Mental Wellness Through Feedback-Focused in A Teacher Preparation Program

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Abstract

This qualitative study employed a group of teacher candidates (n=35) from a School of Education in Southern California. The professor of the class replaced traditional grading (i.e., letter-grades or points) with a mastery-based approach that utilized feedback-only assessment to guide, rather than evaluate, each candidates' understanding of the content. After receiving explicit feedback from the professor, each candidate was given the opportunity to revise their assignments until they achieved mastery (defined as a score of *Proficient* or *Advance* on the assignment's rubric). Such an alteration to the process allowed the participants - graduate students preparing to be K-12 educators - to reconceptualize what it means to be assessed, transforming it from a strictly summative process into a more formative one. Notably, the data showed a positive interaction between feedback-only learning and the participants' psycho-emotional well being. As a result, the authors' argue that implementing such experiential learning provides teacher candidates with a phenomenological understanding of assessment that can alter their theoretical, emotional, and practical frameworks regarding assessment. This may increase the likelihood that such teacher candidates adopt similar assessment approaches in their own classrooms someday, providing K-12 students with the right catalyst to reconceptualize *their own* understanding of assessment while positively affecting their own mental wellness.

Keywords: mental wellness, grades, feedback-focused, teacher preparation, mastery-based approach

1. Introduction

The need to pivot away from solely employing teacher evaluated summative grades towards providing reflective guidance to students has been receiving some attention lately. Darling-Hammond (2022), for example, has mentioned that designing schools for healthy development, as well as more robust learning, should include "formative assessment that informs reflection and revision of work" (p. 57). In addition, a scoping review carried out by English et al. 's work (2022) shows that employing rubrics to carry out formative assessment increases the learner's agency, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, as well as supporting students' desire to become lifelong learners.

Paralleling Gotwal and Cisterna's (2022) work, the present study set out to investigate the possible reconceptualization of what assessment is and what it could be when teacher candidates are evaluated using feedback-only grading. To do so, it employed the following definition of feedback-only grading: the "processes where the learner makes sense of performance-relevant information to promote their [own future] learning," (Henderson et al., 2019, p. 268). In other words, during the learning process, the feedback provided by the expert was employed by the learner to take action steps towards conceptual and professional growth rather than to increase one's academic grade. This follows what Chan et al. (2014) found regarding the appropriate use of feedback, which is, that meaningful and timely feedback should take on a reflective aspect that invites the teacher and student into a deeper conversation regarding mastery learning while, at the same time, fostering a stronger human relationship. Mastery learning is the affirmation that all learners can successfully achieve the desired objective if and when their instructors provide clear and timely feedback before moving to a higher level of expectation (Bloom, 1968).

2. Literature review

The conceptual understanding of the word culture can be simplified to: beliefs and behaviors adopted by a group of people. The continuation and/or propagation of culture, therefore, is attained by passing those beliefs and actions from one generation to the next (i.e., traditions). Thus, the way a specific social group - such as that of teachers - believes and acts *will* generate that group's cultural perspective. Those who instruct future teachers, therefore, accept the responsibility and privilege to lay the epistemological and pedagogical foundations of such future educators. Consequently, schools of Education all over the world act as the gatekeepers for the cultural continuation of a country's educational system. It would seem appropriate, therefore, to claim that teacher preparation programs have the opportunity (and some may contend the ethical responsibility) to evaluate how the pedagogies and systems taught within their walls can either enhance student learning or perpetuate what has been refer to as the *Grammar of Schooling* (to understand this term see Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Tyack & Cuban 1995; Mehta & Datnow, 2020; Labaree, 2021).

An important factor that has been propagating the Grammar of Schooling is how assessment is viewed and implemented. However, in an attempt to move into a new system of schooling many have investigated new possibilities. An example of such innovativeness can be seen in Gotwals & Cisterna's (2022) work. In it, the authors argued for a reconceptualization of how educators and the educational system perceive and employ formative assessment techniques using a practice progression framework (i.e., assessing someone's current level and providing feedback to guide their next step), arguing that teacher candidates can augment their understanding and application of formative assessment techniques if, and when, they experience such practice progression support.

