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The Challenges of Grading Struggling Learners

The day report cards are sent home is one filled with anticipation and excitement for some students but anxiety and fear for many others. All of us can recall at least one report card day when concerns about whether or not we made the “cutoff” for a particular grade kept us from concentrating on our schoolwork. The process of grading can be such a mystery to students that often they have no idea what will appear on their report card until it arrives. And because teachers vary so much in the procedures they use for determining students’ grades, the more teachers a student has, the more complicated the reporting process becomes.

For struggling learners, the uncertainty over grades can be especially distressing. Widespread inconsistencies in the way teachers determine the grades assigned to struggling learners make interpretation nearly impossible. Even if a teacher has a predetermined formula for determining grades, that formula can be different for each struggling learner in the class. Furthermore, because teachers often decide how they will grade struggling learners at the *end* of the grading period instead of at the beginning, the grades assigned are not only difficult to interpret but impossible to predict.

Of course, many teachers feel just as anxious as their students on report card day. Teacher preparation programs seldom include course

work or even discussions of recommended practices for grading students in general, much less for students who may be struggling learners. As a result, teachers at all grade levels grapple with issues of fairness in grading, especially with regard to students who are struggling. Some of the most troubling questions they face include these:

- What grade do I give a student with a disability who has given excellent effort but did not meet the standards?
- Is it fair to give a passing grade to an English learner who did not pass the grade-level language standards?
- What do I do about the grade for the student who I suspect has a disability and is receiving intensive intervention through a Response to Intervention (RTI) model but has not been diagnosed?
- How can I ensure that the grades that I assign to all students are both fair and accurate?

Questions like these about fairness and appropriateness surface every time teachers have to complete report cards. Assigning fair report card grades to struggling learners is an even more daunting problem. Although struggling learners compose only about 20% of students, this problem affects 100% of teachers (Jung & Guskey, 2010a).

Despite the magnitude of this problem, few recommendations for grading struggling learners can be found in the research literature or in education policy. In the absence of thoughtful and consistent guidance from researchers, policy makers, or school leaders, teachers are left on their own to solve the problem. As a result, the approaches they develop vary widely, even among teachers within the same school. Most unfortunate is the fact that their approaches typically lack both fairness and accuracy. Even when teachers recognize that their practices may not be fair or accurate, they usually have no idea of where to turn for information about better or more effective alternatives.

In this context, the frustration for parents of struggling learners comes as no surprise. One of the most important functions of grades and report cards is to give families information on their children's progress in school. Families want and need to know their children's academic strengths, the areas where the children are experiencing difficulty, and what they can do at home to promote success. Yet most parents of struggling learners feel that grades and report cards give them little if any meaningful information. Occasionally the progress report that accompanies the report card offers them a portion of the information

that they need. But more often than not, even individualized progress reports lack the clear, concise, and detailed information that families want and hope to receive.

Who Are “Exceptional” or “Struggling” Learners?

In this book, we use the words *exceptional* and *struggling* to describe several groups of students. For our purposes, the category of “exceptional or struggling learners” includes students who are English learners, those who have disabilities, and those receiving intensive intervention through an RTI model. Although we focus on these three categories of learners, the practices that we describe and the model for grading we will present apply to *all* students who are struggling, whether or not they qualify for any type of special services.

Because most struggling students fall into one of these three categories, let’s review the criteria for a student to qualify for each and some snapshot examples. The four student snapshots presented below represent common grading challenges teachers face. We will return to these same examples throughout the book to illustrate specific applications of the grading policies and practices we will introduce. These snapshots represent students who are struggling in school for different reasons and at various grade levels. Each of these students has unique strengths as well as specific areas that need support. All are experiencing difficulties in meeting grade-level standards.

English Learners

One category of struggling learners includes students for whom English is not their primary language and who have limited skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening to English. Students classified as English learners (ELs) make up approximately 10% of the prekindergarten through 12th-grade population in the United States (Gotlieb, 2006). About two thirds of the EL population is elementary aged (Gotlieb, 2006), and, thus, many are not only developing English skills but are *dual language learners*, still learning the primary language spoken in their homes. ELs often have difficulty across all subject areas until they gain some minimal level of proficiency with the English language. The challenges these students face in language arts can persist for years. Reporting their level of proficiency relative to subject-area standards during the time they are mastering grade-level English language skills poses

major challenges for teachers. In addition, understanding the meaning of the grades assigned to ELs can be particularly confusing for their parents, who also may have limited English language skills.

