of the research in this area. Resh (2009) examined teachers’ allocation of student output and student input in the total for final grades and found most teachers used at least four considerations with different weights in the final grade. Resh also found that although teachers were divided in their beliefs on differentiating grading for “strong” or “weak” students, they all weighted effort more heavily for “weak” students. This suggests subjectivity in grading takes the form of teachers being influenced by the positive feelings they have for students who demonstrate a great deal of effort. The subjective nature of grading was also corroborated by Wiley’s (2011) research where teachers considered non-achievement variables, such as behavior or effort more often in grading than they did academic performance. This became especially apparent when teachers evaluated students who demonstrated high effort and low ability and is problematic because this does not

accurately represent the student's academic ability (Wiley, 2011). Randall and Engelhard (2010) also looked at factors that teachers consider when completing grades such as academic achievement, ability, effort, and behavior. They found that effort and behavior impacted teachers' grading decisions the most. Kunnath (2017) corroborated these findings in his own research, showing teachers include non-achievement factors such as ability, behavior and effort in their decisions about students' grades. Taken together, these studies suggest that teachers try to include many factors of learning into grades.

Researchers surmise teachers may try to incorporate non-cognitive measures into their grading practices out of an effort to be fair to their students. Randall and Engelhard's research (2010) indicates that teachers do this because they want to support struggling students and believe that incorporating non-cognitive factors into final grades is a good way to offer support. Yet this actually increases the subjectivity issues with grades, as teachers influence the grades based on their feelings about students. "It is not hard to believe individuals who have dedicated their lives to helping children would find it difficult to fail a low ability student who works hard and causes minimal classroom disruptions," explains Randall and Engelhard (2010, p. 1379). Teachers' beliefs spur them to manipulate the traditional grading systems by including non-cognitive factors. Though teachers do this with the best of intentions, it is unfair to students as it prevents grades from being a clear indicator of their ability. Teachers may use grades as a consequence for behavior which again complicates the grade. Students are then judge on academic ability and classroom behavior in the same grade.

Equity

Teachers can be subjective in their grading practices in other ways besides considerations of students' effort or behavior. Race and gender are other elements shown to influence teachers'

grading practices (Link & Guskey, 2019). Teachers treat students of a different race and male students differently, often using punitive grading measures as consequences for behavior (Link & Guskey, 2019). It is not fair for one student to receive a “D” that is influenced by disruptive behavior and another student to receive a “B” if their academic ability is the same (Link & Guskey, 2019). This subjectivity makes students of color and male students more susceptible to lower grades based on the teacher’s perception of their race and behavior (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Ford, 2016; Link & Guskey, 2019).

Inequity in grade systems is related to other factors that are outside of a student’s control. Grading inequities exist when grades reward or punish students for elements of the academic journey that are unavoidable. For example, grading policies that include attendance, participation, effort, extra credit, late penalties or homework, often obscure the ways students have unequal levels of support or resources to perform in all of these areas (Feldman, 2019; Wormeli, 2018). An equitable grade should not include an assignment that was supposed to be completed over a vacation break and submitted electronically because that assumes the student has access to technology and a supportive environment at home (Feldman, 2019; Wormeli, 2018). Including this assignment in the overall grade punishes a student for things outside of their control instead of accurately judging their academic ability (Feldman, 2019). Yet these sort of policies are often a part of traditional grading systems, and inevitably punish marginalized students.

Motivation

As teachers may incorporate non-cognitive factors into grades based on students’ behavior, it is also common for teachers to use grades to manage students’ effort and motivation. Many educators view grades as a motivating factor for students, to get them to perform at their

best. However, research reveals that the idea that students are motivated by grades may be faulty. Although students who achieve high grades and perceive those grades as acknowledgement of their success may show continued effort to avoid low grades (Guskey, 1994; 2011b), there is no research indicating that students who receive low grades are motivated to try harder. Not only do low grades fail to motivate, they actually can be detrimental to a student's view of their ability to learn. When students start off a term with a few failures that drop their grade to an extraordinarily low level, they can experience hopelessness and begin to believe there is no possible way to improve (Carifio & Carey, 2013). This can lead to having to retake courses or dropping out of school altogether if the student is experiencing that hopelessness in all of their classes (Carifio & Carey, 2013).

Results from a research study done by Pulfrey et al. (2011) clearly show that using grades as a tool for motivation is problematic. Students who expected a grade for an assignment were more likely to try to avoid the task compared to those who were not expecting a grade. They also found this same avoidance when the grade students were expecting for a task was accompanied with formative feedback compared to those who were not expecting a grade. This research suggests: that grading can be detrimental to learning. If this is the case, then traditional grading can undermine the true purpose of education which is for students to learn. The research outlined above identifies clear issues with the traditional grading system that overwhelmingly points to a need for grading reform (Carifio & Carey, 2013; Guskey, 1994; 2011b; Pulfrey et al., 2011). Those reform efforts are varied, and the most prominent ones are discussed in the following section.

Grading Reforms: Authentic Assessment

Classroom-based grading practices are just one element of educational assessment and are supposed to function as a tool educators use to assess students' achievement over a period of time. When educators start changing how they view assessment, then it is almost inevitable that their grading systems must change as well. Authentic assessment is a movement that started over three decades ago based on the idea that standardized tests and grades were not assessing complex, real world skills that students needed to be successful in life outside of high school. Grant Wiggins (1989), one of the leaders in the authentic assessment movement, argued that assessment needed to “replicate the challenges and standards of performance” that students will face in the working world (p. 703), and advocated educators should determine students' proficiency at skills they would need, rather than grading particular assignments or using standardized test scores.

Authentic assessment shifts the focus from the letter grade to the actual learning and what the evidence of that learning will be (Wiggins, 1989). The evidence of learning is often something that is relatable to what the skill would produce in the professional field instead of a multiple-choice test. Authentic assessment drives students to show their critical understanding of a topic, instead of just regurgitating rote learning (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Wiggins, 1989). Since students need to be prepared with the skills necessary to be successful in a career after high school, assessment practices should align with that preparation and mimic real-world scenarios as much as possible (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Hargreaves et al., 2002; Wiggins, 1989).

Darling-Hammond (1995) furthered Wiggins's (1989) research in her studies of authentic assessment in schools across the United States. She stated that authentic assessment has four qualities: (1) it is representative of what skills are like in the field, (2) there are clear and

communicated criteria based on the essentials necessary for performance, (3) it includes self-assessment practices, and (4) students present their work publicly. These characteristics are also present in Hargreaves et al.'s (2002) definition of authentic assessment.

Where traditional assessment and grading systems focus on categorizing students by what they can recall, authentic assessment focuses on communicating between student and teacher when the learning is happening (Hargreaves et al., 2002). This requires constant communication between the teacher and the student about progress and requires teachers to become collaborators in the learning process (Hargreaves et al., 2002; Wiggins, 1989). Teachers cannot completely know and therefore evaluate, what students know without the valuable information of the students' understanding of themselves (Feldman & Marshall, 2020; Hargreaves et al., 2002). Therefore, increasing dialogue between students and teachers during authentic assessment increases student voice. This research suggests that education needs a grading system that engages both students and teachers in the collaborative process of authentic assessment (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Feldman & Marshall, 2020; Hargreaves et al., 2002; Wiggins, 1989). However, the most common critique of authentic assessment is that it requires an exceptional amount of time for teachers to create the assessments as well as grade them (Wiggins, 1989).

Feedback

Communication is an imperative piece of authentic assessment. Teacher feedback can take a myriad of forms, and some are more effective than others. A seminal study done by Page (1958) revealed the positive effect teacher feedback can have on student achievement. In Page's study, one participant group received only a score and letter grade on a test. A second group received a score, letter grade, and a standardized comment associated with their letter grade. A

third and final group received a score, letter grade, and an individualized comment. Page examined students' results on a subsequent test and found that the second group did significantly better, and the third group did even better than the second. After Paige's research, more studies by the likes of Hattie & Timperley (2007), Wiggins (2011), Percell (2017), and Guskey (2019), all corroborated that feedback was more effective than a stand-alone score or letter grade. "Grades help students identify where they are in their journey to mastery of important learning goals. But, just like assessments, grades alone don't help students improve" writes Guskey (2019, p. 46). Students need feedback to understand what went well, what they need to improve on, and how to go about that improvement (Guskey, 2019).

Since Page's (1958) study, more research has been done on the effective aspects of feedback. Percell (2017), Wiggins (2011, 2013), Guskey (2019) all agree that there are essential qualities of feedback that make it the most effective. Feedback needs to be process oriented and connected to clear goals and learning objectives so that a student can use it to move on to the next skill level (Percell, 2017; Wiggins, 2011; 2012). Process oriented feedback keeps the focus on the learning process as opposed to focusing solely on the outcome (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Percell, 2017). The ways feedback is communicated are important as well; helpful feedback is personal and genuine (Percell, 2017), and must be meaningful to students.

In Page's (1958) study, the results demonstrate how feedback can improve students' learning, and individualized feedback can increase that improvement even more. For feedback to improve student learning it must act as a guide when there is a difference between what the student knows and what the learning outcome is (Hattie & Timperley, 2003). Researchers continued to see the same results as Page (1958) when studying feedback. Hattie (2003) found in a meta-analysis of factors that influence student learning that feedback had the greatest effect

size. The research makes clear how vital and beneficial feedback can be to students' learning as it outweighs many other interventions that are aimed at improving student learning.

Alternative Grading Practices

With research revealing the effectiveness of alternative assessment and feedback on students' achievement, it is natural that alternative grading practices accompany these practices. As many teachers categorize and weight assessments to make a student's overall grade as accurate as possible and attempt to avoid subjectivity (Brookhart et al., 2016), they miss alternative grading practices that may provide better solutions to these widely accepted issues. Alternative grading practices are defined as any grading system that differs from the traditional, points-based system (Percell, 2014); the four outlined in this portion of the literature review are a) minimum grading, b) standards-based grading, c) mastery-based grading, and d) no grade or "going gradeless."

Minimum Grading

One alternative grading practice is called minimum grading. Minimum grading can be defined as a system where a minimum grade is set, so that students are not issued a zero score. Minimum grading is usually used in alignment with the traditional 0–100-point scale, and often the minimum grade is set at a 50 percent (Carifio & Carey, 2013; Guskey, 2004). Minimum grading supports students who face early failure at the start of a term due to inconsistent ability or circumstances outside of their control by preventing them from mathematically falling into a deficit that is near impossible to reverse (Carifio & Carey, 2013; Feldman 2019; Guskey, 2004). Carifio and Carey (2013) conducted a seven-year research study examining minimum grading in a large urban high school. Their research contradicts the two biggest concerns critics of minimum grading have: grade inflation and social promotion. Critics argue that grade inflation

allows for students to receive higher grades on work that would have previously received lower marks, and then result in students being moved onto the next grade through social promotion even when their skills did not warrant the advancement (Carifio & Carey, 2013). Over the 343,425 sets of grades assigned over the seven years, only 1,159 began with assigning a minimum grade and ended with the student passing the class (Carifio & Carey, 2013). Their results showed that only 0.3% of students who were assigned a minimum grade ended with the student passing the class. The minimum grading system did not result in many students passing who, critics might claim, should not have. Instead, it gave a small minority of students a chance at passing, when in the traditional grading system, they would have been unlikely to succeed after one failure.

Standards Based Grading

Over the last two decades standards-based grading (SBG) has become a stronger movement in the grading reform discussion. SBG evolved to address the reliability, subjectivity and equity issues within the traditional grading system. In a SBG system, teachers score specific standards or topics on either a 0-4 scale or a 1-5 scale (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; Feldman, 2019). In the 0-4 scale, a three represents proficiency on a particular standard, and often in SBG systems, students are allowed to continually attempt throughout the year to demonstrate their proficiency (Feldman, 2019; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Varlas (2013) writes about how SBG acts as a clearer communication tool for students on their academic progress. Pollio and Hochbein (2015) found that SBG was more predictive of students' achievement on standardized tests. They also found that 75% of students who earned above-average grades under a traditional grading system in a content class scored below proficient on the corresponding state standardized

test. This reiterates the reliability issue with the traditional grading system, and points to a lack of student learning happening in the traditional grading model.

Mastery Based Grading

Mastery based grading (MBG) is similar to standards-based grading (SBG) in many ways yet contains a distinct difference. Mastery based grading encourages students to try to reach mastery of a skill until they have achieved it and does not differentiate their levels of progress as they work towards mastery (Armacost & Pet-Armacost, 2003; Bloom, 1968; Guskey, 2010; Percell, 2014b). The student has either achieved mastery, or they have not. This is different from SBG where student ability levels are usually marked on a 0-4 or 1-5 scale at regular intervals. Modern mastery-based grading systems that are in use today are often founded on Benjamin Bloom's work (1968). Half a century ago, he advocated for clear criteria or objectives to clarify the learning process for students and give teachers ways to collect clear evidence of whether students had mastered a skill or not. He also advocated for frequent formative assessment with feedback aligned to the necessary skills, and suggested this feedback be organized in a hierarchy so students could see what they still need to learn to achieve mastery. As more research was done on Bloom's theories of mastery learning, Anderson (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of researcher studies examining mastery grading and found that overall, mastery grading had a moderate effect on student achievement. More recently Armacost & Pet-Armacost (2002) and Percell (2014b) have explored mastery-based grading systems where a letter grade is still assigned at the end of the grading period.

No Grading or "Going Gradeless"

While the ideas behind this grading alternative started on the fringes of grading reform, it is now slowly gaining recognition; it is known as no grading or what is colloquially known as

“going gradeless.” In gradeless models, teachers forgo giving letter grades or scores on assignments, yet still give feedback and communicate criteria that students work towards (Loveless, 1989; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020; O’Connor & Lessing, 2017). Near the end of the grading period, the teacher holds a grading conversation with each individual student where they discuss what the student learned and the evidence of that learning (O’Connor & Lessing, 2017). In 1989, Loveless experimented with a gradeless model in an English class of remedial seventh graders and again with an advanced writing class for seniors. Loveless was drawn to implement the gradeless model after becoming frustrated with students' lack of vigor for learning and their hyper focus on their grade. Both sets of students showed improvement in their skills.

Similarly, O’Connor & Lessing (2017) implemented a gradeless model in hopes of increasing students’ intrinsic motivation for learning. In their model, assignments were checked off in the gradebook for completion, and essays, projects, or larger summative works were not graded but received feedback according to set criteria often developed with student input. Half-way through the quarter and at the end of the quarter, the teacher assigns a holistic grade after reviewing students' formative work and the summative, criteria-based assignments. The student also reflects on their work and assigns a grade. Finally, the teacher and student sit down for a discussion on what the final letter grade will be. O’Connor & Lessing (2017) report that often the grade the student and teacher come up with is the same. If there is a discrepancy between the two grades, a conversation ensues. This grade conversation between student and teacher (O’Connor & Lessing, 2017) creates an equitable and accurate assessment of students’ abilities because they can explain their learning (Wiggins, 1989).

More recently, McMorran & Ragupathi (2020) studied student and faculty responses to a gradeless initiative implemented in a public university in Singapore. The university's reasoning

for trying out this model mirrored Loveless's (1989) aim. They wanted students to focus on learning apart from concern about grades and help students develop into lifelong learners (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020). All incoming students were given a "grade-free" period of assessment for their first semester; after that, traditional grading resumed. Their results showed that both students and faculty agreed this model helped encourage improved behavior and attitudes towards learning, students' academic risk-taking, and less stress around grades (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020). There were some downsides, as well; students and teachers reported that going gradeless seemed to make students less motivated to attend class, complete homework, and do assigned readings (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020). Though this counters what other researchers say about grading and motivation (Carifio & Carey, 2013; Guskey, 1994; 2011b; Pulfrey et al., 2011), McMorran & Ragupathi (2020) explained one potential reason for their findings. They learned that although university faculty were instructed to teach the same as before, faculty felt confused about the gradeless model and may have taught differently, as a result. Further research needs to be done, to examine if the gradeless model contributed to students' lack of motivation or if other factors in the implementation affected results.