Another investigation into how assessment can propagate a certain type of schooling, or vice versa, is seen in Smith's (1998) *The Book of Learning and Forgetting.* With it, Smith writes about the two possible approaches to learning and assessment. One that illustrates the state of affairs currently abounding and being perpetuated by the culture within our institutions of learning (i.e., present material, memorize it, assess that memorization, and move on to the next material - hopefully without forgetting the one just memorized) versus a more ancient and organic approach to learning (i.e., stimulate interest, deeply dive into an experience, try one's understanding of the material, fall short of perfection, receive feedback from an expert, try again and again, slowly increase one's understanding until achieving the desirable level of mastery). The latter being the option allowing for the sort of reconceptualization of learning that many experts today, including Metha (2022), claim to be both necessary and timely. In higher education, assessment and feedback are often categorized in the same activity, yet they serve different purposes. A recent study explored the entanglement of assessment and feedback and the need to disentangle both practices (Winstone & Boud, 2022). The challenges reveal that students focus on the grades rather than the developmental process of learning the information .

Exploring the link between mental health and grading practices

The connection between the students' mental health (BlackDeer et al., 2023; Johnson & Lester, 2022) and traditional evaluative processes appears to be calling for a reconceptualization of our evaluative systems. As a result, a movement called *ungrading* has emerged in higher education. This involves supplanting traditional grading schemes with approaches that guide students by utilizing qualitative constructive feedback rather than through the impersonal evaluation attained through simply providing a grade (i.e., points). Such a shift allows for greater self-reflection as well as a resubmission of any assignment the student would like to improve, resulting in an increase of understanding on the subject at hand. Kelenbach (2023), for example, did a study emphasizing student learning and self-evaluation through the omission of quantitative grades. In Kelenbach's work, students *only* received qualitative feedback on assignments and were then given the opportunity to self-evaluate their work at the end of the semester. Initially, the students expressed concern and discomfort with the lack of structure caused by the *ungrading* process; however, by the conclusion of the class, students responded positively to the new approach. This was evident in their increased engagement, a deeper focus on learning rather than grades, and higher quality of work being submitted.

A different study conducted by Chamberlin et al. (2023) revealed that multi-interval grades enhance anxiety and increase an avoidance towards challenging courses. Moving toward actionable feedback, however, enhances motivation and promotes trust between instructors and students. Furthermore, student motivation was compared at institutions with different grading systems. Alternative grading practices were used by two universities, while one university used traditional grading. In the universities where narrative evaluations were implemented, students welcomed the feedback because the comments provided an explanation on areas of improvement and advice on how to improve. In contrast, salient themes from the university using traditional grading include a negative impact on well-being, stress and anxiety. Grades generated negative feelings of self-worth and competence for students from the university with traditional grading. The findings from the Chamberlin et al. (2023) align with the major findings from the present study.

With the notable themes that explore the tensions of traditional grading practices inducing anxiety and stress, a pivot towards alternative grading practices in higher education calls for greater attention. Dismuke et al. (2019) provide an analysis of how to build capacity in teacher preparation programs that promote inquiry feedback and encourage student self-reflection. Perhaps, teacher education programs should intentionally focus on improving feedback practices as they work with teacher candidates. This is what this study set out to investigate.

3. Methodology and Data Sources

This study was a qualitative design based on semi-structured responsive interviewing grounded in the interpretive constructivist philosophy. All of the participants were cross-enrolled as graduate or undergraduate students in the first course of the teacher preparation course sequence. The participants were students from three consecutive semesters of this course.

The six-week course was designed as feedback-only without the application of letter grades or point values to the assignments. The institution utilized Canvas as their learning management system. Students were informed during the first class session that the assignments would be evaluated against rubrics to measure for mastery. If assignments did not meet standards according to the rubrics, they would be returned for revision and a required resubmission. In lieu of grades, for each assignment, students received specific, detailed feedback embedded on the submitted document and in the comments section via Canvas, within two days of submission. Feedback was driven by the four to five learning outcomes, which were utilized as the rubric criteria for the respective assignment within three levels of mastery: progressing, meets, and exceeds for each criteria. The descriptions for each of the criteria provided definitive indicators for the level of mastery for each assignment. Therefore, the professor reviewed assignments based on each of the rubric criteria, which resulted in targeted, actionable feedback that related to the indicators in the levels of mastery. Often, the feedback pointed students back to additional resources that were discussed during class time. On occasion, the professor provided whole-class feedback when the data showed a common trend in lack of mastery. These various forms of feedback provided clear guidance to students for necessary revisions before resubmitting.