SNAPSHOT: Carlos

Carlos is a fifth-grade English learner who moved to the United States from Puerto Rico five months ago. Because his family speaks very little English, he has few English language models at home. Carlos was very quiet and shy during his first few months at school but has since gained an excellent command of conversational English and has become friends with several boys in his class. Carlos's skills in conversation, however, far surpass his English language skills in the academic setting. He has great difficulty with written English and, thus, is not on grade level in any academic subject. His vocabulary is at approximately a second-grade level. Although he struggles with English, Carlos is a very dedicated and hard-working student. He does his best to complete assignments but often appears frustrated because of his difficulties in understanding the language.

Students With Disabilities

A second category of struggling learners is students who have disabilities and qualify for special education services through the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEIA, 2004). We also refer to these students as *exceptional* learners. By fifth grade, nearly 12% of students in the United States receive some form of special education services (Herring, McGrath, & Buckley, 2006). Furthermore, the amount of time students with disabilities spend in general education classes has increased dramatically in recent years (Data Accountability Center, n.d.). As a result, nearly every classroom teacher today must face the instructional challenges presented by these students, and they have little guidance or direction from special education experts. Although there is a wealth of research indicating the positive effects of including students with disabilities in regular education classrooms (e.g., Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994; Waldron, 1998), the process poses significant difficulties with regard to grading and reporting on the performance of these students. It is little wonder that reporting on the progress of students with disabilities is the IDEA requirement for individualized education

programs (IEPs) that states have the greatest difficulty meeting (Etscheidt, 2006).

The most common category of disability is specific learning disability. Learning disability (LD) is a neurological disorder that causes difficulty with academic performance. Students with LD may have trouble with any number of academic tasks, including reading, writing, organizing information, solving problems, or recalling information. A common misconception is that individuals with learning disabilities have lower than average intelligence. But individuals with learning disabilities often have IQs far above average (Horowitz, 2006). Nearly 2.5 million U.S. students receive special education for learning disability (Data Accountability Center, n.d.), meaning most teachers will have several students in every class each year who have this exceptionality.

SNAPSHOT: Janis

Janis is a 10th-grade student in an urban school district who qualifies for special education because of a specific learning disability in the area of written expression. Janis entered special education in third grade after her parents and teachers became concerned about slow progress in her reading fluency, comprehension, and writing skills. Although her reading pace is still slow, intervention has improved Janis's reading comprehension dramatically. She is still working to improve her skills in writing. When given the opportunity to express her knowledge orally, Janis performs at or above her grade level in all subject areas. Her written responses have steadily improved but currently are at approximately a seventh-grade level. Janis struggles with the mechanics of writing as well as expressing her thoughts fully and clearly when writing. Janis receives intervention targeting her writing within the general education classroom as well as in the special education classroom for one hour each day.

Some students who qualify for special education have moderate or severe disabilities and often qualify based on diagnosed medical condition(s). Such students tend to be significantly behind their classmates in several or all subject areas. Completing a traditional report card for students with significant disabilities can be especially problematic for teachers. Most consider it unfair to assign failing grades to students with moderate or severe disabilities who try hard but still are unable to demonstrate proficiency on grade-level standards.

Furthermore, legal provisions require that IEPs written for children with disabilities enable them “to achieve passing marks and advance from grade to grade” (*Board of Education v. Rowley*, 1982, pp. 187–204). From a legal perspective, a failing grade shows that appropriate educational services were *not* provided. At the same time, assigning passing marks to students who have not yet met grade-level performance standards also seems inappropriate, because it inaccurately portrays such students’ actual level of achievement. For these reasons, the parents of children with moderate to severe disabilities rarely find the report card to be informative or useful.