Critics of the gradeless model often object to its use because it is so foreign to not assign a letter grade on transcripts. Researchers like Reeves (2020) point out that doing away with grades is inequitable because some students depend on their grades and grade point averages (GPAs) to earn scholarships and gain admission to colleges and universities. However, in both O'Connor & Lessing (2017) and McMorran & Ragupathi (2020), students' letter grades were still awarded at the end of the marking period. They were just determined in a different manner than the traditional grading system.

Teachers' Perceptions of Grading

Teaching is a profession where frequent change is sometimes the only guarantee, yet teachers often balk at opportunities to make changes to their practice. Hargreaves (2005) found that a teacher's experience in the profession, current stage of life and career, personality type, and generation all factor into a teacher's willingness and response to change. Further research on teacher change, specifically their grading practices, revealed that two of the factors Hargreaves studied, experience in the profession, and their beliefs about grades and assessments, are two prominent factors that significantly shape how willing and able teachers are to enact change in their own practice.

Teaching Experience

Research indicates that teachers who have fewer years of experience may have a more open attitude toward change but lack the skill to competently enact it. This contrasts with teachers with more years of experience, who have the knowledge and skill to change practice, but may not wish to do so. Hargreaves (2005) examined teachers' years of professional experience and found that teachers with less experience may be more open to change but may lack the competency necessary to implement the change successfully. Hargreaves states, "The absence of memory that creates openness to change is unavoidably accompanied by missing experiences that would otherwise put such change into perspective" (p. 982). Veteran teachers may be more reticent towards change, but their experience carries an important element to sustainable reform. Since veteran teachers have perspective and mastery over other areas of their teaching practice, they may be more able to enact change compared to teachers who are new to the profession. Newer teachers may struggle with grading reform initiatives because they lack experience and must manage feelings of overwhelm at starting a new job, focusing on classroom

management and lesson planning (Battistone et al., 2019). This dichotomy between differences in experience often stymies the change process in schools.

Newer teachers are also shaped by their experience with grading and assessment in their teacher education programs. In one study, new teachers reported that courses on assessment were taught at points in their program where they were not able to then apply the new knowledge in their student teaching (Battistone et al., 2019). The time between when they learned theories on assessment and were then able to apply them to their own practice affected their ability to implement alternative assessment practices. Teacher candidates are also typically graded in a traditional manner, based on their instructors' own educational background (Battistone et al., 2019). If a professor's experience is not aligned with new or innovative grading practices, this leaves little room for teacher candidates to experience the benefits of new grading systems (Battistone et al., 2019). If new teachers are open to change but lack experience in the profession as Hargreaves' (2005) research suggests, then they only have what they learned about assessment and grading in their teacher preparation program to inform their practice (Battistone et al., 2019). If the teacher education programs are not successfully preparing new teachers for new grading practices, then grading reform is unlikely. Simultaneously, if veteran teachers have the experience and perspective, but face exhaustion from perpetual education reform efforts that make them reluctant to change (Hargreaves, 2005), then the traditional systems persevere.

Teachers' Beliefs About Grading

Teachers' beliefs about grading vary greatly and stem from a variety of experiences that later inform their grading practices. Guskey (2006b) investigated what teachers recollected of their own experiences with grading as students. Teachers reported in their past experiences that it was important that there was clarity and fairness in grading practices (Guskey, 2006b).

Participants in the study shared experiences from over 20 years ago, demonstrating that grading practices can have lifelong impacts on learners (Guskey, 2006b). Teachers in Guskey's study also reported that the most positive experiences participants had with grading was when a teacher implemented "high expectations coupled with specific directions for achieving excellence" and "specific feedback for improvement" in their grading (p. 10). This again reiterates the need for a grading system where feedback and grading criteria are the priority (Marzano, 2011; Wiggins, 2011; 1989).

Not all grading experiences the participants discussed were positive. Participants shared frustration over grading practices that appeared unfair or that were demeaning or embarrassing (Guskey, 2006b). Percell's (2017) work had similar findings, where participants reported negative experiences with feedback being given at the very end of the semester, being given arbitrary scores, being given superficial feedback, or even being given passing grades on completely plagiarized assignments (Percell, 2017). This reveals how effective feedback must follow the qualities that Wiggins (2013) and Percell (2017) have outlined.

A teacher's beliefs about grading are also influenced by how they feel they may be perceived based on the grades they assign, and how they use grades to manage other parts of their practice (Bonner & Chen, 2009; Guskey, 2009). Bonner & Chen (2009) found that teacher candidates were influenced by attitudes about leniency and concerns for classroom management. They hypothesized that this belief came from the fact that teacher candidates preparing to enter the profession wanted to be perceived as fair and not as a pushover in regard to grading. Secondary candidates in the study were more supportive of using grades as punitive measures for individual students or groups (Bonner & Chen, 2009). These beliefs demonstrate how grading is

a part of the teacher's identity and how much of these beliefs are tied to traditional views of secondary education.

Guskey's (2009) research on teachers' views of grading correlates to Bonner & Chen's (2009) findings on what influences secondary teachers' grading practices. Secondary teachers in Guskey's study were more likely to include behavior in the grade, grade homework, and give zeroes for late or missing work. These methods align with more traditional beliefs about grading that considers grades as a tool to manage student behavior (Bonner & Chen, 2009). Both studies showed secondary teachers were more likely to include punitive measures in their grades than elementary teachers. The difference in beliefs could be in part due to secondary teachers being more likely to embrace more traditional teaching practices (Bonner & Chen, 2009) and the fact that high school grades go on a permanent transcript (Guskey, 2009). This creates high stakes around secondary grades as they can impact a student's life after high school in terms of applying for jobs or college admissions (Guskey, 2009).

Teachers' Beliefs About Student Achievement

Though teachers often have strong beliefs about grades and grading practices (Bonner & Chen, 2009), they do not generally believe that they have an impact on students' achievement (Evans et al., 2019). Evans et al. discovered that teachers associate student achievement with the teacher's instructional practices only 15% of the time. Participants were more likely to identify influences such as student behavior as the cause for student achievement (Evans et al., 2019). If a teacher does not believe that their practice can impact students' achievement, then they may be unlikely to attempt to change their practice.

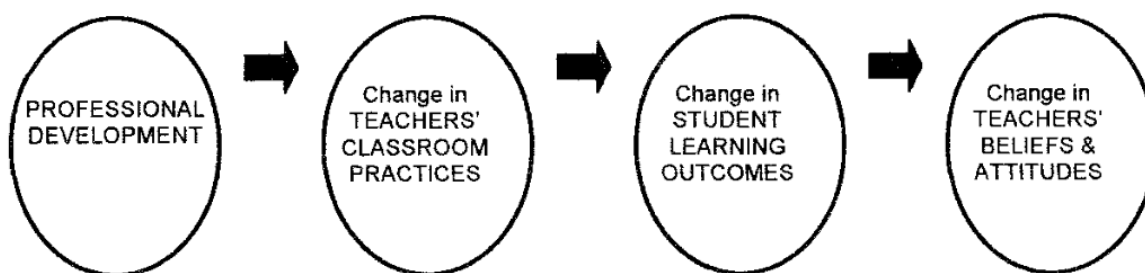
Teacher Change

Though the research suggests that grading practices are deeply related to a teacher's beliefs and experiences (Bonner & Chen, 2009; Guskey, 2006b; 2009; Percell, 2017), research also demonstrates teachers' beliefs can be changed (Guskey, 1984, 2003; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Putnam and Borko (2000) stress that teacher change must be viewed through a situative perspective that recognizes sustainable teacher change is situated within their own practice (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Teachers must examine grading reform in the context and situation of their own classrooms to develop sustainable and meaningful change.

The idea of situating teacher change in a teacher's context directly connects with Guskey's (1984; 2002) foundational theory of teacher change. Figure 1 indicates Guskey's model of change. Guskey's model of teacher change suggests that "significant change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs occurs primarily after they gain evidence of improvements in student learning" (p. 383). This illustrates how a teacher makes intentional changes that are situated in the context of their own practice (Putnam & Borko, 2000), they are unlikely to change their beliefs until they observe student improvement (Guskey, 1984; 2002).

Figure 1

A Model of Teacher Change



Bonner & Chen's (2009) research is a good example of how useful Guskey's theory and Putnam & Borko's (2000) findings on teacher change can be. In their study, teacher candidates

began an instructional course on assessment while either student teaching or working in their own classroom. They found that teacher candidates:

became markedly more moderate in their support of nonstandard grading practices following coursework in classroom assessment. This suggests that on average their pre-existing, unorthodox perceptions about many grading approaches became tempered over time, perhaps by learning about concerns for fairness in grading and validity of grade interpretation (p. 74).

Their results indicate how, when grading reform is situated in teachers' practice, it can lead to a change in their beliefs about grades. Guskey's (1982; 2002) work along with Putnam & Borko (2000) emphasize that the idea a change in teachers' beliefs will lead to a change in their practice is often a faulty assumption. Instead, teachers must see positive learning outcomes to change their beliefs (Guskey, 2002). The implications of this are that teachers may never enact sustainable change if they have not seen a positive outcome for their students, which only secures the placement of the traditional grading systems.

Conclusion

Traditional grading systems are not the best method for supporting student learning due to issues with reliability, subjectivity, equity, and motivation. It is also clear that grades and grading systems are rooted in teachers' beliefs. An entrenched grading system and strong beliefs that support it, do not foster a situation to readily enact change. Reform efforts have focused on an overhaul of assessment practices and alternative grading systems to try to solve these longstanding issues, yet still the traditional system prevails. Research is needed to better understand what is involved when teachers are actively changing something as entrenched and significant as a grading system.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins with a review of this study's purpose and a discussion of the research design, research setting, and participants. I also explain data sources, data gathering procedures, and data analysis, along with a discussion of trustworthiness in this qualitative study.

Additionally, I explain how my experiences with grading as a high school teacher led me to make decisions as a researcher, while acknowledging my biases.

Restatement of Research Questions

Over a century of research has demonstrated systemic issues with the variety of grading systems and policies that are used in public education, particularly those related to traditional letter grade systems (Brookhart et al., 2016). Students experience some form of grading practices at all levels of public education. In elementary school, it often takes the form of a ranking system based on how well a student meets standards. As students progress in their academic journey, letter grades become standard; by the time students reach high school, they are often grade-focused and motivated by them, rather than by the learning itself. Grading systems in high school have driven students to focus more on the score or letter grade than the actual learning (Kohn, 2011). Students are “responding to adults who, by telling them the goal is to get a good mark, have sent the message that success matters more than learning” (Kohn, 2011, p. 29-30). Grading systems often become solely results based, which effectively de-prioritizes learning for learning's sake. Grading can thus become an obstacle to the learning process.

For teachers and students, one of the main purposes of grading is to gather information about students' academic achievement and then communicate that as feedback to guide their learning (Brookhart et al., 2016; Kohn, 2011; Kunnath, 2017). Ideally, grading should be a tool in the learning process, rather than the ultimate outcome. Teachers interact with their students

and their grading system every day in the classroom. Since the responsibility of evaluating students' ability level is part of a teacher's job description, it is imperative that researchers examine teachers' thought processes around grading. Teachers have useful knowledge and relevant experience with the ways grading systems function for students and either foster or hinder learning, which is why studies such as this one, which seek to examine teachers' experience with unique and countercultural "gradeless classrooms" are so important. This study examined the ways teachers make sense of what matters with relation to grades, and what motivates them to make significant changes to traditional grading systems. This qualitative case study aimed to inquire:

How do high school teachers make sense of and enact a gradeless system in their classrooms?

- a. What led them to make such a big shift in their thinking and practice?
- b. What supports/challenges did they experience in the process of making the change to a gradeless system?

Research Design

This study was a qualitative, exploratory case study. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state, "qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity" (p. 23). Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to examine how people encounter and respond to everyday occurrences by observing them interacting within their environment (Yin, 2015). A case study approach was appropriate for my aim to explore how a particular group of teachers make sense of an innovative gradeless classroom model as they meet to discuss it and make changes in their practice. As such, this was a study that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in

depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2019, p. 15). Since this study took place in the multiple and varied contexts in which it occurred (school, classrooms, and the social spaces where teachers meet to discuss and enact this change in their practice), I examined teacher sense making in contexts where classroom, school, and practice are entwined.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) define a bounded system as “a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 38). This was a single case study of teachers who were engaged in the discourse and implementation of a gradeless classroom model at a rural, Oregon high school. The case was also bounded by the process by which these individuals make sense of and implement a gradeless classroom model through conversation with like-minded others, and within their own classrooms. This was a unique case; I was privileged to study alongside a group of educators who were delving into an alternative grading model since the traditional 0-100-point grading system tends to be the dominant system in public high schools.

Another reason case study was a good approach for this inquiry was because it can “cope with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points” (Yin, 2019, p. 15). Conducting research in a human-based public-school setting means there was countless elements to study; case study enabled me to explore the most relevant by collecting multiple types of evidence to triangulate data in such a way as to confirm themes arising from such a complex ecosystem (Yin, 2019). To that end, I collected data through a variety of methods such as single-person interviews and document and artifact collection. Triangulation has the potential to reveal multiple insights into the work and confirm conclusions across data sources, strengthening the veracity of the study (Yin, 2015).

Setting of the Study

The high school where this work with gradeless classrooms was actively taking place is in a rural area of Oregon. Pacific Northwest High School (PNHS-pseudonym) has a total student population of 2,136 students and 98 teachers. The student population is primarily White (60 %) and Latino (35%) with a small percentage of other ethnicities (American Indian/Alaska Native-2%, Asian-1%, Black/African American-1%). 89% of licensed teachers at Pacific Northwest High School (PNHS) have more than three years of experience; the school's average teacher retention rate is 94%. The high-school's on-time graduation rate is 91%.

I met a gatekeeper for this research setting via a professional connection; Sam (pseudonym) agreed to help me gain access to a school where I was effectively an outsider. Sam has been a high school English teacher for 12 years and has a deep commitment to reflecting and improving his practice all for the sake of providing the best education possible for his students. According to Sam, PNHS is under the direction of principal, Amanda Whitman (pseudonym) who is committed to innovative and student-centered practices. Her Twitter feed exudes her passion for student centered education, her humility as a leader, and her drive to improve public education. On her social media account, she states (Whitman, 2021):

To go from bad to good we need to implement common sense systems with consistency and accountability. To go from good to great we need to encourage innovation within and beyond those systems. To go from great to groundbreaking we need to empower people to disrupt those systems.

Based on my understanding of the setting, this principal's 20 years of experience in education offered a wealth of knowledge and experience; her leadership was a significant element of a gradeless classroom model taking hold at PNHS.

Participant Selection Process

Once my proposal and IRB application were approved, I set up an initial conversation with my gatekeeper Sam; I asked for a list of teachers he believed may be interested in participating in the study. Sam helped me recruit three high school teachers who had changed their classrooms from traditional grading models to gradeless classroom models within the past five years. Criteria for participant selection included the following: the teacher was actively pursuing a gradeless classroom model and/or attended and collaborated for professional learning discussions on this topic. After gathering a group of possible participants, I reached out to them via email and explained the study further and scheduled a phone call for further discussion and informed consent. The informed consent explained the purpose of the study as well as the procedures that would be followed. It made clear that participation was voluntary and that participants would have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Lastly, the informed consent letter discussed confidentiality and how the results of this study may be used. A copy of this letter may be found in Appendix A.