In order to track which assignments needed to be revised and resubmitted, they were marked with a 0 or an incomplete until they were revised, resubmitted, and met standards. The instructor would provide specific feedback on how to strengthen a component of their assignment and refer students to exemplar examples. Because the course is a foundational/introductory course in the teacher preparation program, the instructor would provide clear guidance on the assignment and avoid question-based feedback. At times, some assignments required revision and resubmission more than once. Once the assignment met standards, it was marked with a 1 or a complete grade.

In order to fulfill the university's requirement for letter grades, all students who revised and resubmitted assignments regardless of the number of resubmissions to achieve standards earned an A for the course. Students were notified of this arrangement during the first class session. Students were also notified that any student who did not comply with the feedback-only model of revising and resubmitting assignments would meet with the

professor to discuss a move back to a traditional letter grade model for the course. No students fell into this category.

During the three semesters of this study, there were a total of 55 students enrolled. Of those, 35 agreed to be interviewed as participants. It must be noted that the final semester of this study was during the first full semester of COVID when universities shifted to fully online, remote learning. During that time, only three of the 18 students in the class agreed to be interviewed, which was a significant decline from the two previous semesters.

Twenty five of the participants were graduate students, while ten were undergraduate students. 26 of the participants were female, and nine were male. 19 of the participants were multiple subject candidates, and the remaining 16 were single subject candidates. Fifteen of the participants were White, nine were Latino/a, one was Black, eight were Asian, and two were more than one race.

At the end of the course, after grades were posted, the professor of the course extended an invitation to participate in the interviews. Participation was voluntary and resulted in no benefit to students since the course had ended and grades had been posted.

Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews. The interview protocol was scripted and consisted of six questions, some of which had up to two additional probes. Each initial interview was conducted one-on-one via phone or video conferencing per the participant's choosing, recorded using two devices, and required approximately 30 minutes. The researcher took hand-written or typed notes and recorded each conversation for audio. After each interview, the author reviewed the audio recording against the transcription to check for accuracy.

Interview transcripts were used for the first cycle of coding. The first cycle stage began with initial coding through the use of in vivo coding, which "uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language" (Miles, Huberman, Saldaña, 2014, p. 74). In this first step, the researchers looked for words and phrases that were commonly used by participants, thus, "prioritizing and honoring the participant's voice" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). The Dedoose software enabled researchers to move forward with the second cycle of coding which employed pattern coding. The researchers were able to identify common major themes by considering the "rules, causes, and explanations in the data" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 211). Then the researchers applied focused coding to decide which codes appeared most frequently to arrive at the most significant categories in the data and decide which codes were most fitting. Finally, once it was determined which themes were the most prominent, the researchers were able to determine the "categories of categories" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 250). By doing so, the researchers looked for possible structures and relationships between the codes as a pathway towards theories, concepts, and key assertions.

4.Results

In this qualitative study, the data collected from the 35 interviews revealed that feedback-focused grading impacts students in several regards. After analyzing and coding the transcripts, three main themes emerged: reduction of stress and anxiety, a shift in the association between grades and identity, and an increase in positive relationships between students and professors leading to greater learning.

Reduced Stress and Anxiety

The first theme suggests how feedback-only reduced the stress and anxiety of students. Throughout the interviews, students remarked on feeling "less" stress and pressure, which was indicated by a total of 40 responses during the interviews. Four participants specifically mentioned less anxiety. The anxiety, stress and pressure stemmed from a desire to maintain an "A" in the course and their overall grade point average. More than half the participants indicated how letter grades affected feelings about themselves, so the idea of not having letter grades on assignments was actually difficult and strange initially. As previously discussed in the literature review, the system of grades has been introduced to students in elementary school, so receiving a letter

grade is the norm - the *grammar of schooling* (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). In line with that perspective, some students expressed being uncomfortable with the change. One participant stated, "Um I was a little hesitant because I wasn't sure what to expect. Maybe even a little bit nervous. I was so used to having a scale and knowing how to measure what was expected of me. I am used to that instant information. The number or letter. It's just something I'm just so used to." Four participants expressed a sense of "relief." The realization of how participants are used to receiving letter grades surfaced when they were told that they would not be receiving one, but rather simply feedback on their assignments. One participant expressed, "Grades hasn't always brought comfort but it's how I was trained. Unfortunately, in high school, I learned how to manipulate my grade by getting the minimal done." In addition, another participant stated, "One benefit to having grades would have been motivation to do well. Not that not having letter grades isn't motivating. A little bit of pressure keeps us focused and wanting to do well." Participants have assimilated to the culture of grades, so pivoting to feedback only was a shift in how they perceived grades in relationship to how they view themselves.

