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The Use of an Alternate Grading Rubric for Students with Significant Disabilities

By

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Action Research

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Abstract

In the past five to ten years, educators have begun to increasingly question the validity of traditional grading practices. The questioning has become especially evident in the field of special education, where educators have often struggled to find objective, consistent, and valid means of assessing students who often do not have the same academic goals as other students. Through this study, special educators will be able to consider their own grading practices, and will have access to classroom-based research that thinks outside of the box in the attempt to develop a more accurate and more reliable method of grading students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities.

Chapter 1

Statement of the problem

Traditionally, students have been graded on an A-F or A-U scale. Students who completed all or most of their work in a timely manner, did well on quizzes and tests, and presented what the teacher would define as “good behavior” in the classroom earned As and Bs. Students who failed to meet a teacher’s expectations in one or more of these areas received lower grades. In the past several years, though, this traditional method of grading has been challenged on several fronts. It has been said that it is subjective and inconsistent. One of the greatest arguments against the traditional grading system is that it is biased against students with special needs, especially those students who are identified with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities.

In the past, I have primarily graded students based upon their completion of work, their academic effort, and on meeting their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals. Students who completed their work in a timely manner, showed effort and persistence, and who worked actively towards their IEP goals earned As and Bs. Students who did not (such as students who were truant, aggressive, non-compliant, or simply did not do work) earned lower grades. I have been challenged by school staff (including administrators and supervisors) because they claimed that it was “unfair” to students in general education to have their class rank affected by our students with special needs, who would not earn high school diplomas but Certificates of Completion or attend college. The question for me then became “How can I validly assess and grade students with special needs while aligning their grades with their IEP goals?”

I chose to study this particular topic because I believed that we are doing our students a disservice by not providing them with a valid, objective grading rubric that took into

consideration their both abilities and IEP goals. Through this study, I expected that I would be able to develop a more consistent and reliable method of grading for use with students with moderate to severe disabilities.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to develop and implement an alternate grading rubric for high school students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities and to determine whether the alternate method of grading could be more objective, consistent, and/or reliable. I became motivated to take another look at this issue at this time after attending a presentation by Dr. Thomas Guskey. With the information that he presented, I was able to consider in a different light some of the grading obstacles I had previously encountered. I believed that developing an alternate method of grading was feasible and manageable, especially considering my current class size and accessibility to my students; most of my students were with me for a majority of their daily classes. This rubric could be used by special educators, especially those working in cross-categorical classes with students with moderate to severe disabilities. It was clear that traditional grading practices were not working for many. The rubric that I developed was examined to see whether it offered a reliable alternative.

Research Question

The primary question of this Action Research project was, “Will the use of an alternate grading rubric with students with moderate to severe disabilities result in grades that are more consistent, reliable, and replicable?”

Significance of the study

This topic has always been relevant and important. However, in light of increased state and federal regulations surrounding special education, as well as the increased importance of accountability, the need for accurate grading is more important than ever. This study may provide some of the direction necessary in developing a cohesive and reliable grading system for students with special needs. This study was different from other research on the topic in that it studied a specific cohort of seven students over an extended period of time and directly compared grading practices before and after implementation of revised rubric. The goal of this study was to start a discussion for educators who work with students with special needs. Ideally, in the future, special educators could access a general rubric that can be individualized and utilized to validly assess students with significant disabilities. Furthermore, the rubric developed may help general education teachers who work with students with special needs provide objective grading to these students in the least restrictive environments (LRE).

Scope

The seven research participants in this study attended a high school in a suburban Midwest city. All were identified with cognitive disability and/or Autism. Male and female participants ranged in age from 15 years old to 20 years old. All participants were Caucasian, except for one Asian-American student. Two students qualified for free/reduced lunch and school vouchers; the others did not. The students participated in the study during the 2nd and 4th quarters of the 2011-2012 school year.

Definition of terms

The following definitions are taken from the “Early Intervention and Special Education Glossary” (Rutgers, n.d.).

- **Autism:** A pervasive developmental disability (PDD) that greatly affects a student’s verbal and non-verbal communication and ability to interact with other people, and can affect academic performance.
- **Cognitive Disability:** A cognitive disability (CD) is a disability that greatly impairs a student’s cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior skills.
- **Cross-Categorical:** This includes: learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disabilities, and cognitive disabilities.
- **Individualized Education Program:** An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a legal document developed at a meeting with the IEP team that outlines a student’s goals, objectives, services, and transition plans.
- **Least Restrictive Environment:** All students with disabilities must be educated with non-disabled students to the maximum amount appropriate (as identified in a student’s IEP).
- **Special Education:** Specially designed instruction that is provided at no cost to meet the needs of a child with a disability. Special education includes instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions and in other settings.

