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Best Practices in Education: Standards Based Grading
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One of the academic freedoms afforded educators is assigning student grades. We have autonomy in our pedagogical approaches and assessment measures. Many educators implement grading systems inherited from the early twentieth century. According to educator Joe Feldman, the grading systems we have inherited were designed for, “tracking students to situate them for specific roles in the economic hierarchy...to replicate the existing social and racial hierarchy, and to provide ‘scientific’ justification for doing so.”¹ Considering these origins, it shouldn’t surprise anyone that prominent, “traditional” grading practices, as they are implemented in our contemporary context, disproportionately harm vulnerable students: students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, students whose first language is not English.

In *Grading For Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*, Feldman lays out a compelling case for Standards Based Grading. The aim of the book is to lay out a theoretical and practical design for grading practices that are accurate, resistant to internal bias, and reliant on intrinsic motivation. Feldman describes five sets of practices: practices that are accurate and mathematically sound; practices that value knowledge, not environment or behavior; practices that support hope and a growth mindset; practices that lift the veil on how to succeed; practices that build ‘soft skills’ and motivate students without grading them.²

What does this look like? The practice of Standards Based grading advocated by Feldman uses a four-point scale rather than a 100-point scale. A 100-point scale suggests that a professor could distinguish student performance with a significant degree of specificity but, can a teacher of preaching distinguish the difference between a sermon earning an 85% and a sermon earning an 88%? Studies have shown that reducing the options for grading leads to less variability and more reliability. Another compelling reason to use an alternative scale, the 0-100 scale is oriented toward failure. Feldman writes, “Our scale allocates sixty of its 100 numbers (0-59) to the failure scale while only forty numbers (61-100) are allocated to passing What does this say to our students about learning and achievement?”³

Standards Based grading is based on summative analysis using pre-determined measures of success rather than student behavior or performance. Often, this looks like a rubric for graded assignments. In Feldman’s system, there are no homework grades, participation points, or assessments of effort. Students are not penalized for late work and are allowed opportunities to re-do assignments or re-take tests. Feldman supports the use of these practices with numerous studies on measures of student motivation and outcomes. Grading in this way aims to eliminate internal-bias and environmental factors. A student who turns things in late because they work 2 jobs and have family responsibilities can earn the same grade as a single student whose only responsibility is school.

¹ Joe Feldman, *Grading for Equity* (Corwin Press, 2018), 21.

² *Ibid.*, 10-11.

³ *Ibid.*, 80.

Grading for Equity is geared toward primary and secondary education but many of the theories and practices are applicable to higher education. Feldman invites the teacher of preaching to think about why and how they assess student work, challenges presumptions about student motivation and success, and offers practical suggestions for new ways forward. As the academy continues to consider systemic racism and ways to de-colonize preaching and teaching, a look at how we grade may be in order. This book effectively resources those wishing to think about best practices in education and experiment with new ways of doing things.