Table 1

Teacher Participants' Educator Demographics

Participants	Years of Teaching Experience	Year of Using Nontraditional Grading System	Content Area	Number of Classes Taught per Semester	Grade Level(s) Taught	Number of Students Taught per Semester
Amanda	18	4.5	French	6	9th-12th	130
Ken	14	2	Social Studies	6	10th	140
Nicole	17	3	Social Studies & Avid	6	11 th -12th	160

Data Sources and Data Gathering

This qualitative research study collected interview data from each participant, along with artifacts and grading documents. Data gathering followed careful protocols to uphold participant privacy and minimize as discomfort as much as possible.

Interviews

Interviewing was one of the most appropriate data collection techniques for this research study because “the aim of the interview is to obtain contextualized accounts of participants’ experiences” (Josselson, 2013, p. 5). Interviews allowed me to gain more insight into the gradeless classroom model and participants’ sense-making experience. Josselson (2013) compares the interview process to a “dance” and describes interviewing as trying to “follow the motion of the interviewee” (p.7-8). I worked to achieve this dance through semi structured interviews, “moving with the participant and trying to ask as few questions as possible” (p. 8). I used a list of guiding questions, and as the interview evolved, I asked follow-up questions in response to the conversation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These guiding questions aided me in exploring the motivations and process the teacher used to make the change to a gradeless classroom, what the system looked like and how it functioned, how the teacher created buy-in, what issues had emerged for the teacher, how they resolved them, and participants’ thoughts on the results of the change to a gradeless classroom (Appendix B).

To be conscious of the time demands interviewing would require for participants, I conducted two, in-depth interviews per participant. With each interview I conducted, I expected more questions to arise. A strength of qualitative research is “being ready to change [ideas and procedures] when their findings require it” (Becker, 2009, p. 548). While exploring the data, new

inquiries arose, that lead me to test the new inquiries against the current data and complete member checks with each participant.

I was unable to conduct interviews in-person due to COVID restrictions. I used audio recordings and created initial transcriptions using a transcription application. After interviews were recorded, I kept the recordings for one week as I worked to download them to a password protected computer and stored them in encrypted files before deleting them from the transcription application.

Artifacts

Yin (2015) suggests that artifact collection may include “documents, artifacts, archival records, videos, or social media information” (p. 154). Collecting these objects during my research could “yield invaluable data about things not directly observed” (p. 155). Collecting objects that educators used while enacting or making sense of the gradeless classroom model helped me understand how they went about the process. For some participants who enacted this model several years prior, these objects gave me insight into the inception of the work. Participants also shared artifacts they had created to support gradeless classrooms with parents and students, including anything they used in planning, organizing, or implementing gradeless design in their classroom.

Throughout the entire data gathering process, I kept a journal for writing analytic memos. Analytic memos helped me make “constant comparisons” and worked towards “continually posing questions about [my] data” (Yin, 2015, p.185). After the first interview, I asked participants for any documents that aided in their making sense of, or implementation of, the gradeless classroom model. After I completed my interviews with the three teachers, there were still some lingering questions that had arisen from the data and my analytic memos. I scheduled a

follow-up or member check interview with all three participants to gain clarity on these questions. I also met with my critical friend, Sam, to discuss these questions as well.

Data Analysis

In this case study, data collection and analysis happened simultaneously and iteratively. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain that this is normal for case study: “the process of data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic” (p. 195). I began analysis as soon as the first data was collected, and it only intensified and informed further data collection. As I conducted and finalized interview transcripts, I read through them several times, making notes and “commenting on the data” (p. 196). I wrote memos to record emerging themes, hunches, ideas, or questions I wanted to ask in any subsequent interviews or informal interactions with participants. I informally analyzed and compared emerging ideas with each subsequent interview to help me discover constructs “rather than verifying given notions or hypothesis,” (Tesch, 1990, p. 90) and I continued this analysis and comparison cycle for each subsequent interview or collected document.

After all data collection was completed, I began compiling the data in a database (Yin, 2015) to organize it before disassembling the data and coding the segments. The themes that evolved from my notes and memos formed the basis for the first set of categories (Tesch, 1990). As I coded and segmented the data, I grouped codes to form categories. I continually checked and revised the relevance of categories as I added new data. Yin (2015) refers to this as a “reassembling procedure” (p. 187). Once the last data was collected and coded, I proceeded to “look for the configurations within each category to describe their content, and for linkages across categories” (Tesch, 1990, p. 91). This step allowed me to interpret the reassembled data

and “create a new narrative” (Yin, 2015, p. 187). Finally, I drew conclusions based on the interpretations from my data analysis process (Yin, 2015).

The Researcher

As a high school Language Arts teacher, I started my sixth year of teaching this year. I am constantly working to improve my teaching practice. However, no matter what area of my practice I focused on, it seemed like grading practices were one of the thorniest and most prevalent issues affecting my students; they seem fixated on grades. These are the grades that determine students’ eligibility for extracurricular activities, their possible acceptance into colleges or universities, their potential to earn scholarships, and even their chance of being rewarded by parents or guardians. I have seen students fight to bring up their 59% to a 60% to receive a “D-” in a course, subsequently earning a credit and avoiding penalty. I have seen other students arguing over each percentage point and always looking for ways to gain a few more points to bring their 89% (B+) up to a 90% (A). As I participated in these increasingly frustrating conversations, I started viewing our grading system as shaping students to become outcome oriented, with little attention to the depth or meaning of their learning. For students and teachers, focusing only on the outcome of a single assignment or only on the summative letter grade at the end of a term is problematic because it overlooks the entire process and experience of learning. Overlooking the learning for the sake of grades was deeply troubling to me.

These observations and reflections brought me to reading writers such as Joe Feldman (2019), Rick Wormeli (2018), Alfie Kohn (2011), and Thomas Guskey (2009; 2013), who advocate for grading systems that are based more on proficiency or mastery rather than points. I also regularly asked my colleagues for their thoughts on the matter; both my reading and these collegial conversations revealed common grading fallacies I was observing around me and

actually practicing myself. I began to change my personal beliefs about grading. For instance, in my early years of teaching, I wanted to help kids earn a passing grade, assuming their learning was aligned with a grade. Now, I sense how grades have very little to do with what students actually know and may actually be a barrier to genuine learning. My personal beliefs on grading, the experiences of my students with grading, and the general discourse around grading formed the basis for my interest in this research.

Bracketing of Potential Bias

As I began looking into the gradeless classroom model, I felt simultaneously excited about the possibilities there and discontented with a traditional 0-100-point system. It was easy to believe that this model must work in practice because, in theory, it aligns closely with research on learning and motivation. However, a belief and a feeling that this model is an improvement without the data or results to support them was a pitfall of which I was cautious. My bias could have made it easy to view this system through a positive lens and overlook possible obstacles or flaws. I recognized how important it was to stay aware of these emerging beliefs and preferences as I conducted this research.

A researcher's subjectivity or biases cannot be ignored, and instead, they need to be acknowledged as an inseparable part of the researcher (Peshkin, 1988). Peshkin advocates for this acknowledgement by suggesting that "an enhanced awareness" can "result from a formal, systematic monitoring of self" (p. 20). To stay in tune with my subjectivity and biases, I maintained a researcher's journal throughout the process where I reflected on my thoughts, feelings, preconceived notions and expectations surrounding grading practices as I conducted my research. By setting my thoughts down on paper before engaging in data collection or analysis, I kept myself aware of my subjectivity and allowed myself to monitor it accordingly.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Interviewing participants in a study is a deeply relational act. There is an inherent power dynamic between myself, the researcher, and my fellow participants. Even though I was a fellow colleague in the realm of public education, by conducting this formal research I was put in a position of power to take an analytic stance on the work of participants in this study. I wanted to ameliorate this by maintaining a humble learning stance, never judging the work of my participants. I used member checking to give them opportunities to speak into my summaries of data and tentative interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Vogt et al., 2012). Through building respectful relationships with my participants and offering member checking, I increased the trustworthiness of a study that is carefully constructed and honoring to participant educators.

Triangulation was another critical piece of ensuring trustworthiness and credibility in my research. My research design allowed me to triangulate views by interviewing several different individuals who have different relationships with gradeless classrooms. In doing so, I was working to increase the internal validity of my study. My design also allowed me to triangulate data. By collecting data from a variety of participants and sources (interviews and documents) I increased my study's reliability by examining "the extent to which there is consistency in the findings" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 265).

Finally, throughout this research study I collaborated with two critical friends to help increase the integrity and credibility of this study. As Samaras and Sell (2013) explain, working with a critical friend "improves the quality of research so that it is not limited to [one] viewpoint, judgment, or opinion" (p. 93). One critical friend had an astounding depth of knowledge about qualitative research as well as education. She has advanced degrees in education and has walked alongside many dissertation students. She "contributed to the integrity of the research process

through questioning me, my processes, my interpretation and findings, and by ensuring I engage in critical reflection” (Appleton, 2011, p. 6). My gatekeeper, Sam, enthusiastically agreed to take on the role of my second critical friend. Sam was the first teacher at PNHS to enact the gradeless classroom model. His experience proved valuable in helping provide context for findings that arose from the data.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the background and reasoning for pursuing a methodological case study for this research. I explained how the uniqueness of my case supports using this methodology and how my research questions will investigate how educators enact and make sense of the gradeless classroom model. I provided in depth explanation about how I collected and analyzed the data as well as ethical considerations for this research. The following chapter will dive into the results of the data collection methods.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This case study explored the work of teachers at PNHS who took up a gradeless classroom model. The data in this study consisted primarily of interviews with participants, along with relevant artifacts and documents they provided to help me understand the model and their work to enact it. This chapter begins with a brief description of each participant before discussing the research findings derived from interviews with this group of innovative and energetic educators.

Key findings in this study focus around five central themes, which I organized to describe this nontraditional model, along with the successes and challenges of enacting it. I begin first with a theme describing the teachers who took up this work to explain the uniqueness of this case. These findings are in answer to the research questions at the center of this study:

How do high school teachers make sense of and enact a gradeless system in their classrooms?

- a. What led them to make such a big shift in their thinking and practice?
- b. What supports/challenges did they experience in the process of making the change to a gradeless system?

Teacher Participants

Before discussing emergent themes, it is important to share background information about my teacher participants, Amanda, Ken, and Nicole. Their unique personalities and characteristics were an important part of what enabled them to make this shift in their grading practices; it was a privilege to interview them for this study and gain insight into their strengths as teachers.

Amanda

“I’m listening to students tell me who they are, as the professional of themselves...it’s a lovely moment because I’m giving that power to them. Or I should say, they’re claiming it.”

At the time of this study, Amanda had been teaching high school French for 18 years. When we sat down together over Zoom, she radiated a drive to constantly better her teaching practice. This drive had led Amanda to try a variety of grading systems prior to enacting the nontraditional model she described to me for this study. As I listened to Amanda share her experiences with the nontraditional model, I was struck by her willingness to try something new and continue adjusting it through several iterations. It demonstrated her belief that people must be able to take risks to grow. She embodied this process by implementing a grading system designed to support students to believe it was okay to make mistakes and take risks to grow. Amanda demonstrated confidence with making changes to her practice as well as perseverance to continue honing the nontraditional model she had been using for five years. During these years, Amanda indicated she has seen her students take ownership of their learning, feeding their identity and agency as learners.

Ken

“Shouldn’t grading reflect effort and improvement? And we’ve just for so long said getting everything right is effort when that clearly isn’t necessarily the case.”

At the time of this study, Ken was a high school Social Studies teacher who had been teaching for 14 years. Though he was skeptical at first, after learning about the nontraditional model, he began to see how it addressed the concerns he had with traditional grading models. Of the three participants in this study, Ken had the least experience with the nontraditional model as this was only his second year using the system. His energy and enthusiasm for this change was

evident when he sat down with me. Even as he discussed challenges, his enthusiasm did not waver. Instead, he expressed determination in continuing to tweak the system to make it work for him. Even though he had only been using the nontraditional model for a relatively short period of time, Ken had experienced nothing but positive feedback from students and parents. He believed the system has helped his students gain clarity about their learning; he raved about hearing students discuss what they need to improve and how to go about growing, rather than arguing with him about points. For Ken, the proof that nontraditional grades are worth the effort existed in conversations like these.

Nicole

“This is exactly how they're going to be graded in college and in life...Nobody's scoring me on a points-based system.”

The third participant in this study was Nicole. At the time of this study, Nicole had been teaching high school Social Studies for 17 years. Several years ago, she became very motivated to find a better grading system for her students, with a special interest in supporting their motivation to learn. In her experience, students were not having fun or enjoying school because they were so afraid of earning a poor grade. She became fully committed to making this change, doing her own research, collaborating with colleagues, and implementing a new system. When I first sat down with Nicole, she seemed reserved, but as our conversation progressed, I saw how confident she was in herself as a teacher and in her choice to implement this system and make such a significant change to her practice. Nicole had been enacting nontraditional grading for three years and in that time, she had witnessed what she termed as “amazing” change in her students. She saw them evidencing greater engagement and willingness to take risks, which she viewed as aligned with her values for authentic learning and real-world markers of growth.

Emerging Themes

Together, these three experienced teachers shared their stories of how they came to make sense of and enact this system, along with the ways this model aligns with their beliefs about education. This case study explains how these teachers enacted a gradeless classroom model and what they have learned in the process. It also shares alignments between this nontraditional model and who they perceived themselves to be, as teachers. Through a careful analysis of the data, I identified five major themes. The first theme describes the nontraditional system as a reference point for teachers' work. The second theme explores teachers' identities and their beliefs about grading. The third theme shares what teachers needed to implement this system in their courses. The fourth theme explored what made this system and all its associated changes worthwhile for teachers. The fifth and final theme discusses the challenges these teacher participants encountered within their implementation process.

The Nontraditional System Itself

Though colloquially the system is recognized by educators as a "gradeless" system, all participants made a point to share that they do not actually use the term "gradeless" when discussing this system with their students. There was some variety in the use of the terms, but teachers favored "nontraditional," "system," and "skill-build system." Nicole avoided the term "gradeless" because students do, in fact, end up with a grade at the end of their term, to maintain compliance with larger grading systems that exist outside of her coursework, school, and district. Ken avoided "gradeless" because he wanted students to focus on developing their skills, rather than associating their effort with a grade. This small but significant change in terminology aligned the language with the purpose of the system, which was to help students develop skills, rather than accumulate points for their grade. Teachers had various ways of figuring out how to

match students' skill development to a letter grade; primarily, they focused on helping students self-evaluate their growth, proficiency, and soft skills.

Growth

Each teacher had unique ways of implementing the system that fit their own teaching practice and style, yet all teachers prioritized student growth as one of the first criteria for determining an end-of-semester grade. Each participant described the way they helped students actively track and evaluate their own growth or progress throughout the semester. Student growth was important to teachers regardless of whether or not students met a given standard. Amanda explained how a traditional grading system does not take growth into account nor encourages it:

I could have a student come in who was very skilled and easily achieve the level of proficiency that was expected, get an A and not grow. I could likewise have a student come in that had a more difficult time achieving any kind of level of proficiency, and yet work hard, persevere and grow exponentially, but not receive an A status. (Amanda Interview 1, 1-17-22)

With these words, Amanda indicated how important it was to her that a grading system prioritize a student's effort to change and grow, regardless of their starting point. Ken strongly believed grading should reflect a learner's improvement. He created a color-coded tracker that he and students used to visually see their growth. Ken explained, "with the color coding on the progress tracker...I think that when I can, you know, just sort of scroll over, and I can see things go from orange and yellow to green and blue and then some pink and stuff. That's really a satisfying thing" (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22). He wanted students' grades to reflect improvement from one

point in time to another. Teachers believed all students at any level could honor and acknowledge growth, and this would always be preferable to grading achievement.

Proficiency

The second criteria participants factored into their nontraditional grading systems was proficiency. According to the ways participants used the term, they view proficiency as a skill-based continuum where students demonstrate where they are along that continuum at a particular moment in time. These skills are associated with required state standards for their courses.