SNAPSHOT: Jimi

Jimi is an eighth-grade student who qualifies for special education because he has been diagnosed with Down syndrome. He enjoys being with his friends in the general education class and his special education class. Jimi spends three hours each day in the general education classroom and three hours each day in a special education classroom. In addition to academic interventions, Jimi also receives occupational therapy and speech therapy to support his fine motor, oral motor, and speech development. Those who know Jimi can understand his speech, but others have some difficulty understanding his words completely. Jimi is learning to read and currently is able to read books at the kindergarten and first-grade levels with help. He is developing the ability to write and can write his name without help. Jimi’s skills in mathematics include the ability to sort, group, and count. He is beginning to add with objects. Jimi enjoys reading and mathematics with objects, but he does not like writing.

Students Receiving Intensive Intervention

The final category of struggling learner we will discuss is students who are struggling enough to require intensive intervention, often within an RTI framework. RTI is a set of assessment and intervention practices that allows teachers to identify early those students who may have individual learning difficulties and then to address those difficulties directly with effective instructional strategies (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). For some students, a short period of intensive intervention remedies the difficulties, and no further special services are needed. For others, long-term intensive intervention is needed to maintain sufficient progress.

As they do with the other categories of struggling learners, teachers may feel confused about how to assign grades to a student who is

receiving intensive intervention. Although the student may not be meeting grade-level standards, most teachers may find it difficult to assign a failing grade to a student who is putting forth extraordinary effort and making excellent progress. How can we communicate with a single grade that a student is struggling and needs additional help but also is trying hard and making significant improvement?

SNAPSHOT: Norah

Norah is a second-grade student who is experiencing difficulty in the area of reading fluency and decoding. Despite her difficulty with fluency, her reading comprehension is excellent. Norah's school, using an RTI model, is offering extra reading instruction to Norah. She is receiving direct instruction in a small group with other struggling readers three times each week for an hour; she also receives individual direct instruction twice each week for 30 minutes. Her reading specialist is using a curriculum-based measure to track her progress weekly. Norah's reading level is about one grade level behind, and she is still considered at risk. But since she began daily reading intervention, her skills have steadily improved.

Common Solutions

Although the students like those described in the snapshots above are exceptional, they are by no means rare. As we described earlier, struggling learners are estimated to make up approximately 20% of the student population. As a result, every classroom teacher today faces the challenge of grading struggling learners. For those students who receive most or all of their supports and services in a general education classroom, the general education teacher typically takes responsibility for assigning grades on the regular report card. Specialists such as special education teachers or EL teachers typically report on progress toward IEP, EL, or other individualized goals in a separate progress report that accompanies the report card. Although this seems a logical division of labor, it leaves the general education teacher without help in deciding the appropriate grade to assign these students in each content area.

Lacking explicit recommendations on grading, most general education teachers make individual, informal grading adaptations for struggling learners (Polloway et al., 1994). In recent years, researchers have recommended a variety of such adaptations to better meet

individual students' needs (Silva, Munk, & Bursuck, 2005). The adaptations they recommend for struggling learners generally fall into one of five broad categories:

1. Grading on individualized goals
2. Grading based on improvement over past performance
3. Weighting assignments differently
4. Including indicators of effort or behavior in the grade
5. Modifying the grading scale (Silva et al., 2005).

Let's consider each of these adaptations and its specific implications.

Grading on Individualized Goals

One of the most common approaches to grading struggling learners is to assign a grade based on the student's individualized goals. These individual goals may be stated in the IEP or EL plan. For students receiving RTI, they may be less formal. Individualized goals are usually based on a team's assessment of the student's general skills and often are not directly connected to curriculum standards.

Teachers approach this type of adaptation in many different ways. An A in language arts on Jimi's report card, for example, could mean that he exceeded his IEP goal for articulation in verbal communication. Although the teacher may have followed a logical process to arrive at this grade, Jimi's parents would likely have difficulty appropriately interpreting this grade without additional explanation from the teacher.

Similarly, Norah's report card might indicate a B in language arts. For Norah, that could mean that even though she is still behind her grade level, she met the goals set for her by a reading specialist. If Norah meets those goals and on that basis receives all As and Bs in language arts, but then is referred for special education, her parents are likely to be both surprised and confused.