Limitations and Assumptions

The study was somewhat limited as it included a small sample (7 students) over two quarters in a school year. Ideally, the sample size would be greater and the length of the study

would be longer. Uncontrolled variables included: student illness, student absence, new student enrollment, and attrition rate due to students leaving district. In order to provide inter-rater reliability essential to the study, only the primary teacher and case manager assessed and graded the students.

Assumptions in this study were that students would be in attendance in each graded class every day and that class periods would run on regular schedules, with classes each 51 minutes on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, and with classes on Wednesdays lasting 38 minutes.

Summary

In the past five to ten years, educators have begun increasingly to question the validity of traditional grading practices. This questioning has become especially evident in the field of special education, where educators have often struggled to find objective, consistent, and valid means of assessing students who often do not have the same academic goals as other students. Based on this study, special educators may reconsider their own grading practices in an attempt to develop a more accurate and more reliable method of grading students with moderate to severe cognitive disability.

Chapter 2

Theoretical/Historic Framework

Historically, educators have struggled with grading students with special needs. While students with special needs, especially those with moderate to severe disabilities, attend school and complete work, it has been argued that the work they complete is different than that completed by the students in regular education and therefore, that the students with disabilities should be graded differently. Often, the students with the disabilities were offered only Pass/Fail grades (instead of letter grades). The argument for this practice was that offering Pass/Fail remedied two concerns. One, the students with disabilities generally do not complete the same work so they are not graded on the same grading scale. And two, the grade point averages of the students with disabilities on a Pass/Fail grading system do not affect the class rankings of students who are in regular education and who are planning to seek higher levels of education.

There is clearly a push for change in special education grading practices and a general sense of dissatisfaction among professionals. Jung and Guskey reflect current grading practices for students with special needs do not “provide meaningful and interpretable indicators of achievement for making accurate decisions about students in special education” (2007, p. 49). Moving forward, should professionals utilize the current rubrics or should an alternate be developed? Guskey and Jung posed the question, “Is it best to report on achievement on grade level standards, for example, or should grades be adapted” (2007, p.4). Is it even possible to modify or develop a rubric that can be utilized in both special education and regular education for students with such diverse levels of abilities?

Review of the Literature

In considering the current and past research on the subject of grading practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities, there are many glaring weaknesses. There appears to be a nearly complete lack of quantitative data. There are fewer than ten studies that have any quantitative data, and the sample sizes in these studies are small (often less than 20 participants). For example, one of the key studies by Munk and Bursuk's, which was one of the few studies in recent years to "evaluate the effectiveness of a collaborative model for making grading adaptations", utilized only four participants (2001, p.211). There is a lack of long-term research, with most studies completed in a short period of time. There is a lack of research with students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. Several studies have focused on students with Learning Disabilities but very few have considered the population with the more significant disabilities. This is especially alarming considering the skyrocketing Autism rates and dramatic increases in the numbers of students in Special Education. Additionally, many of the findings in current research are difficult to replicate in alternate settings, "Few, however, have found alternatives that satisfy the diverse needs of students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and community members" (Guskey, 2001, p.20). Furthermore, the alternate grading practices that have been postulated to be effective and valid are often create an extraordinary amount of additional work for teachers and staff members. For example, Munk and Bursuk developed Personalized Grading Plans (PGPs) for each student, which would prove to be extremely time-consuming (2001, p.211). Silva, Munk, and Bursuck also outlined plans for grading adaptations, but their plans were extremely time-consuming and too individualized to generalize (2005).

There are also several gaps and inconsistencies in the findings of the previous literature. Most research was primarily theoretical with a nearly complete lack of quantitative data. There

is a general lack of long-term research. There is a need for diversity, both among researchers and in subjects. Currently, there is one primary researcher in the field, Thomas Guskey.

Although he has presented a wide array of research and theories, best practice necessitates more than one researcher. There is also a need for diversity within subjects. Future research should study both individuals with moderate to severe disabilities and individuals with mild disabilities. It is also recommended that the research consider both urban and rural populations, as these populations can present different needs and challenges.

The current study aimed to fill some of the aforementioned gaps or address any inconsistencies in current research. As some of the previous research has taken place in rather short periods of time. The current study took place over the total of an entire semester (Quarter 2 and Quarter 4 grading periods), and the study implemented an intervention over the course of 10 weeks. Many of the current studies did not address the utilization of an alternate grading rubric in regular education; this study will address implications for use of an alternate grading rubric in collaboration with students' regular education classes.