A focus on proficiency meant teachers had a great deal of work to do to clearly define skills and demonstrable aspects of those skills. They also needed to share this information with students. In Ken's words, the first thing teachers needed to do was, "think about what it is you want your students to be able to do, and once you figure that out, make that your target" (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22). Ken delineated proficiency markers (on target, close to target, partially met target, or exceeding target) by creating rubrics for each skill students needed to demonstrate. He associated these rubrics with corresponding assignments to clearly communicate proficiency expectations to students and help them have a shared understanding of their goals.

Amanda and Nicole also used rubrics associated with proficiency levels. Nicole explained, "I have it [proficiency] spelled out. This is what you must do to meet the standard" (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22). Teachers used these rubrics and proficiency markers to provide feedback to students on assignments in place of a numerical score like eight out of ten. Teachers also noted that when students were no longer trying to achieve points, they were better able to concentrate on developing proficiency within their assigned tasks.

Soft Skills

Soft skills were the third element of teachers' gradeless systems. It included aspects of learning such as communication skills, work ethic, problem solving, interpersonal communication, and teamwork (Ellis et al., 2014). Teachers named work ethic, participation, attendance, work completion, and communication as important skills they wanted their students to demonstrate. Amanda collaborated with another colleague to identify these and called them "mindset skills." These constituted the "mindset that you're bringing with you to learn" (Amanda Interview 2, 1-25-22), and gave her ways to help students understand their drive to learn, work ethics, and participation mattered for their academic success. Ken and Nicole included attendance, work completion, participation, and their communication with the teacher as the soft skills they valued and tracked.

Communication

Once participants identified these major elements of their system, they sought tools that would help them implement it in their courses. Every teacher indicated implementation started with communication to students and parents such as parent letters in Appendix E. They recognized the importance of justifying their decision to make this change, offer research about why gradeless models were beneficial to students, and outline details of what parents and students could expect. Communication was so pivotal to Nicole that when asked what advice she would give to another teacher implementing this system, her response was concise yet serious, "Over communicate! Especially in the beginning." (Nicole Interview 2, 1-27-22). Amanda and Ken also prioritized communication; Amanda said she believed she received far fewer emails from parents throughout the term due to her clear communication of system expectations at the

beginning of the academic year. When parents did reach out to her, she said it was always positive.

Ken said he has explained this system to “maybe a couple 100 parents...every parent has had a positive response” (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22). Teachers felt certain this positive response rate from parents was the result of clear and upfront communication. Participants prioritized this kind of communication with students, as well. Each teacher had early conversations with students around grades, grading systems, and trying out a nontraditional system before they began as seen through discussion slides in Appendix F. This communication created student buy-in and alleviated the stress that is a natural part of any change.

Tools

Teachers also needed to create or find the tools that would enable them to track student data and progress. Participants developed multiple rubrics aligned to standards or skills enabling students to track their progress and proficiency level as seen in Appendix G. Each participant then uses two systems to track student progress and work completion.

To track student progress, each teacher kept a spreadsheet with students in one column and the skills or standards across the top row such as the one shown in Appendix H. They used a color-coordinated system to fill in each box according to a student’s current proficiency level. For example, if a student had mastered a particular skill, that box was green. If they were showing progress, the box was yellow. Teachers posted these spreadsheets in their learning management systems where parents and students could see their progress on their skills throughout the semester.

Teachers tracked students’ work completion using the school’s gradebook software, called Eschool. In Eschool, the participants entered the assignments for all students and simply

marked a one or zero. A one meant the student completed the assignment, and a zero meant the assignment was not completed. Eschool calculated the percentage of work completed as a useful element for teacher/student progress meetings about students' soft skills. The software enabled teachers to issue progress reports throughout the term, noting a "pass" or "no pass" status based on students completing more or less than 60% of the assigned work.

At the end of a semester, students are required to have a letter grade assigned to their report card and recorded on their high school transcript. Accordingly, teachers helped students determine their final grade by using surveys such as those in Appendix I near the end of each semester. Students reflect on their growth, proficiency, and soft skills for each course. Amanda explained, "those three criteria are discussed at the end of the semester in a one-on-one conference with students" (Amanda 1, 1-17-22).

Nicole and Ken further supported their students' understanding of progress by giving students documents, such as the one in Appendix J, outlining the characteristics of an "A" student, a "B" student, and so on. This enabled students to calibrate their grade compared to overall proficiency criteria. Ken described these one-on-one conferences as "a back and forth;" he indicated this is truly a decision made between teacher and student. It is not, as Ken tells the students, "Me deciding your fate." Ken emphasized the importance of student input in determining final grades: "I don't know what the kid is going through. I don't know what the kid has experienced. I don't know how hard this has been for this kid" (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22). Since students are the most knowledgeable about their own experience, teachers rely on students to help them understand how to fairly assign final grades: "incorporating the students into this process...is an important part." All participants indicate students frequently arrive at the same grade the teacher would assign: "out of 100 students...I'll have a couple that don't give

themselves the same evaluation I would. And usually, it's because they give themselves a lower grade" shared Nicole (Interview 1, 1-20-22). Participants expressed that the nontraditional system was grounded in students demonstrating growth, working towards and achieving proficiency, and displaying soft skills. They spoke to the tools and the communication that were necessary for implementing this system. Yet as much as they shared about the system, it was clear there was something unique about the participants that played a role in them enacting this system in their classes.

The Teacher

This theme of teacher speaks to the qualities and characteristics of the participant teachers in this study who took up this massive change in their practice and their thinking over several years. They themselves were the critical element enabling such a change to systemic ideas. Their beliefs about grading led them to grapple with how their traditional grading practices contrasted their values for a nontraditional model. Teachers also came to understand how their past experiences with a traditional system were antithetical to their beliefs about grading. Over time, their experiences and beliefs grew strong enough to enable them to enact change.

Beliefs

Participants' beliefs about grading primed them to make a shift in their thinking and practice when the opportunity arose. They expressed their belief that students should be able to try something within their learning and not be punished by a poor grade for a poor product if they put forward honest effort. They did not like how, in a traditional model, a low scoring attempt would significantly impact a student's overall grade, potentially reducing their willingness to try something new. In comparison, the nontraditional model meant students' attempts at learning or risk-taking were not held against them. Ken described a perfect grading

system as something that demonstrates that the students can do a particular skill or have improved it, and that they are putting in effort. He believed grading should reflect more than just an achievement, but also growth and work ethic. Amanda expressed similar sentiments. She explained:

In a perfect scenario, for me grades reflect the amount or progress a student has made...this means language proficiency and ability...it also by sort of default, reflects their ability to take risks, push themselves, be willing to fail in order to grow, and also show perseverance and work ethic. (Amanda Interview 1, 1-17-22)

This showed that Amanda believed growth should be a foundational part of any grading system. Nicole added, “I want kids to walk into my room and to feel like they have the freedom to take risks and make mistakes and that it won't kill them” (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22). Nicole’s belief that students should be allowed to make mistakes without consequences drew her to the nontraditional system. In her nontraditional system, students receive feedback, not points, on their learning attempts. This way, when they make mistakes, they have guidance on how to improve. In a traditional system, if they made mistakes, they would receive a lower grade and could become leery of taking a risk on the next assignment.

Because participants believed learning and growth is a process that often takes many attempts and sometimes failures, they wanted a grading system that celebrated students taking those risks without fear of a poor grade. In the traditional model, if a student attempts an assignment and does it incorrectly, they are likely to receive a low score that negatively affects their grade average. In comparison, teacher participants acted on their belief that this was an unhelpful model for learning, and subsequently provided feedback on how the student could improve on the next attempt. Since they believed that learning and growth comes from both

unsuccessful and successful attempts, they felt excited to create a grading system that allowed for both kinds of learning attempts.

Participants' beliefs about grading did not align with grading models they used previously. "I started feeling convicted about what I was doing was harmful," expressed Nicole (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22). Nicole began experiencing a moral dilemma as she observed students' lack of curiosity and engagement in learning and their hyper-focus on scoring points. Based on her belief that students should be allowed to make mistakes and that grades should reflect how much a student has grown, she made sure to incorporate a feedback system that supported these beliefs into her new system. Ken held similar beliefs about grading representing the students' work instead of their mistakes. He explained "A kid gets an F because the kid didn't do anything. Well, shouldn't we instead be evaluating what the kid did do?" (Ken Interview 2, 1-25-22). In the traditional model, a student could miss enough assignments that it would become mathematically impossible for them to score enough points to pass. Ken believed that grades should be based on the work the students did complete instead of the work they did not.

Past Experience

Participants shared how their past experiences with the traditional grading model left them frustrated and dissatisfied. This frustration made them eager to embrace a new system when they felt ready. They sensed the traditional model was not accurate and distracted students from their learning journeys. With a myriad of scores combined to determine the overall grade, the traditional system made it very difficult for teachers to identify students' abilities on particular skills. Students often seemed absorbed in trying to gain points or absorbed in trying to raise the percentage of their grade; this was misaligned with how teachers wanted students to feel about learning.

Participants stood out for having questioned the inaccuracies they observed in the traditional model, a system that has been in common practice for almost a century. They were renegades, seeking to make grading better. Ken explained how the averaging of points did not seem like the best way to accurately reflect students' skill. He asked himself:

What's really the primary focus? Can a kid do this right now and can a kid show me that they can demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect. And again, it makes you think about does coming up with an average number accurately reflect that? And the answer is no. (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22)

Ken's experience with an averaged grade led him to question if that model was best for students' learning. These doubts prepared Ken to embrace a new model when he was ready.

One of Nicole's past experiences with grading troubled her, related to her work as an Advanced Placement (AP) teacher who regularly used College Board rubrics to score students' work. The rubric scores students out of seven points; a three score would allow a student to pass on an AP exam. When she converted those rubric scores into percentages, however, students had failing grades. "Those kinds of things just didn't add up. In my mind, you doing a DBQ [essay] in class is absolutely trashing your grade, and yet you're going to pass the AP exam? It just didn't match up," Nicole explained (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22). The student's grade did not accurately reflect their abilities. This discrepancy led her to the nontraditional system where she could still provide feedback via rubrics but did not need to convert that feedback into a points system.

Teachers also saw declines in students' mindset and attitude toward learning as they received points within a traditional grading system. "I feel like what grades have done is set kids up to worry about a number as opposed to what they're actually learning," expressed Nicole

(Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22). Students began to focus on doing whatever it took to achieve points, rather than learning something new or improving their skills. The drive to achieve points dominated the students' thought processes. Teachers recognized that points even dominated their view of the assignments they asked students to complete; Amanda explained that before, she felt like she had to offer extra credit or give certain assignments because she needed more points in the gradebook for her principal or parents. This "tail wagging dog" began to seem absurd to her; in a nontraditional system, she and her students had an easier time focusing on growth and learning because the feedback she gave to students guided them to their next steps in the learning.

Participants' past experiences with the traditional model illustrate that they valued students' growth and the traditional model did not easily account for student improvement. Amanda expressed:

The problems with the grading system as it is, was that I could have a student come in who was very skilled and easily achieve the level of proficiency that was expected. Get an A and not grow. I could likewise have a student come in that had a more difficult time achieving any kind of level of proficiency and yet work hard, persevere and grow exponentially but not receive an A status. And also, be willing to take risks. (Amanda Interview 1, 1-17-22).

In her mind, the traditional system did not reflect how hard a student worked, their improvement, or their willingness to try. She further explained, "so the grade system did not reflect a student's growth potential. It only reflected their skill level at that moment in comparison to each other. Likewise, it impeded students' ability to take risks, and therefore grow" (Amanda Interview 1, 1-17-22). Amanda wanted grades to reflect student growth and knew the traditional model would

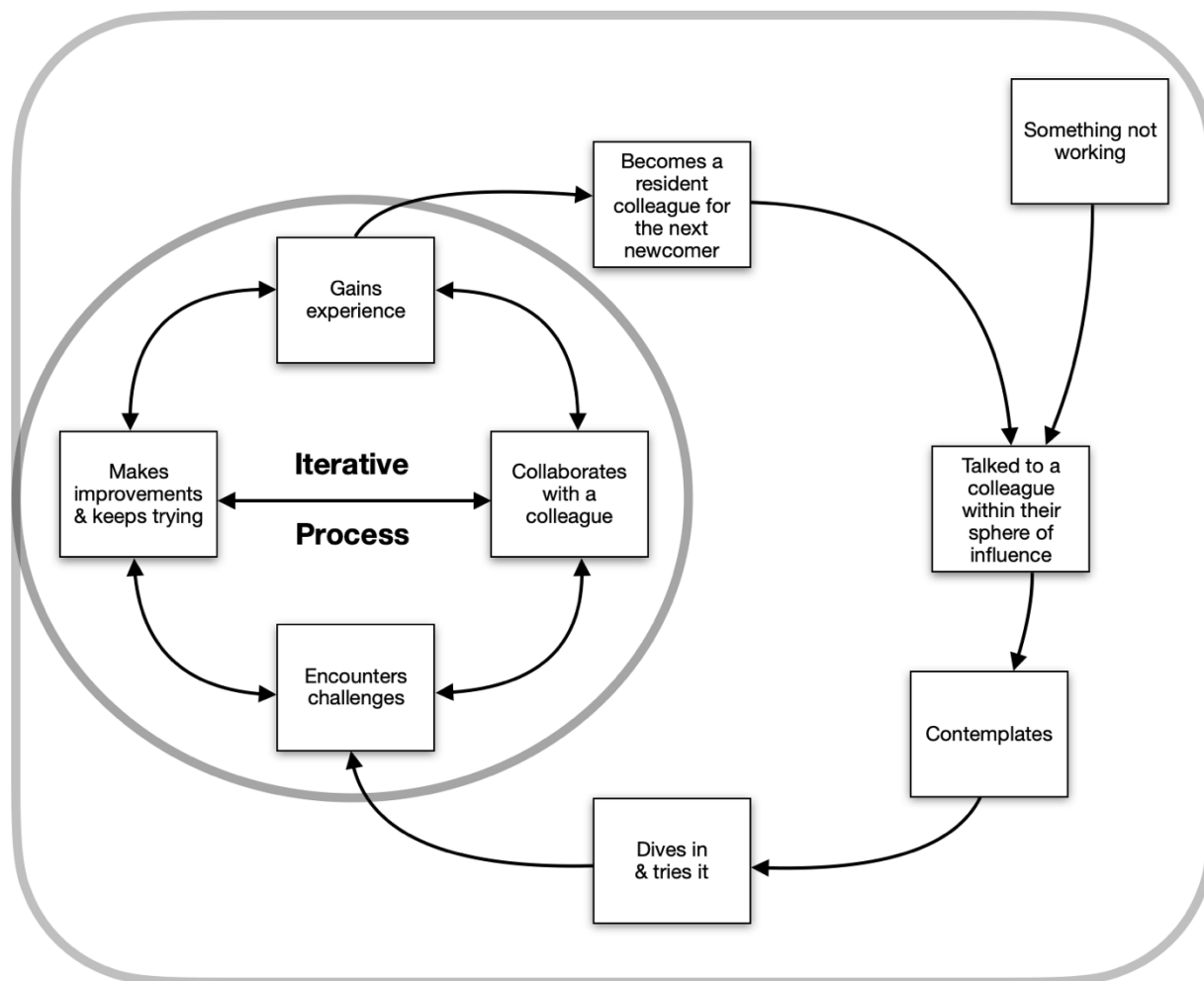
not meet that goal; points-based grading offers no reward for moderate improvement. Nicole explained that the percentage range for an F in the traditional model is 0 to 60 while students can pass a class with 40 percentage points (Nicole Member Check, 2-17-22). This meant a student could show improvement, and demonstrate immense effort, yet still earn a failing grade. These experiences were discouraging for teachers and students; taken together, teachers used these experiences to embrace a nontraditional model.