The past experiences of receiving letter grades undoubtedly caused stress and anxiety for most participants. This was particularly true for returning graduate students. Jasmine, a graduate student who was returning to school after over 10 years stated, "I just relaxed because I felt ok, now I can just focus on why I'm here and not on a transactional you know, meeting expectations for a grade." Cherise, a graduate student who was returning to school after five years stated, "[Feedback only] impacted me positively because there wasn't a fear of failing." Jill, who had just completed her undergraduate degree, also commented, "A lot of students feel like there's too much pressure. It's not healthy or helpful." These are just a few of the dozens of responses citing a shift in mental health that allowed them to feel less stressed enabling them to focus on learning.

This shift occurred as students began receiving timely feedback without letter grades on assignments. Two participants specifically addressed their mental health during the interview. They explained, "Mental health, this definitely alleviated some stress and anxiety," and "For my mental health as a student it made this course less stressful, but more rewarding and that counts a lot for me." The results indicate a potential interaction between feedback only and the reduction of stress and anxiety, ultimately lowering the affective filter of participants.

Grades and Identity

A notable second theme was how participants attached grades to their identity. Participants have been taught how to *earn* their grades since elementary school. Although these letters are given to assignments and on report cards, along the way, participants have internalized the meaning to represent their own identity. One participant recounted how as a young girl, "I understood that getting a good grade means that you're smart." The grading system has continued to influence why students learn and what educators use to measure learning. The culture of grade achievement is quite significant in the responses of the participants. A particular participant highlights how, "Parents care more about the letter grade instead of the learning. They'd say it's great so long as you get a [good] grade. The GPA shows up on the resume." To this participant, it would appear that the use of grades is the norm and standard that parents have transferred to children to measure their learning. Furthermore, the participants were accustomed to equating their letter grades with their identity and worth, whether they were conscious of the impact or not. One participant described how, "Letter grades can be harmful growing up. You put yourself in this category. I am an A student, B student, C student. . . tied to your identity." The responses by the participants reflect how letter grades have become a lens in how they view themselves rather than a measurement of their learning.

Positive Relationships with Professors Towards Greater Learning

A third theme emerged - participants having a positive relationship with their professor. Six participants highlighted the importance of their relationship with the professor. Participants associated the feedback with the feelings of care and investment by the professor. According to a graduate student, "A professor's feedback shows how personally invested the professor is in me and my work." Feedback does require a high level of commitment, care and investment by the professor. Timely, meaningful feedback from the professor is a critical link between the student and mastery learning. Furthermore, during the interviews, 56 responses included how

feedback only shifted students' focus to learning the content for the course. Participants described their ability to focus on learning more on the course content because these expectations were clearly communicated the first week of class. The professor continued to emphasize mastery learning throughout the semester and through the feedback given on assignments. The students responded positively to the feedback because they knew the professor was reading their submitted work. One participant explained, "Words mattered more to me than the letter. With a letter grade, you don't know anything beyond the letter grade. Feedback makes it very clear." The positive correlation also revealed alignment in how the class was set up and the follow through by the professor.

5. Discussion

What does it mean to evaluate and assess student learning while considering the impact of mental health upon such learning?

Mental Health Matters to Learning

The angst of letter grades is real. For undergraduate students, grades are tied to grade point averages, which impact acceptance to graduate programs. For graduate students, the anxiety of returning to school after a number of years in the workplace is often exacerbated by a return to the traditional grading system they experienced all through their years of education. However, the reality of stress and anxiety brought about by such a system, as the data demonstrates, does not have to be a necessary experience. Almost every participant cited a reduction of stress and anxiety as a result of not having letter grades attached to their assignments.

I really, really enjoyed the way that the class was set. When teacher candidates experience a feedback-focused model, a shift occurs in their mind from grades to learning, which may shift their own practices as a future teacher. Hannah, an undergraduate student, stated, "In general, I really, really enjoyed the way that the class was set up. It got me excited thinking if there was any way for me to implement anything like that in my own classroom someday. It opened my mind to the possibility of having quality learning taking place without grades." As teacher candidates experience this disruption to the way grading has always been done, they can shape their grading practices to incorporate feedback-only grading, lower anxiety and stress, and teach students to value mastery learning. Teachers, and those who train them, have to be the ones to lead this change.