In light of the aforementioned gaps in research, this study attempted to address some of the perceived weaknesses. This study, unlike other studies, utilized a rubric that could potentially be used for most students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities, which saves staff from the extremely time-consuming task of having to organize standards and create a new set of rubric for every student. With consideration to how to create a standard rubric, in his presentation "Improving Student Learning with Standards, Assessments, and Grading", Guskey suggested using a combination of product, process, and progress criteria, and considering factors including, but not limited to, : achievement, participation, homework, punctuality, and/or effort (August 30, 2011). Furthermore, Scriffiny states, "If we base our grades on standards rather than

attendance, behavior, or extra credit (which often has nothing to do with course objectives), we can actually help students grapple with the idea of quality and walk away with a higher sense of self-sufficiency” (2008, p.73). The move towards a standards-base rubric (with grading reflective of students’ IEP goals) will be far less subjective than having every teacher in every classroom create his or her own rubric. This will help students better understand what is expected from them and what quality performances look like, and will also help them be better prepared to self-monitor and self-correct.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Design

The primary question of this study was, “Will the use of an alternate grading rubric with students with moderate to severe disabilities result in grades that are more consistent, reliable, and replicable?” The study utilized a quantitative research design using a one-group pre-test post-test design. The dependent variable was the students’ grades and the independent variable was the grading rubric. The controls that were used to ensure internal validity were: implicit use of alternate rubric; no interfering external influences and grading by only the researcher. Each class (Math, English, and Social Studies) was graded identically. The attrition rate was minimal or non-existent. The control that was used to ensure external validity was a sample that was representative of other similar populations (students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities).

The researcher examined the students’ grades during Quarter 2 of the 2011-2012 school year (when the original grading rubric was in place) and compared the grades to the Quarter 4 grades of the 2011-2012 school year (during which time the alternate grading rubric was in place). The alternate grading rubric was designed to be more consistent, reliable, and replicable, using the most current literature in the field of special education and grading. According to that literature, reviewed in Chapter 2, the use of an alternate grading rubric is essential in order to provide a valid “snapshot” of the academic abilities and performances of students with special needs.

Sample

There were seven participants in the study. They were selected for their participation in the study because of their placement in the class that piloted the alternate rubric. The results can be generalized to a similar population (students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities).

Table 1. Participant Information.

Student	Age	Grade	Gender
A	16 years old	9 th	Male
B	19 years old	11 th	Female
C	16 years old	11 th	Male
D	20 years old	12 th	Male
E	17 years old	11 th	Male
F	16 years old	9 th	Female
G	16 years old	10 th	Male

Procedures

During Quarter 2, students were graded using a rubric that had been in place for years in several of the high school CD/Autism classes in the district. Students were graded in each academic class (Math, English, and Social Studies) in which the researcher was the instructor (see Appendix A). Students were assessed in five categories in each class: attitude, behavior, commitment, done in time, and effort. Students had the opportunity to earn two points in each category for a total of 10 points per class. Students who performed proficiently in terms of product and process in a category would receive two points in a category. Students who

performed minimally in terms of product and process would receive one point in a category. And students who put forth no effort or who were unexcused from a class earned no points. Grades were entered in the paper copy of the grade book daily and were entered in the online grade book every Friday afternoon.

Students were graded during each academic class (Math, English, and Social Studies) in which the researcher was the instructor. Students received two grades per academic class per day: a product grade and a process grade (see Appendix B). There were different product criteria for each class but the same process criteria. In Math, for their product grade, students were assessed daily on: Application, Comparison, Identification, and Organization. In English, for their product grade, students were assessed daily on: Application, Composition, Connection, and Identification. In Social Studies, for their product grade, students were assessed daily on: Connection, Identification, Interpretation, and Summarization. Students could receive up to four points: four points for advanced work; three points for proficient work; two points for basic work; one point for minimal work; and no points for no work. Therefore, students could receive a score between 0 and 16 for each academic class period per day. Students also received a process score. For each class, students had the opportunity to earn 12 points. They could receive up to three points in each category: achievement, classwork, effort, and participation-three points for consistently demonstrating work, two points for sometimes demonstrating work, one point for rarely demonstrating work, and no points for not demonstrating work or if it was not present at all. In order to convert points to letter grades, the number of total points earned per class per week was divided by total possible points. The resulting number was then converted by the online gradebook to a percentage and was converted to a letter grade using the school default

grade scale (see Table 1). Grades were entered in the paper copy of the grade book daily and were entered in the online grade book every Friday.

Table 2. Percentages and Corresponding Letter Grades.