The participants' beliefs about grading and their past experiences with the grading systems were contributing factors to participants making the shift in their teaching practice. These factors were motivating for participants as they began making that shift. If participants did have strong beliefs about what grading should look like for their students, then they would have not undertaken this change. Their beliefs combined with their experiences with grading inclined them toward trying something new.

What it Takes to Enact Nontraditional Grading Systems

Analysis of process codes revealed that all participants underwent a similar process of moving from not knowing about nontraditional grading systems to becoming fully engaged in enacting them. Figure 2 shows a drawing of how I conceptualized this movement based on analysis of participant interviews. Initially, each participant was provoked by something that was not working in their classrooms. For Amanda, it was a frustrating morning of classes. For Ken, it was seeing students experience a lack of access to technology and having to care for younger siblings, circumstances that arose during the online school necessitated by Covid-19.

Figure 2

Process of Implementing a Nontraditional Grading System

Nicole noticed how her own kindergarten-aged child had such a strong drive for learning and curiosity, something that was nearly non-existent in her 11th grade students. These inciting incidents drove each participant to reach out to a colleague for ideas on how to address these thorny challenges. Each participant named a different resident colleague as the person who was significant to them, yet it was clear that these colleagues shared similar characteristics. Teachers described them as well-respected teachers at their school, educators who were progressive, creative, and student-centered, or teachers who taught subjects similar to their own. These resident colleagues introduced participant-teachers in this study to the nontraditional system.

In general, after talking with their colleague, each participant spent time contemplating the nontraditional model, reading research, thinking about how it might look in their own content areas, and talking with their administrator. At some point, they each decided to take the leap and try it. Once they implemented the system in one or more of their classes, teachers entered an iterative process of encountering challenges, collaborating with colleagues, making improvements, and gaining experience. This growth process meant that Nicole and Amanda in turn became resident colleagues for other newcomers who asked for advice when they became interested in the system. Nicole explained, “it was kind of like a ripple effect where now we have...10 or 12 people that are doing a nontraditional system that’s similar, and even more than that are dabbling right now but maybe they haven’t fully gone in” (Nicole Interview 2, 1-27-22).

Collaboration with Colleagues

For participants, this cycle of implementing a nontraditional model was grounded in support from colleagues and ongoing collaboration with them. Ken shared that a major supportive factor in his implementation process was the chance to collaborate with Nicole and another colleague who was the first teacher to try out this model at their school. Ken had talked with both many times about this system before he was willing to try it.

Additionally, collaboration was just as important after implementation. As Amanda gained experience with the nontraditional model, she encountered a dilemma around the ideas of proficiency and performance. Originally, she viewed her students’ demonstrating their skills as becoming proficient. However, a colleague from a professional forum advised her that proficiency in language development was a student’s language ability measured over an extended period in a natural setting. This helped Amanda reconsider that what she had been counting as proficiency was a skill performance. She continued to work with this colleague and

subsequently revised her practice based on this observation. Her solution was to have students review several performance tasks and reflect on how often they were able to accomplish a particular skill across a variety of tasks. Amanda also started working with another colleague in her department on improving her use of soft skills in her classes. This world language teacher shared her own research with Amanda, who subsequently applied it to her own system.

Nicole explained how she and Ken worked together each year to define the characteristics of an “A” learner, a “B” learner, and on through each district-mandated grade category, to align their expectations and ensure some objectivity within their systems. Similarly, Nicole also collaborated with colleagues outside of her building, picking up new ideas and regularly trying out new strategies. Even though teachers had several years’ experience with a nontraditional model, they still sought collaborative opportunities to explore, improve, and problem-solve alongside others. Participants named this ongoing communication as an essential element in maintaining an effective system through each iteration.

Support from Principal

Overwhelmingly, all three participants described receiving enthusiastic support for this change from their principal, Ashley Whitman, when they approached her with the idea of trying a gradeless system. Amanda described her principal as a “yes” person. Amanda explained:

If you come to her with something and say this is why I feel like this is really important...and this is why I think this is really going to benefit our students, she will say yes in any possible way. (Amanda Interview 1, 1-17-22)

Ken felt Ashley trusted and fully supported him, especially when parents had negative responses about the changes he was making. He believed Ashley would step in and help facilitate a

discussion with an upset parent. Nicole felt the same trust toward her principal and shared appreciation for the autonomy they have as teachers over their teaching practice:

So, knowing that I was supported in this attempt, and knowing that if I went to her with something that kind of went belly up, I would still be supported. I'd still be recognized as someone who as a professional is trying something. I felt safe to fail...and that was everything. (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22)

It was clear that all three participants highly valued their administrator's support and encouragement. That support allowed them to attempt this change with less fear or hesitancy than they might have otherwise experienced.

What Makes Nontraditional Grading Systems Worth the Work

Participants shared a plethora of positive experiences with the nontraditional model. The transformations they noted in their students was the primary reason participants believed this change was worth making. The analysis revealed that the nontraditional system increased student ownership and was more equitable than previous grading systems.

Student Ownership

Participants emphatically described how the system increased students' ownership of their learning process. As they described it to me, student ownership meant that students were taking control over their own learning. They were aware of their skills and knew how to advocate for what they needed to improve. Students could discuss which aspects of a concept or skill they understood and which they did not, as opposed to discussing how many points they received on a particular assignment. Such abilities align with ideals expressed in the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching's (2021) definition of student ownership: "student shares learning, applies and extends strategies they used, and takes responsibility for their learning" (p.

2). All participants discussed how the most obvious place to see students demonstrate ownership of their learning was in the end-of-term conferences between student and teacher. Students came to these conversations prepared to describe their growth, abilities, and the learning processes they had engaged in and planned to do, going forward. Amanda reflected on it this way:

I think those moments that I just sort of sit and revel in have been those end of semester conferences when I sit with students, and they come to me and they are clearly taking ownership and pride in how they've grown, where they've really pushed themselves or taken risks. They're able to identify those things for themselves. It clearly is an intrinsic motivation, and they clearly have a sense of pride in terms of what they have accomplished. And I have a sense of, wow, they really know their own abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and process better than I do...I'm listening to them tell me as the professional of themselves. This is what I know about myself, and this is where I'm going, and it's a lovely moment because I'm giving that power to them. Or I should say, they're claiming it. (Amanda Interview 1, 1-17-22)

Ken saw evidence of ownership when students were clear about their learning: "I have had students come in and say, 'Oh, I know what I need to do.' Students say that they can see what it is that they're missing or what it is they need to work on." These sorts of comments indicated students were focused on their learning and not on collecting points. Ken felt this made all his work worthwhile.

This increase of student ownership was not an incidental byproduct of the nontraditional system. Rather, teachers purposefully wove it into the system from the beginning. Prior to implementing anything teachers asked for students' thoughts about grading. When Amanda asked her advanced level students what they thought about nontraditional systems, they

discussed it and decided to move forward. Amanda believed her students would give her honest feedback, and that they trusted her enough to know that if it was not working, she would change it.

Nicole had similar conversations with her students, and she also sought student input on parts of the system she found challenging. “I continue to change things and ask for students for feedback,” she explained (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22). Students take increased ownership near the end of each semester when they need to actively participate in a conversation about their final grade. Teachers ask students to offer evidence for the grade they feel they have earned. Ken said, “I also tell students, this whole thing isn't me deciding your fate. It's a back and forth” (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22). Nicole also emphasizes the joint nature of this grade determination: “we conference and based on all of the stuff we have then, together, we enter a grade” (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22). In each step of the process, participants relied on student input and ownership, which brought about unforeseen changes in how their students participated in the business of learning. Overall, teachers were clear in stating the dramatic increase in student ownership was one of the most rewarding results of implementing a nontraditional system.

More Equitable

As participants shared specific examples of their experiences with the nontraditional system, I began to see principles of equity embedded in it. I asked participants to help me understand this better and reviewed the data carefully with my critical friend to better articulate this. Everyone confirmed that though the nontraditional system was not perfect, they believed it was more equitable than a traditional model. Participants shared many anecdotes about how the nontraditional system supported diverse learners better than what they had done before. Nicole explained, “especially with kids that have, whether it be an IEP or 504, it allows for that to come

into play...it allows for the human aspect to come in” (Nicole Interview 2, 1-27-22). Using a grading system that embraces the whole student created more equity. She also shared a story about a student who was on a 504 plan:

I was in a 504 meeting this morning before school and the student has ADHD and he's really, really smart, but so incredibly unorganized and can never find anything and so rarely turns anything in. But he still has been able to show [his learning] on those big assignments. I'm really looking at are you meeting the standard? And he's meeting the standard. (Nicole Interview 2, 1-27-22)

This is a dramatic departure from how a traditional system might determine this student's grade, where several missing assignments would have proven difficult to overcome. Amanda shared a similar experience for her students on 504 plans or IEPs:

This is so ideal for my students, you know, on IEPs or 504s that are coming in really pretty low, and quite possibly getting them to reach proficiency might not be realistic, but they can definitely show progress, right? They can really show that they're making progress, and that they're learning and they're advancing, and they can certainly engage the soft skills and, so it's easy for them to say here's what I'm learning. Here's proof, rather than well...let's work out the percentages and see if you manage to scrape by and pass. (Amanda Interview 2, 1-25-22)

In Amanda's courses, the nontraditional system created space for students who had learning disabilities to find success through improvement. Teachers acknowledged that while it may take a student with an IEP longer to reach proficiency, the nontraditional system did not punish them if they were showing growth. It even allowed students with disabilities to access advanced courses. Amanda explained that for students to take the next level of French they do not have to

have met proficiency on all the skills in the prior year. If a student shows improvement and good work ethic, she would certainly have a conversation with them about continuing onto the next level. The next level may be a challenge for the student if they were still working towards proficiency, but they would have the opportunity to do it, if they so desired. This option would typically not be open to students in a traditional system, where failing to pass early levels would prevent them from accessing more advanced levels.

Teachers shared examples of how diverse students experienced more equitable circumstances. Ken indicated this was a good system for language learners because they had the space to work on their skills without being penalized for language issues. He explained:

What I see is pretty common at Pacific Northwest High School is we will have Latina students who face a lot of pressure culturally speaking...to achieve certain things and behave certain ways and that sort of thing, and that can be stressful for kids. And I think again, having this kind of cushion for kids to come and grow and move, I think allows them to adapt easier. (Ken Interview 2, 1-25-22)

During a member check discussion with Ken, he noted the system could present some inequities if a teacher was not careful. He explained that having the one-on-one conferences at the end of the term where the student is advocating for a grade could be inequitable if a teacher puts too much weight on a student appropriately expressing what they think they deserve. He was aware that students from different backgrounds may have different comfort levels with telling their teacher what grade they think they deserve and sought to manage these conversations carefully.

Not only was the nontraditional system more equitable for diverse learners, but it was also more equitable for students struggling with challenges outside of school. Amanda's students

who were struggling with social-emotional issues or who lacked support at home benefited from the nontraditional system by sharing this example:

I have a student for example, that has been absent the vast majority of the semester but is a very competent learner and will do the work online and will watch the videos and do the things and can show me that he is progressing. So, he will pass the class even though in a traditional class, he'd have a 15% and be epically failing, but I have a pretest from him, and he swore up and down, he'd do the post-test, and I have documentation that shows his progression. (Amanda Interview 2, 1-25-22)

These examples demonstrate how students from diverse backgrounds or students with disabilities may benefit from the nontraditional system. These students would fail in a traditional system since they often begin at a lower skill level or experience issues outside of school. The nontraditional system enables them to demonstrate their abilities and be evaluated on what they can do instead of what they do not do. This, combined with the room for growth in the nontraditional system, makes it a more equitable system for students. Overall, teachers felt that an increase in student ownership and more equitable outcomes made the work of establishing and maintaining a nontraditional system worthwhile.

Challenges within Nontraditional Systems Work

My analysis showed that although the teacher participants expressed many positive experiences with the nontraditional system, enacting it was not without challenges. Teachers experienced both theoretical and practical issues. One of these was their own entrenched mindsets about how using numbers to determine grades ensures grades are objective. Since the nontraditional system did not use points, it could be deemed as subjective. Participants had to reflect on their own beliefs and contend with historical measures of achievement. They overcame

this challenge in ongoing collaboration and thoughtful conversations with like-minded others.

They also identified and addressed practical challenges through multiple iterations of the system.

I discuss each of these below.

Subjectivity

One key challenge participants identified was the difficulty in conceptualizing objectivity and subjectivity within the nontraditional system. Ken discussed his personal struggles with this and described his objectivity as a point of pride for him; he found it a challenge to be objective within this nontraditional system:

For a student to go from at the beginning of the semester not doing anything, and then getting to being close to target, is that amount of growth equivalent to an A? Then if you have a student that went from close to target to being on target, that wasn't quite a jump, but the kid is on target. (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22)

Ken described the difficulty in determining what amount of growth is equivalent with a letter grade. Since the path to improvement is different for each student, Ken struggled with how to quantify that growth. He also discussed how he tries to factor effort into the final grade but finds it hard to measure. Ken wondered if a student's effort should influence whether he should move them from one letter grade to another and acknowledged that both this nontraditional system and his content area, Social Studies, make objectivity challenging. "We're dealing with a topic that...lends itself to subjectivity...I think that's the hard part...I want to be able to draw a line in the sand, but it's water" (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22). Trying to focus on one right answer in humanities classes or identifying and measuring what is the "right" amount of effort to determine a grade is challenging. However, Ken noted that trying to apply objective perceptions of grading to this nontraditional model creates a challenge that may not be necessary. Perhaps the struggle

comes from viewing the nontraditional system through the same perceptions of a points-based traditional model. To overcome this challenge, teachers began to consider the nontraditional model as a unique system, deserving of its own lens, rather than a 20th century one.

Amanda noted the challenge of subjectivity and objectivity when she named possible obstacles to other teachers who might consider adopting a nontraditional system. She explained that several colleagues expressed concern that a teacher could not award a grade without points: “for them, it felt very subjective and did not feel like you had proof or data or numbers to support it” (Amanda Interview 2, 1-25-22). Her response to this was that it was not subjective at all: “[students are] either meeting a standard, or gaining proficiency, or showing progress” (Amanda Interview 2, 1-25-22). The idea that without numbers a grade cannot be objective falsely assumes teachers are not already using subjectivity when assigning those numbers. Nicole explained she viewed this nontraditional system as providing more data about student learning than the traditional system ever did. Nicole used a color-coded spreadsheet to track students’ ability and progress on each skill. The information it provides her is invaluable:

I could just look at it and see one class and know this class needs a lot of help with Skill A and the other class, they have that one. It was all this data right in front of me instead of points. (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22)

Nicole used this data when she sat down to conference with a student at the end of a term. She had their skill progression and proficiency level, their percentage of work completion, and the student’s own input about their growth, proficiency and soft skills. This is a strongly informed place from which to discuss learning and proficiency. Ken expressed that this student-generated data increased the objectivity of the system for him: “I don’t know what the kid has experienced. I don’t know how hard this has been for this kid...I think that incorporating the students into this

process is an important part” (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22). He emphasized that, from his point of view, including student input in the evaluation process helps ensure the system is more objective than it would be if a teacher made the judgment on their own, based solely on points.

Sustainability

The second challenge participants identified in nontraditional systems was its sustainability, and the work it took to keep it manageable. This challenge was a practical one, figuring out how to not be overwhelmed by the details required by such a significant change. Nicole expressed that the first year of implementing this nontraditional system felt overwhelming to her. At certain points, she had to reevaluate and reduce the amount of feedback she was giving. She explained, “some of that was like realizing I don't have to grade everything. They don't need feedback on everything, and feedback can come in a lot of different forms” (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22).