Changing entire systems is hard. . .but honestly if it just starts with one professor doing it. One of the prominent findings suggests that feedback-focused grading is more meaningful and useful, which indicates a positive relationship between feedback only and student learning. However, several participants acknowledged, grades are part of the reality in education, and grades are what they have experienced throughout their years of schooling. Only three of the participants had ever experienced some form of feedback-focused grading, and those were either pass/fail courses or delayed and/or sub-par feedback. This course was the first for the vast majority of participants to ever experience a true feedback-focused grading system. Without these experiences, their mindsets will continue to maintain the status quo. We must acknowledge that changing existing systems is challenging and sometimes discouraged. However, as Alison stated,

> I think that it is possible to change the system we're currently in, though it will be difficult. Systems are insecure about the information they're presenting to the outside world. People may look at [feedback-only] as slacking off and not rigorous. Changing entire systems is hard…but honestly if it just starts with one professor doing it, and it being extremely successful, people will start realizing based on the product. It could be successful on a macro scale.

Limitation of time

Lastly, feedback-focused grading is time consuming. It takes time to review assignments, papers in particular, and give meaningful feedback. Teacher preparation programs need to provide time in order for professors and teacher candidates to engage in this process. Limited time should not prevent teacher preparation programs from trying. There should also be a limit to the number of times a student is given feedback on the same assignment and allowed to resubmit. In this course, students were limited to three resubmissions with feedback. Mastery of concepts and skills for teaching should not come to an end after one course.

6. Recommendations

The attachment of grades and identity calls into question the prioritizing of mental health for students through disrupting the status quo systems of measuring student learning. Perhaps, reimagining how to measure student learning means changing the approach, intentionally shifting to mastery learning, specifically in teacher preparation programs. The impact of feedback only for mastery learning elicits a larger discussion at the teacher preparation level. Two recommendations for teacher preparation programs are encouraged from this study.

First, preservice teachers must experience mastery learning for themselves while being recipients of timely and meaningful feedback from their instructors. Teacher preparation programs have substantial influence in how courses are structured and the ways in which student learning is being measured. Modeling is a powerful strategy to prepare preservice teachers to follow suit in their own classrooms. The instructors must be equipped and encouraged to implement mastery learning in these teacher preparation courses. As preservice teachers attach meaning to the experiences and make connections to their learning at the teacher preparation level, they will understand and can build upon the foundation to transfer mastery learning and meaningful feedback to their own students.

Second, program leaders should consider how they can transform the process of learning towards mastery by abandoning the traditional letter grade system and implementing meaningful feedback only as tied to rubrics. This will require a high level of commitment, care and follow through by the instructors in teacher preparation programs, and therefore time must be allocated for this endeavor. Although normative grading practices are easier and quicker for instructors, these practices may not accurately measure student learning. Instead of teacher preparation programs contributing to the status quo of grading, embedding other approaches must be considered by programs that warrant measurement of mastery learning. These varied approaches support socio-emotional learning crucial in sustaining the students' mental health. Considering rubrics, portfolios and the specific feedback that attaches significant meaning in contrast to normative grading encourages attention to the process of learning and mastery of steps along the way. The shift must happen in implementing learning measurement practices that recognize learning is an ongoing continuum.

As teacher preparation programs shift to and model mastery learning, and teacher candidates receive timely and meaningful feedback from their instructors, preservice teachers develop their capacity for lifelong learning. The preservation of mental health for preservice educators is guarded by the high level of commitment, care and accountability at the teacher preparation level. Reframing the approach means learning becomes the process and goal.

Grading assignments with a letter scale has been the standard practice at higher education institutions and P-12 schools for a significant amount of time. Letter grades are a quick way to rate, rank, and communicate students' performance on an assignment and in a course as a whole. It is definitive and terminal. However, letter grades do not necessarily reflect true learning and mastery of content or skills and may have an psycho-emotional effect. For pre-service teacher candidates, their experiences with letter grades and feedback directly impact their future practices as a classroom teacher. It is time to consider a permanent disruption to the existing system in order to improve the quality of the learning experiences and shift our focus from earning a letter grade to learning for mastery. If pre-service teachers experience a high-quality feedback-focused experience, they may in turn rethink their assessment practices in their future classrooms.

The authors recognize that students have their own prior experiences with feedback. Future research would include
understanding how students' perception of feedback could be influenced by factors such as familial upbringing, culture and age.

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