Grading Based on Improvement Over Past Performance

A second type of adaptation is to base the report card grade on the degree of improvement since the last reporting period. Carlos, for example, may make incredible strides in his English language acquisition from the first reporting period to the second. It is completely

understandable that his teacher would want to acknowledge that progress with a high grade in language arts, even if Carlos is not yet meeting the standards expected for his grade level. It hardly seems fair to assign a failing grade to a student showing such progress amidst difficult circumstances. But how is Carlos's family to understand what he has achieved? If grades are based on progress alone, parents are unable to know what skills their children have acquired or where they stand in terms of grade-level expectations.

Weighting Assignments Differently

Another option for adapting grades is to weight assignments differently for students who are struggling from the way they are weighted for other students in the class. Homework and assignments completed as a group, for example, might be given more weight for struggling learners, while major assessments and assignments completed individually by students in class are given less weight. For Carlos, weighting homework and group assignments more heavily could change his report card grade in science from a D to a B. His teacher may feel better about assigning the B to Carlos, especially since he is an English learner. But she also must realize that this grade is not an accurate reflection of Carlos's true performance in science. Looking at only the report card, Carlos appears to be achieving the same as the other students in his class who are actually on grade level.

Including Indicators of Behavior or Effort in the Grade

Considering a student's behavior or effort in the grade is also a common adaptation for struggling learners. But this again results in a clouding of the meaning of the grade and makes it impossible to understand what the student has actually learned and is able to do. Furthermore, because teachers vary in how much they count behavior or effort, it is possible that Jimi's A is based entirely upon his behavior, but Janis's C is calculated by weighting effort 50% and achievement 50%. The grade alone gives no meaningful information on how effort was included.

Modifying the Grading Scale

The simplest way to adapt grades for students who are struggling is to alter the grading scale mathematically so that the percentage or points required to earn each grade is lower. In Carlos's class, for

example, grading may be based on a traditional percentage scale, where 90% to 100% is an A, 80% to 89% is a B, and so forth. For Janis, however, it may be decided that because of her learning disability, a modified percentage scale is more appropriate. So for Janis, each grade cut-off is set 10% lower. With that adaptation, an A for Janis would be 80% or greater, a B 70% to 79%, a C 60% to 69%, and so forth. This adapted grading scale makes it more likely that Janis will receive a passing grade. But Janis is also a high school student, and the grades recorded on her transcript will be viewed by the colleges or places of employment to which she applies. Because the transcript will not include the grading scale that was used for each class, those who look to her transcript for information on her performance will be receiving distorted information.

Problems With Grading Adaptations

For each of the struggling learners in our examples, the above grading adaptations would all result in higher report card grades. Unfortunately, that is also the *only* outcome of adapting grades in these ways. These new grades are not necessarily accurate nor do they offer better information about a student's true academic performance. Because individual grading adaptations change the ruler by which students' performance is measured, understanding the meaning of adapted grades is impossible. Does an A mean that the student met criteria? Or does it mean the student demonstrated high effort? Maybe the A means the student participated well. The grade may be some combination of all of these factors and maybe others.

A primary reason that teachers adapt grades is they believe adjustments that make higher grades attainable will encourage struggling learners to try even harder (Silva et al., 2005). In addition, these adaptations provide students who are unable to meet grade-level standards with the opportunity to earn higher grades, which seems only fair. But in reality, these adapted grades can lead such students to believe that their grades are the result of who they are, not what they do. This, in turn, leads to *decreased* student motivation (Ring & Reetz, 2000). Grading adaptations also introduce issues of injustice to other students who, along with many of their teachers, feel that adapted grades are inappropriate and unfair (Bursuck, Munk, & Olson, 1999). Furthermore, even with these adaptations, most struggling learners continue to receive low passing grades, placing them at high risk for low self-esteem and for dropping out of school (Donahue & Zigmond, 1990).

Summary

Teachers desperately need new ways to communicate accurate information about the performance of struggling learners. They want to ensure that parents and others can understand that information and can use it for decision making. But they also want ways to provide that information that are practical and efficient and that do not create a bookkeeping nightmare for teachers.

In the next chapter we will discuss grading processes and practices that allow teachers to do just that. We will show how relatively modest changes in grading procedures can help teachers resolve many of these dilemmas. We also will show how changes in the format of the report card will solve many reporting problems and allow teachers to communicate more accurate and honest information without increasing their already burdensome record-keeping tasks.