Moving from points to feedback systems like rubrics or narrative comments increases the time required to grade each assignment. As participants balanced the demands of teaching, it was certainly more challenging to increase their grading time. Amanda noted, “I was fighting documentation and grading and evaluation procedures that for me, did not feel efficient. So, for me the major challenges were finding something that felt efficient and authentic” (Amanda Interview 1, 1-17-22). Logistically, participants struggled with how to continuously give feedback to all students in ways that supported their learning and felt sustainable.

Another challenge related to making the system work was the student management system, Eschool, and how incompatible it was with a nontraditional grading system. Participants detailed the challenges of navigating a learning management system (LMS) that did not support

their grading system. Though they have found a solution, they still want changes to their LMS to find better alignment with their new grading practices.

Ken described the one-on-one student conferences as the part of the system that has felt the least sustainable to him: “I know some colleagues who have these meetings with the students...three, four times a semester. For me, I just feel like I don’t have the time for that” (Ken Interview 1, 1-18-22). Over the course of a single semester, Ken teaches about 140 students. Conducting meaningful one-on-one conferences with each student more than once a term produced a logistical challenge for him. It has meant striking a balance using class time for these meetings with the loss of instructional time. Facing these sorts of obstacles everyday calls into question the sustainability of the system. A grading system is deeply connected to most aspects of how a classroom functions for both students and teachers. If participants were not able to make the nontraditional system sustainable for them, it was likely that they would not have continued using the system.

However, teachers indicated these challenges surrounding sustainability were not insurmountable. They identified several solutions they developed during subsequent iterations. Amanda noted her own learning curve had flattened somewhat: “a certain level of that experiential wisdom that has started to kick in that does make it easier,” (Amanda Interview 1, 1-17-22). As she has worked through several iterations of the system, Amanda’s experience has provided her insight into what works and what does not work. Nicole shared that once she started finding more manageable strategies to give feedback, things got easier. She found and began using strategies perfected by Language Arts and Social Studies teachers who have always sought ways to make narrative feedback manageable. Being able to apply experiential knowledge to such challenges helped participants keep the system manageable.

Sustainability also increased for participants as other teachers joined the nontraditional grading learning community at their school. It was getting easier to create systems that worked:

The other thing that's helping make it more sustainable is we have more and more teachers doing it each year. And therefore, kids are starting to understand, and it doesn't feel so overwhelming to get them to that place. (Nicole Interview 1, 1-20-22)

As students became acclimated to this nontraditional model, participants found it easier to sustain. Teachers felt increasingly comfortable with the system and noticed when students felt more comfortable too. Amanda noted:

What makes it the most sustainable is really the mental peace, like I know, I'm just showing up to teach kids. I'm not worried about whether I need to give them something so I can fit it in the gradebook...It's about me showing up and providing them with learning opportunities, so that they can continue to grow and not I need to have this conversation with this person who has an 87 and they want an "A"...all of those time wasters are no longer present. (Amanda Interview 1, January 17, 2022)

Amanda's words point to a more complex element of sustainability; the deep and abiding feeling of peace that the way you are interacting with students is aligned with one's values as a teacher. The challenges of seeking objectivity and sustainability are ones that teachers should expect, but trust that they will be able to navigate through collaboration with similarly minded educators.

Conclusion

Taken together, these themes indicate teachers who enact such nontraditional systems have a certain amount of motivation to try it before changing anything. Their beliefs about grading and their past experiences influenced their mindset. Teachers felt emboldened to make this change when they could collaborate with colleagues to navigate the iterative process of

enacting a nontraditional system. Through this iterative process, a teacher gains experience and understands more deeply what the system requires. Administrative and collegial support was critical for each of the teachers enacting this model; none of these teachers were a solo hero. The main way participants overcame the challenges of this nontraditional system was collaboration with colleagues. It was clear that peer support and informed input from others was pivotal to successfully enacting a new way of thinking about proficiency. This study indicates that although this kind of change takes a considerable amount of effort, teachers were convinced the benefits far outweighed the drawbacks. What I found most interesting and significant was the increase in student ownership. Students taking control of their own learning and being able to discuss their learning process is an achievement many educators dream of yet struggle to achieve. This study points to the possibility of it all for those who are willing to engage with the challenge of change.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This educational case study explored a unique case of educators who challenged a traditional grading system by enacting a nontraditional grading system, also known as a gradeless classroom model. This case study inquired,

How do high school teachers make sense of and enact a gradeless system in their classrooms?

- a. What led them to make such a big shift in their thinking and practice?
- b. What supports/challenges did they experience in the process of making the change to a gradeless system?

Three educators at PNHS who enacted this nontraditional model agreed to participate in this study designed to understand the work they undertook to enact this nontraditional grading model in their classes. Data was collected through two in-depth interviews with each participant. Interview data was coded using Saldaña's (2021) processes for in vivo coding, descriptive coding, and process coding; each coding round revealed more analytical insight into themes that coalesced from repeated readings of the data. Member checks with participants and critical friends supported deeper discussions and clarifications of themes.

This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings in relation to the research questions outlined above and in relation to associated literature. I also explore the unexpected outcome of student ownership participants said was a direct result of using a nontraditional system. Lastly, I share implications for educational practice and scholarship, along with suggestions for further research in this area.

Discussion of Major Findings

The first theme that emerged from the findings focused on describing the nontraditional system, itself. The system was grounded in three pillars: growth, proficiency, and soft skills. To enact these three priorities, participants relied heavily on clear communication with students, parents, and administrators, as well as tools they created to fully implement the system in their courses. Though the system was quite remarkable, it was clear that there was also something exceptional about the teacher participants themselves, that they would have such deep beliefs about grading systems motivating them to make such significant change. They believed grades needed to reflect students' growth and improvement, so they created a system to bridge traditional and nontraditional systems to meet those goals. The third theme explored the iterative process teachers engaged with to enact a new system and in the fourth theme, I discussed what motivated participants or made this change "worth it" for them. The final theme identified some of the challenges teachers had to overcome in enacting this change in their professional practice.

Making Sense of and Enacting the Nontraditional System

Participants revealed there were many facets that worked in combination as they made sense of and began enacting a nontraditional grading system. Each one was introduced to it by a colleague, which led them to begin a process for making sense of it. The process was reflective, requiring them to weigh their beliefs about grading and critically evaluate their previous experiences with more traditional grading systems. They named a deep belief that grades ought to account for student growth and improvement in ways that do not punish students for low score attempts. They sought to change a system where students who begin a class with multiple failures which drastically lower their grade, experience despair and start to believe there is no way to change their outcome (Carifio & Carey, 2013). Participants wanted students to be willing

to take chances and make several attempts even if some were not successful. They also relied on research that indicated that often students who know an assignment is going to be graded were more likely to avoid the assignment compared to those who were not going to be graded (Pulfrey et al., 2011). They began to see how detrimental traditional grading was to learning.

When considering the nontraditional model, participants used what they knew about more traditional systems to articulate what they wanted the new system to accomplish. Most educators and researchers concur that grades are intended to communicate to students their academic progress (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2006). Students' grades should reflect their performance skills, yet too often they do not because the grade is composed of several other factors. Participants recognized the ways they averaged grades incorporated so many different factors and assignments that it became impossible to discern whether a student could do a specific skill. They also discussed how trying to convert rubric scores into points to fit a traditional system negatively affected students' grades, even when they were meeting that standard on the rubric. This composition of factors clouds an accurate view of a student's abilities for both the student and the teacher, which is contrary to one of the main purposes of grades (Feldman, 2019). The participants in my study experienced many of these researched issues with traditional grading systems.

As participants described how they enacted a nontraditional system, it became clear they all engaged in a similar cycle for doing so. The cycle began when a participant became frustrated with a grading issue in their class, which typically led them to seek the advice of a well-respected colleague in their sphere of influence. This colleague then introduced them to the nontraditional system. Participants began to contemplate making a change, and doing further research and reflection on their own, leading each of them to implement it. Once they made the choice to

implement, participants found themselves in an iterative process where they continued to improve the system as they encountered challenges, collaborated with colleagues, and gained experience. This process clearly aligns with Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptions of how communities of practice function. Their theory argues that the learning is the outcome of a situative social process; it does not occur through individual activity. These social communities can emerge in any profession (Wenger, 1998); my participants became a part of the nontraditional grading community of practice at their school. They participated in a multitude of social interactions and practices that helped them learn how to implement the nontraditional model and participate more fully in the community.

Shift in Thinking and Practice

When I asked participants for their thoughts on why more teachers do not take up this nontraditional model, the most common response was that teachers could get stuck in their ways. Their acknowledgement that many teachers would not embrace this type of change in their practice and the fact that all three participants did, highlighted something unique about these teachers: their willingness to change. Hargreaves (2005) found that particularly in respect to grading practices, a teacher's years of experience and their beliefs about grading and assessments are two key factors in their ability to enact change in their own practice. Though teachers who are new to the profession may be more open to change, they often do not have the capacity for it as they manage the high demands of an unfamiliar job (Hargreaves, 2005). Although veteran teachers have mastered aspects of their job that would enable them to undertake change, many are nevertheless hesitant. The three participants in this study had been teaching for between 14 to 18 years, yet still demonstrated characteristics of educators who actively sought to improve their practice.

Although grading practices are deeply rooted in teachers' beliefs, research reveals that teachers' beliefs can be changed (Guskey, 1984; 2003; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Putnam and Borko (2000) emphasize that sustainable teacher change must be situated within a teacher's own practice. Amanda, Ken, and Nicole made this change within their own practice and in so doing, they each tailored systems to fit their individual personalities and classrooms. As they continued to hone their system and pick up new ideas, they adjusted things for themselves and for students. This work kept the change situated in participants' own surroundings and is therefore more likely to become lasting change.

Guskey's (1984; 2002) foundational model of teacher change is evident in this study's findings. Guskey's research demonstrated that after professional development, a teacher makes a change in their practice and then waits to examine the student learning outcomes before changing their beliefs. The participants of my study learned of a new system, implemented the change in their classrooms, and experienced positive student outcomes that further confirmed their beliefs and attitudes around grading. Each participant has continued using their nontraditional grading system since beginning it; they also expressed many positive outcomes for both their students and themselves. These positive student outcomes led participants to continue using the system. Brody & Hadar (2018) emphasized a similar process in their research. Enacting such significant change may begin with an individual, however, the change is sustained when teachers are part of a learning community and actively evaluating their interactions with students (Brody & Hadar, 2018).

Supports and Challenges

Findings indicate participants had foundational supports that helped guide their work with the nontraditional model as well as challenges. The most important support was that of

colleagues and administrators. Indeed, teachers identified collegial support as the impetus for change; it was also what helped them successfully navigate the challenges as they iterated the model to meet their needs. When teachers attempt new or innovative strategies, they navigate those strategies through feedback loops that often involve reaching out to colleagues with insight or prior experience (Brody & Hadar, 2018). The teachers in this study were grateful to rely on the experiential knowledge of a colleague since they had not yet accrued their own experience. Community support aided teachers in finding their way through the difficulties of transitioning to a new process (Brody & Hadar, 2018).

Administrative support was another critical element to teachers' success. Participants felt their administration's support of them alleviated their fear of repercussion and fear of failure. They felt they had the trust, autonomy, and support from their principal to embark on this change. Feeling like it was safe to fail allowed participants to devote their full energies to making the change. They embraced the professional opportunity to take a risk for their students' benefit and felt the freedom to innovate. Innovation cannot be fostered in environments where teachers do not feel safe to make mistakes. The literature around community of practice theory and my findings make it clear that enacting this nontraditional model must be accompanied with support from a community and administrators to give the system its best chance at success.

The challenges that participants named were both theoretical and practical in nature. Ken and Amanda expressed a struggle with conceptualizing the ideas of subjectivity and objectivity when it comes to awarding grades. Other participants shared frustrations with how the nontraditional system did not feel sustainable at first, especially when it did not mesh well with the school's learning management system. Regardless, participants collaborated with colleagues to devise their answers. The challenges were not so great that participants could not overcome

them. These findings suggest that even more important than finding solutions to challenges, a teacher must have access to supportive colleagues when they encounter a challenge. The participants had not yet encountered a challenge they could not overcome, and I believe that is due to being part of a learning community that readily offered support when needed.

Unexpected Findings

There was a strong sense of students' owning their learning that was evident in what teachers shared about the implementation process and the system itself. This finding, though not directly related to my research questions, was a prominent theme from the data analysis. Participants spoke repeatedly of students' ownership over their learning process and learning products as one of the most positive outcomes of using a nontraditional grading system. I believe this was due to the teachers including student voice throughout the process. They also fostered discussions with students about students' feelings about grades, regularly soliciting feedback on how the new grading system was going for them. I sense this open style of communication helped students consider their own learning in a new light and offer feedback on a system that was just as much theirs as it was the teachers'.

Student ownership was also a prevalent outcome of the system itself. By building a system where students were regularly assessing their own progress, teacher participants helped move students away from collecting points to taking responsibility to document one's own effort and proficiency. Their final grade was no longer determined by a mathematical average with categories weighted by the teacher. Their final grade was a culmination of what the students accomplished. Because students were truly in control of their final grade, they felt vested in the system and motivated to see what they could do. This shift in student ownership is important to highlight because research shows that high levels of student ownership is often one factor that

sets apart high performing schools from lower performing schools (Rutledge et al., 2015). The literature also indicates that students who own their learning are more engaged in their work, take risks to try more difficult tasks, and demonstrate perseverance when they make mistakes (Farrington et al., 2012; Zimmerman, 2000). Furthermore, students who have higher levels of self-efficacy show more positive academic outcomes (Farrington et al, 2012; Rutledge et al., 2015; Zimmerman, 2000). Teacher participants wanted students to be able to enact these outcomes and found the nontraditional grading system a better framework for supporting these outcomes.

Implications

Although this case study's findings cannot be generalized to all teachers and classes, it nevertheless provides helpful insights into how teachers who enact significant change can experience unexpected and fulfilling results. This study offers insight into what enacting this system was like for teachers and points to some implications for scholarship and educational practice.

Implications for Scholarship

Educators and researchers must start paying attention to nontraditional models of grading by making them a priority for educational research. The small body of research on nontraditional systems is yielding some promising results around increased academic achievement (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020; O'Connor & Lessing, 2017; Loveless, 1989). There are also many teachers implementing this type of system in their classrooms and experiencing positive anecdotal results. The body of research outlining the problems with more traditional models dates back over a century. It is time for researchers to move from pointing out the shortcomings of traditional models to changing things and exploring other options. There is little to lose when the traditional

model carries so many flaws. Educators and researchers must start challenging the status quo for the sake of the students by pushing grading reform to the top of their agendas.

Implications for Teachers

For teachers who are contemplating a change to a nontraditional system, it is necessary to first engage in introspection surrounding grading. Embracing this radically different approach means teachers must almost decondition themselves from the deeply ingrained ideas they hold about grading. This begins with teachers reflecting on the experiences they had with grading as students. These experiences can leave a lifelong impact on a person and lead a teacher to carry certain beliefs forward into their own practice (Guskey, 2006b). Not only must teachers reflect on their past, but they must also spend time with the literature around grading. The literature on the issues with traditional models of grading is extensive (Carifio & Carey, 2013; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Ford, 2016; Link & Guskey, 2019; Feldman, 2019; Wormeli, 2018; McMillan, 2003; Resh, 2009; Wiley, 2011; Kunnath, 2017; Randall & Engelhard, 2010; Brookhart et al., 2016; Starch and Elliot, 1912; 1913a; 1913b; Brimi, 2011). Yet still, more traditional models of grading systems exist. As much as teachers may believe they are using their grading system in a way that benefits students, it is imperative that teachers examine the literature to see the true impacts of their grading system. Teachers who take up this work must be willing to honestly reflect on their own beliefs as well as challenge the existing systemic belief that a traditional grading system is the best measure of a student's learning. This is not a simple task to undertake, and it is not one teachers should do alone.

Moreover, if a teacher is thinking about engaging in this work, it is imperative that implementation be coupled with a strong support system. Educators enacting this model need to have colleagues who will work with them throughout this change. This study also suggests that,

although the teacher must individually decide to embark on this endeavor, community is critical to the process. Foundational research on communities of practice, reveal how valuable they can be (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Participants in this study had support from their principal to enact it and guidance from colleagues who were a bit ahead of them in implementation and had ideas of how to troubleshoot the problems that came up. Those who want to try something so radically different need to build a community in which they can participate.

Lastly, a teacher considering making the change to a nontraditional system must be ready to put in the work and consequently see the change transform their teaching practice. Participants in this study expressed that this change did not come without challenges, and they also shared that they all are continuing to improve their systems. This is not a static change. It is a piece of a teacher's practice that will continue to evolve as they encounter challenges and find solutions. Nevertheless, the switch in grading systems brought about changes in other areas of the participants' classrooms. Amanda reevaluated assignments she gave for the sake of adding more points to the gradebook. Nicole stopped giving reading quizzes that tried to hold students accountable for their reading through a grade. Instead, she implemented small group discussions where students became accountable to themselves and their peers. All three participants expressed how the nontraditional system has allowed them the space and peace of mind to truly focus on learning with their students instead of point collecting.

Implications for Administrators

Administrators who are interested in encouraging teachers to change to a nontraditional model must be aware of what their teachers will need to embark on this change. One need will be a learning community. Teachers need places to problem solve, brainstorm, and process,

continually honing the system to make it better for themselves and their students. Administrators must support the community by creating time and space for teachers to work together.

Dedicating time during the workday time for teachers pursuing this work to collaborate will aid in the success of the system. An administrator must also understand their place in the newly formed community of practice. Educators hold strong personal beliefs about grading (Hargreaves, 2005). If an administrator requires a change to the nontraditional model without the willingness of the teacher, it is unlikely to be a successful or sustainable change. The participants in this study were introduced to the nontraditional model by a colleague. The nontraditional grading community of practice at this school has become a small grassroots movement of grading reform. The change was not mandated from the top down. Instead, it spread organically through teachers who implemented the system and passed it on to others. Administrators must create the space for innovative teachers to embrace this work with their fellow educators.

For a teacher to be willing to embrace a new and unfamiliar practice, they must feel safe to do so. This safety is the outcome of administrators cultivating a relationship of trust between themselves and teachers. To enact this change, teachers need to feel secure in the idea that they will still be respected if they fail. The findings reveal that participants went through several iterations of the system as they encountered challenges. Without trust and respect from administrators, a teacher may feel nervous to continue the system when they encounter a challenge for fear of retribution. Teachers additionally need administrators to support their decision for this change in case of push back from parents or students. Administrators must make the trust they have in the teachers as professionals known to parents and students. For an educator to make this type of change to their teaching practice, they need to have wrap-around support from their supervising administrators and their peers.

Recommendations for Further Research

This case study examined how teachers made sense of and enacted a nontraditional grading system, the shifts that occurred in their thinking and practice, and what supports or challenges they experienced. The issues that have plagued traditional grading systems for decades are well documented. The issues are so well-known that it is puzzling why the traditional system is still commonly used. There is a current need for more research on less common and innovative grading models. To expand the literature on nontraditional grading systems, I offer three recommendations for further research: content area research, research on the student perspective, and student achievement research.

Content Area Research

The participants in this study taught French, Social Studies and Avid classes. Their content areas varied from content areas like Science or Math classes. Further research is needed to understand what it is like for high school teachers to enact this kind of system in other content areas such as Math, Science, Elective classes, or CTE programs. Educators may hypothesize that nontraditional grading systems would not work in classes where the outcomes to learning are more direct and less subjective. It is important for researchers to explore a variety of content areas to validate the usefulness of the nontraditional grading system.

Research on the Student Perspective

This study examined the nontraditional grading model through the lens of teachers enacting the change. However, researchers also need to understand the nontraditional system through a student lens. Students play a more active role in this grading system than they do in more traditional models. This study revealed how important it was that teachers consistently solicited and incorporated student feedback. Subsequent formal research should closely examine

students' perspectives on nontraditional systems, providing valuable insight into what this system feels like for them.

Student Achievement Research

Finally, further research is needed to explore the possible impacts of the nontraditional grading system on student achievement. Most educators would agree that the purpose of school is to help students learn through meeting certain academic benchmarks. Therefore, all practices in education should be examined through the lens of how they impact student learning. Grading systems should not be an exception. In fact, it could be argued that researching the impacts of grading systems on student achievement ought to take precedence over research on instructional practices or engagement strategies. A grading system is often the foundation of a classroom, influencing both teacher and student decisions. A grading system in a high school system can often influence instructional decisions. Teachers may decide to give assignments to add more points to the grade book or decide to weight assignments differently to increase or lessen the impact on the overall grade. Making instructional decisions based on a grading system instead of based on student learning is an area that needs to be examined. Educators and researchers cannot underestimate the weight a grading system has on students in the classroom.

Limitations

As with any qualitative research, there are limitations to this work. The limitations of this study centered around data collection. Covid-19 was a limiting factor in my data collection. My ability to collect data was impacted by surge of cases from Covid-19. Due to this, I was not able to access the school. Lack of access prevented me from Getting to meet the teachers in person for interviews and observe their classrooms and students. Not being able to complete observations impacted the triangulation of my data sources and may affect the overall validity of my results.

As my participants were still navigating a new normal during this study, it is possible that the effects of Covid-19 may have impacted my participants' perspectives of their work during this time. This may skew the data as the participants continued to navigate teaching during a global pandemic.

Conclusion

This study indicates that enacting substantial change in grading practices required teachers to reflect on their own beliefs and past experiences with grading, become a part of a learning community with like-minded colleagues, and enter an iterative implementation cycle enabling them to hone the system as they used it. In so doing, participants made a shift in their thinking and practice. This moved them away from traditional models that have often been accepted as status quo and moved them into a more innovative practice. The benefits they experienced for both themselves and their students confirmed this change was appropriate; I sense they will never return to the grading systems they have used in the past. Participants expressed immense gratitude for the support they received from their principal and their colleagues, allowing them to pursue this change without distraction. They were not stymied by challenges, but instead used them to workshop solutions and new ideas. This study's findings show that research must focus on examining nontraditional grading systems if educators are serious about enacting more equitable and just systems in education. It is time for educators and researchers alike to get into schools where this grassroots grading movement is taking place and explore the possibilities instead of accepting grading practices perpetuated for the sake of tradition.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Letter

Researcher: Sarah Leonard

Dissertation Chair: Karen Buchannan, EdD, George Fox University

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of teachers who have enacted the gradeless system in their classrooms. The researcher's goal is to learn from the valuable knowledge and experience that participants have to share. These experiences will contribute to existing research on alternative grading systems and may reveal grading practices that better support student learning.

Procedures

Upon consenting to participation in this study, you will be asked to converse with the researcher one time via phone or email. The purpose of this first conversation will be to answer questions, select the pseudonym you wish to use, set up interviews, and get to know the researcher and the study. Following this first, informal conversation, you will be asked to sit for one interview with the researcher. Each interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will be audio-recorded via Otter ai. After each interview, the researcher will create a transcript of the interview and follow the confidentiality procedures listed below. A follow up meeting may be requested to collect artifacts or documents that the participant is willing to share.

Possible Risk and Benefits

This study is expected to result in minimal risk and/or discomfort to the participants. However, the case is small, and it is difficult to guarantee absolute anonymity. Though every effort will be made to keep research confidential, it is possible that others may recognize part of your experience.

You will not receive any financial compensation for participation in this study. You may receive a small token of thanks from the researcher. Your participation will contribute to a small but growing body of knowledge around the gradeless classroom model and may benefit teachers and students alike.

Use of this Study

This study is being done to fulfill the requirements of a doctoral dissertation. If you are interested in seeing the final dissertation, a copy can be provided upon completion. Interview data may be used in short excerpts as well as longer passages in my dissertation as well as in presentations for schools, school districts, universities, organizations, or conferences supporting or related to education, or any journal or magazine related to education.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be maintained to greatest degree possible throughout the study. Steps to promote confidentiality at each step in the research process will include:

- The use of pseudonyms for participants and the school.
- All audio files of interviews, electronic files of transcripts, and hard copies of transcriptions will be kept using pseudonyms.
- Audio files will be deleted within one week of recording.
- Soft copies of transcripts will be saved in encrypted files on a password protected computer.
- Hard copies of transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet.
- The participant may ask that any content be struck from the transcript, at any time, for any reason.
- All forms of data will be destroyed within three years of the completion of the study.

Withdrawal

Participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Participation is voluntary. Withdrawal will not affect the confidentiality of any information. If you choose to withdraw from the study, the researcher will discuss how you wish your data to be treated with you

Voluntary Consent

This This consent document outlines your rights regarding participation in this research study. Please direct any question to the researcher, Sarah Leonard or the dissertation chair, Dr. Karen Buchanan. Contact information is below.

By signing this document, you are indicating that you consent to participate in the study outlined above.

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____

Researcher: Sarah Leonard (sleonard18@georgefox.edu)

Dissertation Chair: Karen Buchanan (kbuchana@georgefox.edu)

APPENDIX B

Interview #1 Protocol

First Moments: Engage in small talk to break the ice and create a comfortable conversational tone for the interview. Thank the participant for their participation and their time.

Introduction: My name is Sarah, as you know, and I am working on my Doctorate of Education at George Fox University. I am also a high school Language Arts teacher. I am interested in learning about how teachers make sense of and enact a gradeless system into their classrooms, and I am hoping to learn about your personal experience with that process through our interview today.

Informed Consent: Before we begin, I have a few formalities to take care of. (Present participant with hard copy of Informed Consent Letter). Before we do any research at my university, we must have formal informed consent from those who participate in our studies. Here is a copy of the form I emailed you earlier. The form states that whatever you tell me will be kept completely confidential, and whatever I write about this conversation, I will disguise your identity, so that no one will be able to identify you. And, most importantly, that you can stop our interview at any point if you wish to stop. All of that information, and more, is on the form for you to review. If you are comfortable with it and agree, go ahead and sign the form.

Begin interview: Okay, we can now begin with the interview. (Start recording). As you know, I am studying how teachers took on changing their grading practices to a gradeless system. (Repeat recruitment question here). So please tell me about...(Proceed with Guiding Questions listed in Appendix C).

End of interview: I am so grateful for your willingness to share your experiences with me. (Stop recording). Would you be willing to continue this conversation over a virtual meeting on another day? What are some days and times that work for you? (Schedule 2nd interview).

Adopted from: Josselson, R. (2013). Interviewing for qualitative inquiry: A relational approach. The Guilford Press.

APPENDIX C

Interview #2 Protocol

First Moments: Engage in small talk to break the ice and create a comfortable conversational tone for the interview. Thank the participant for their participation and their time.

Introduction: It is great to see you again. I'm looking forward to continuing our conversation about your experience with making sense of and enacting a gradeless system into your classroom.

Participant Rights: I also want to remind you that you can stop our interview at any point if you wish to stop, and if you share something you wish for me not to include, please just let me know, and I can strike it from the record.

Begin interview: Okay, let's jump back in. (Start recording). Please tell me more about...(Proceed with Guiding Questions listed in Appendix C).

End of interview: I am so grateful for your willingness to share your experiences with me. I would like to tell you a little bit about what the next steps of my research process will look like. I am going to analyze our interview from today and draft a summary of our conversation. I will email you a copy of the summary to review and speak to any interpretations you feel I misconstrued. When I finish my research, I am happy to email you a copy of the results if you wish. And, again, thank you for your time and openness to sit down and share with me. (Stop recording).

Adopted from: Josselson, R. (2013). Interviewing for qualitative inquiry: A relational approach. The Guilford Press.

APPENDIX D

Guiding Questions for Interviews

Interview #1

1. Tell me the story of how you took up this gradeless classroom work.
2. Tell me about what the system looks like in your classroom.
3. Can you talk about your grading beliefs and practices within this process?
4. Talk to me about the supports that made enacting this system possible for you? If you felt
5. Talk to me about what the challenges have been with enacting a gradeless system? (Prompt them: "Can you name a list and then unpack 1-2 with a story or further explanation)
6. Talk to me about what the shining moments have been with an enacting a gradeless system?
7. Artifact questions (participant to bring with them to second interview):
 - a. Could I see some of the things you used in your first year and then we can start our next interview with having you talk about how you needed to iterate them? You can send me copies in whatever way is easiest for you (via Google, pictures, PDFs, etc.)

Interview #2

*Start with follow up questions, then artifacts, then move onto questions.

1. What have you observed or noticed for students with regards to gradeless classrooms?
2. What have you observed or noticed for yourself with regards to gradeless classrooms?
 - a. Tell me about if you feel this system is sustainable for you. What makes it sustainable or unsustainable? Why do you think that is?
3. What have you observed or noticed for parents or guardians with regards to gradeless classrooms?
4. What's your perspective on teachers who do NOT take up this work? Why do you think this is? What do you imagine are the reasons why more teachers do not take up gradeless classrooms? Which one of these barriers was biggest for you? And how did you overcome it?

APPENDIX E

Example of a Letter to Parents Explaining Gradeless Classroom Plan

Dear Parents and Guardians,

This semester is going to be mostly gradeless, and here's how and why we are going to get there:

There is a lot of research focused on helping students to become more intrinsically (self) motivated. The most telling is that while students can be intrinsically motivated in short bursts, they have a hard time blocking out the system that has been in place in public education for nearly a century that is built on rewards and punishments. What is most concerning is that, at best, students are too focused on their grades or a score on an assignment rather than focusing on their own learning. At worst, students quit, or do not even attempt an assignment because they typically got bad grades even when they did try.

Some key texts and sources that inform thinking about grades and intrinsic motivation are: Alfie Kohn's Case Against Grades, Alfie Kohn on Why Grades Shouldn't Exist, Elements of Grading by Doug Reeves, Drive by Daniel Pink, and finally the TED talk, The Puzzle of Motivation, by Dan Pink. All of this research comes to the same conclusion: focusing on grades can deflect students' attention from the LEARNING. In short, grades get students focused on how well they are doing based on extrinsic measures (good grades, bad grades) rather than being focused on what they are learning, how that work is going, where they are strong, and where they need to focus.

Focus on grades in the classroom leads to:

- students choosing the easiest possible/safe path to their ideal grade
- students avoiding the risks involved in real learning for fear of being penalized with points being taken away.
- surface-level thinking
- decreased student interest in what is going on in the classroom
- pressure to cheat
- harmful student/ peer relationships
- lack of trust in their teachers
- students avoiding challenging work
- a highly stressful and unhealthy work environment for students

This is in direct opposition of what I want for my students! I'm interested in truly engaging students as language learners, readers, writers, thinkers, and communicators.

So, what is different in the mostly gradeless context of my classroom?

Classroom Learning

Students will continuously reflect on their work alongside a set of World Language Standards (which were created by American Council of Teachers of Foreign Language and edited for

common language by the students in my classes) for: 1. Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, 2. Work Ethic, and 3. Growth. These are the 3 main criteria for the class.

Students will turn in work throughout the semester with a slip attached (example below) indicating their proficiency level goal and any specific feedback they would like to receive from me. Students will receive feedback from me and their peers regarding their work towards proficiency and growth, rather than a simple number or letter grade. At any point in the semester, students can request a conference where we look together at their work to identify where the student can focus for improvements.

What about our school-wide grading system like Eschool and progress reports?

Eschool

The number you see in Eschool as we move through the semester is NOT a student's grade. Eschool still keeps track of a percentage as we move through the semester. But this percentage will be a result of only one factor: completion of work. So, we all need to think of that percentage not as a grade in the traditional sense, but rather a simple percentage representing how much of the course's tasks a student has completed. Students will only receive a complete (1) or incomplete (blank) in the gradebook.

Students will be able to revise work until it is complete up to each 4.5 week progress report. A late assignment will only be recorded as "complete" in Eschool if a student has fully completed the paper or assignment thoroughly in response to feedback from me and/or peers. Assignments done without a lot of thought or effort will not be accepted.

Interim Progress reports:

Since the percentage you see in Eschool is not a student's grade, the grade you see at progress report time may seem to mismatch that percentage. I use the following scale for (4.5 week) progress grades:

- P (On track to pass): The student has no missing work. Some assignments may be incomplete, but the student is working toward completing the assignments.
- NP (Not on track to pass): The student is missing work, has several incomplete assignments with no plan to complete them, or is generally not attending to the work of the class.

Report Cards:

At the 9.5 week progress report and at the end of the semester, students will submit a reflection to me assessing their learning via the **3 main criteria for the class: proficiency standards, growth, and work ethic**, and making a case for the grade they think best represents that learning, using his/her collection of work and the turn in rate in Eschool. The student and I will have a face-to-face conference discussing their progress throughout the semester, and we will come to an agreement about what letter grade they have earned.

Based on the process described above and the work the students have completed, report card grades will be assigned as a collaborative effort between me and the student. These grades will be on the A-F scale.

If at any point in time you would like to know of your student's progress, please let me know and I'll share your student's work and reflections with you. You may also use eschool to check what percentage of the work has been turned in.

Thank you for all the hard work you do with your kids and students and your willingness to support this change. The feedback I received from my classes that piloted this approach is powerful. I'm excited for all of my students to have this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Teacher's Name

APPENDIX F


Examples of a Discussion Slides for Students

Education from a Historical Standpoint

Please watch this clip and think about:


Why was education created the way that it was?

Should education evolve with society? If so, how do we, in the 21st century, create a system considerate of learners and society today?



6:45-11:45

With the video clip in mind Let's talk Grades...



Please get out a scratch piece of paper

What is your experience with the standard (100pt) grading scale?

What are the positives and negatives of it?

Positives	Negatives

1. In your opinion, what should grades represent?
2. Do you think that grades accurately represent what you think they should?
3. What do your grades tell you about your progress in a class?
4. What are the toxic consequences of grades (even if unintended)?

World Economic Forum Skills for 2025

Top 10 Skills in 2025:

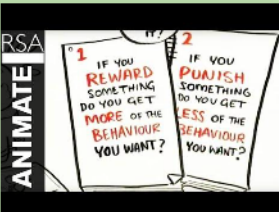
1. Analytical thinking and innovation
2. Active learning and learning strategies
3. Complex problem-solving
4. Critical thinking and analysis
5. Resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility
6. Creativity, originality, and initiative
7. Leadership and social influence
8. Reasoning, problem-solving, and ideation
9. Emotional intelligence
10. Technology design and programming



Motivation & Reward

As we view an animation of Daniel Pink's talk regarding motivation and reward please consider:

What do extrinsic motivators (rewards) do to us as learners?



Autonomy, Mastery, & Purpose

Français

The Grading System

This is my "why"...

How do you feel about grades?

This is my "why"...

What do you appreciate most in a class?

What if I Told You...

- There is a way for you to enjoy an academically rigorous class, where you can grow and learn but without all the stress and pressure that grades can sometimes bring.
- There is a way for you to have a better understanding about your progress and what you need to work on to be successful.
- There is a way to harness your full potential and take risks without negative consequences.



The Answer

- Research shows that getting rid of classroom grades will result in all of these positive outcomes for students.

What does this mean?

- You will continue to work hard on all 4 modes of language to learn and grow.
- I will give you feedback, not a number or letter.

What does this NOT mean?

- There's no work, or you don't have to do it.
- You don't have to learn and do your best.



What about their GPA?

What will colleges think?

Here is our plan:

- Since colleges only look at end of semester grades, and only look at the letters, (not an overall percentage) **we're still going to enter an A-F grade twice per semester.** Your GPA will still calculate normally.
- Colleges won't notice any difference, but our students will not suffer any of the negative effects of grades.



APPENDIX G

Examples of Rubrics Used in Participants' Classes

WHAP DBQ Rubric

Category	Points
Context - Provides the reader with relevant background information on the time, place, and developments related to the prompt	1
Thesis - A defensible claim that answers the prompt <u>and</u> states how it will be proven	1
Describes - Shows an understanding of at least three documents (quotes cannot be used)	1
Supports - Uses at least six documents to support the thesis	1
Sources - Shows how either the point of view, historical context, intended audience, or author's purpose affects the document	1
Outside Evidence - Provides evidence outside the documents that support the thesis	1
Complexity - Shows a deeper understanding by linking the argument to a development or process from another time period, OR shows an understanding of an alternate thinking skill than the one in the prompt. For example: If the prompt asks to compare, ALSO provide a contrasting point, if the prompt asks for change over time, ALSO provide continuity, etc.	1

Total: 7 points

Your DBQs will be evaluated as follows:

Progress	Color	Qualities
T = On target	Blue	Context Thesis Describes AND/OR Sources 3 documents Supports (using 6 documents AND Outside Evidence)
^ = Improving, Close to target	Green	Thesis Describes AND/OR Sources 3 documents Supports (using 3-6 documents AND/OR Outside Evidence)
> = Partially met target	Yellow	Thesis Supports (using Outside Evidence)
* = Not on target	Orange	Thesis
NC = Not Complete	Grey	Not complete
E = Exceeding Target	Pink	Context Thesis Describes AND Sources 3 documents Supports (using 6 documents AND Outside Evidence) Complexity

READING #1 Familiar (Jeanne D'Arc)

RECIPE RUBRIC

	You're ready for The Great British Bake-off!	This is TASTY!	On the 'make again' list	Not too bad, with lots of ketchup	The dog ate it
Interpretive Retell (Reading and Listening)	<p>Answers all four of the basic Narration Main Idea questions and your factual information is all taken from the passage: Who, When, Where, What Happened?</p> <p>Describes the setting using three or more facts and sensory details to show a complete understanding.</p> <p>Describes the character's feelings/ internal traits using three or more details AND their physical/external characteristics, using three or more details.</p>	<p>Answers 3 of the Main Idea questions with facts from the passage.</p> <p>Describes the setting using at least 2 facts and sensory details.</p> <p>Describes the character(s)' internal AND external traits with at least 4 details.</p>	<p>Answers 2 of the Main Idea questions with facts from the passage</p> <p>Describes the setting using at least 2 facts and sensory details.</p> <p>Describes the character(s)' internal OR external traits with at least 3 details.</p>	<p>Answers two of the Main Idea questions with facts from the passage.</p> <p>Describes the setting using at least two facts and/or sensory details.</p> <p>Describes the character(s)' internal OR external traits with at least two details.</p>	<p>Answers one of the Main Idea questions with facts from the passage.</p> <p>Describes the setting using at least one fact.</p> <p>Describes the character(s)' internal OR external traits with at least one detail.</p>

Speaking

	No L2 Speech	Novice Mid	Novice High	Intermediate Low	Low Intermediate Mid
1.	My partner understood the question & responded in L1.	My partner said a word in L2.	My partner said one phrase or sentence in L2.	My partner said two or more sentences in L2 about the same topic.	My partner said three or more sentences in L2 about the same topic and used their imagination to add more information. My partner asked me a question in L2 and I understood and was able to respond in L1 or L2.
2.	My partner understood the question & responded in L1.	My partner said a word in L2.	My partner said one phrase or sentence in L2.	My partner said two or more sentences in L2 about the same topic.	My partner said three or more sentences in L2 about the same topic and used their imagination to add more information. My partner asked me a question in L2 and I understood and was able to respond in L1 or L2.
3.	My partner understood the question & responded in L1.	My partner said a word in L2.	My partner said one phrase or sentence in L2.	My partner said two or more sentences in L2 about the same topic.	My partner said three or more sentences in L2 about the same topic and used their imagination to add more information. My partner asked me a question in L2 and I understood and was able to respond in L1 or L2.

APPENDIX H

Example of a Progress Tracker

ID#	9/24 SAQ (A)	9/24 SAQ (B)	9/24 SAQ (C)	10/27 SAQ (A)	10/27 SAQ (B)	10/27 SAQ (C)	1/3 SAQ (A)	1/3 SAQ (B)	1/3 SAQ (C)					
	>	^	T	*	*	*	T	^	T		T	On Target		
	*	*	*	>	>	>					^	Improving, close to target		
	>	>	^	*	*	>	^	^	*		>	Partially met target		
	T	>	>	T	>	*	*	*	>		*	Not meeting target		
	*	>	*	*	*	>	*	*	*		NC	Not Complete		
	NC	NC	NC	*	*	*	*	*	NC		E	Exceeding Target		
	>	*	>	*	>	>	>	^	T					
	^	*	^	*	*	*	>	*	>					
	*	*	*	*	*	*	NC	>	NC					

APPENDIX I

Examples of End of Semester Reflection Survey

Semester Grade Reflection: Work Ethic & Participation

In this section, please respond to questions about work ethic and participation in APUSH.

1. Email

2. According to Eschool, what percentage of your work has been turned in?

3. How many assignment in Eschool are marked with an “L” signaling that they were turned in late?

4. Did you couple both the Time Period 1 & 2 and Time Period 3 Tests as well as the TP 4 DBQ (These must be complete to earn an A).

_____ Yes, all of them

_____ No, I’m missing one or more

5. How many times have you missed class (excused and unexcused)?

6. Have you read or watched the Adam Norris videos on chapters 1-13 and taken notes? Mark only one.

_____ Yes

_____ Not yet, but will have them all complete by the end of the semester

_____ I have done some, but not all of them

_____ No, I haven’t kept up with reading/videos and note taking

7. On a scale of 1-5 rate your work ethic for APUSH. Consider things like: do you have materials/notes with you during class? Are you paying attention? Participating in class? Are you prepared for seminars? Are you taking notes? Do you complete the ‘reading’ and notes to the best of your ability? Are you procrastinating so quality of work suffers? Do you study for tests? Mark only one.

(I haven’t been working very hard) 1 2 3 4 5 (I am giving my full effort)

8. Additional comments or things you would like the teacher to know about participation or work ethic.

Semester Grade Reflection: Academic Progress

In this section, please respond to questions about your academic performance in APUSH. Refer to the Student Evaluation Spreadsheet to see your proficiency.

9. What proficiency grade did you earn on the Time Period 3 One Pager? Mark only one.

- ☐ Meeting
- ☐ Nearly Meeting
- ☐ Progressing
- ☐ Beginning
- ☐ I did not complete or submit the Time Period 3 One Pager

10. What proficiency grade did you earn on the Time Period 4 One Pager or questions? Mark only one.

- ☐ Meeting
- ☐ Nearly Meeting
- ☐ Progressing
- ☐ Beginning
- ☐ I did not complete or submit the Time Period 4 One Pager

11. What proficiency grade did you earn on the Stimulus Based Multiple Choice Section of the Time Period 1 & 2 Test?

Mark only one.

- ☐ Meeting
- ☐ Nearly Meeting
- ☐ Progressing
- ☐ Beginning
- ☐ I did not complete or submit the Stimulus Based Multiple Choice on the Test

12. What proficiency grade did you earn on the Stimulus Based Multiple Choice section of the Time Period 3 Test?

Mark only one.

- ☐ Meeting
- ☐ Nearly Meeting
- ☐ Progressing
- ☐ Beginning
- ☐ I did not complete or submit the Stimulus Based Multiple Choice on the Test

13. What proficiency grade did you earn on the Short Answer Questions (SAQs) portion of the Time Period 1 & 2 Test?

Mark only one.

- ☐ Meeting
- ☐ Nearly Meeting
- ☐ Progressing
- ☐ Beginning
- ☐ I did not complete or submit the SAQs on the Test.

14. What proficiency grade did you earn on the Short Answer Questions (SAQs) portion of the Time Period 3 Test?

Mark only one.

- ☐ Meeting
- ☐ Nearly Meeting
- ☐ Progressing
- ☐ Beginning
- ☐ I did not complete or submit the SAQs on the Test.

15. What letter grade did you earn at the 9-week progress check?

Mark only one.

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ F

Semester Grade Reflection: Overall Grade

16. Since the start of the school year, to what extent, or how, have you grown as a Student of History? Be thorough. Consider: Are you learning the content? Could you explain the basics of each Time Period 1-4 to someone? Have you found a system of 'reading' and note taking that works for you?

17. Based on your worth ethic and academic proficiency scores what letter grade best describes your learning to this point. Please be honest with yourself. Don't give yourself a grade you haven't earned. Don't short yourself a grade you have earned trying to be modest. Mark only one.

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ F

18. General questions, comments, or concerns?

19. Do you want to meet with (teacher's name) to discuss your semester grade?

Mark only one.

- ☐ I would like to meet with (teacher's name) to discuss my grade even if our evaluations are the same.
- ☐ I only need to meet with (teacher's name) if my self-evaluation is different than her evaluation.

Student Evaluation Reflection

Please take a few minutes to respond to each question below. Thoughtful responses are important as we'll be using this reflection as a guide during our conference time.

1. Since the start of the semester, to what extent, or how, have you grown in your UNDERSTANDING? (listening/reading)	
2. Since the start of the semester, to what extent, or how have you grown as a WRITER and SPEAKER?	
3. Are you showing your drive to learn/soft skills every day? When it comes to you putting in full effort in this class, what has been a big barrier for you?	
4. This semester, what is one key insight you have gained about yourself as a learner?	
5. From the start of the course, up until now, what letter grade best communicates... a. Your proficiency level b. Your drive to learn c. Your growth	
6. What are your thoughts about the class in general? What is working for you, and what would you like us to do more of?	

APPENDIX J

Characteristics of an “A” Student Document

What does an “A” Student look like?

- No unexcused absences or tardies
- An unexcused absence or tardy will be defined as a student not being present for, or being late to, class without contacting *before*, or on the *same date* of the meeting to communicate the circumstances of the absence or tardy.
- Steady improvement in skill building (There will be dips along the way. Don’t assume a straight line.)
- Is close to, meeting, or exceeding all targets
- Asks for help when skill building has stopped or regressed
- Turns in 90+% of assignments (LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED)
- *ALL* SAQs, DBQs, and LEQs are turned in (LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED)
- Is prepared for class
- Participates in class
- Works well with others
- Demonstrates a strong work ethic (goes above and beyond)

What does a “B” Student look like?

- There have been some unexcused absences and/or tardies
- Many skills have shown steady improvement, but some have not improved
- Asks for help when skill building has stopped or regressed
- Turns in 80+% of assignments (LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED)
- *ALL* SAQs, DBQs, and LEQs are turned in (LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED)
- Is usually prepared for class
- Participates in class
- Works well with others
- Demonstrates a moderate work ethic (works hard, but could have done more)

What does a “C” Student look like?

- There have been some unexcused absences and/or tardies
- Most skills have not improved
- Does not ask for help when skill building has stopped or regressed
- Turns in 70+% of assignments (LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED)
- Missing some SAQs, DBQs, and/or LEQs (LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED)
- Is rarely prepared for class
- Does not participate often
- Work ethic not apparent

What does a “D” Student look like?

- Multiple unexcused absences and tardies
- Most skills have regressed
- Does not ask for help when skill building has stopped or regressed

- Turns in >70% of assignments (LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED)
- Multiple SAQs, DBQs, and/or LEQs (LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED)
- Is rarely prepared for class
- Does not participate often
- Work ethic not apparent
- Failure of this class will only occur if a student does not turn in assignments, does not participate in class, and ignores interventions and advice from (teacher's name).