90-100%	A
80-89%	B
70-79%	C
60-69%	D
59% and below	F

Materials Used

Three materials were used during the intervention: the alternate grading rubric, an online grade book (PowerTeacher), and a traditional paper grade book.

Data Collection Plan

Two data collection instruments were used: Quarter 2 grading rubric and Quarter 4 grading rubric. Both rubrics were designed by the researcher. Grades were collected during Quarter 2 and Quarter 4 and were recorded both in a paper version of a class record book and on PowerSchool (district online gradebook). The traditional rubric was utilized during the entire second quarter and the alternate rubric was implemented and utilized during the entire fourth quarter. The Quarter 2 and Quarter 4 rubrics and grades were compared at the end of the school year. The Quarter 2 and Quarter 4 class means, standard deviations, and t-test results were also compared.

Chapter 4

Results

The primary question for this research study was “Will the use of an alternate grading rubric with students with moderate to severe disabilities result in grades that are more consistent, reliable, and replicable?”. The assumption was that, after the implementation of the alternate grading rubric, grades would not necessarily be higher or lower, but that they would be less subjective and more reliable and replicable. Mean percentages were compiled for the seven participants enrolled in the study. When comparing the class average percentages, there was a small decrease in both English and Math from Quarter 2 and Quarter 4. There was a small increase in the class average percentage for Social Studies from Quarter 2 to Quarter 4. See Table 1 for average individual and class percentages for all participants.

Table 3. Mean Percentages for All Study Participants.

Class	Quarter 2	Quarter 4	Class Mean	Class Standard Deviation	t-test (p<0.05 sig.)
English	61% (Student A) 89% (Student C) 83% (Student D) 90% (Student F) 83% (Student G)	50% (Student A) 88% (Student C) 85% (Student D) 84% (Student F) 89% (Student G)	Quarter 2: 81.2% Quarter 4: 79.2%	Quarter 2: 11.8 Quarter 4: 16.5	0.57
Social Studies	60% (Student A) 75% (Student B) 89% (Student C) 81% (Student D) 95% (Student E) 85% (Student F) 82% (Student G)	50% (Student A) 85% (Student B) 88% (Student C) 87% (Student D) 94% (Student E) 83% (Student F) 83% (Student G)	Quarter 2: 81% Quarter 4: 81.4%	Quarter 2: 11.2 Quarter 4: 14.4	0.86
Math	62% (Student A) 88% (Student C) 85% (Student D) 91% (Student E) 87% (Student F) 83% (Student G)	50% (Student A) 86% (Student C) 84% (Student D) 88% (Student E) 86% (Student F) 85% (Student G)	Quarter 2: 82.67% Quarter 4: 79.83%	Quarter 2: 10.5 Quarter 4: 14.7	0.21

The difference in the grades is statistically not significant, as evidenced by the t-test results. However, the data imply that if there sound grading practices are in place, it does not matter which rubric is used.

The findings have provided evidence that it is not necessarily the rubric that determines the grades but the grading practices themselves. Although there was a different rubric used during Quarter 2 and Quarter 4, the mean class grades themselves did not greatly differ. However, the Quarter 4 grades were more reliable and easily replicable because of the alternate rubric that was utilized. Additionally, the second rubric was possibly, but not for certainly, less accurate at assessing the students than the first since the Standard Deviation is a bit higher, but a much larger sample size is needed in order to confirm this.

The mean grades of Quarter 2 and Quarter 4 are significant in their similarity. The data implies that, if there are sound grading practices, the rubric is inconsequential. The findings have implied that the grades from Quarter 4 are more replicable because of the use of the rubric.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations

Results & Interpretation

After the implementation of the alternate rubric, there was not a statistically significant difference between the grades reported in the 2nd Quarter and grades reported in the 4th quarter. However, the results were significant in that they showed that, in the presence of sound grading practices, the grading rubric itself is secondary. If a teacher has sound and objective grading practices in place, then a grading rubric will not affect students' grades. However, the use of a valid grading rubric is still essential in education in order to ensure that students' grades remain consistent in different classes.

The one identified source of important source of extraneous variables that possibly played a role in this study was the reported health issues and frequent absences of one of the participants. These absences greatly impacted the participants' grades and therefore, altered the mean scores of the grades for the classes. General participant illness also potential played a role in the study. The participants often presented with cold and flu-like symptoms, and their academic performance was potentially compromised by their illness.

The alternate grading rubric was designed to be less biased and more objective than traditional grading rubrics. However, there still exists some subjectivity in the grading process. When assessing students based on their perceived performance and IEP goals, it is nearly impossible in the traditional classroom setting to have an unbiased, non-objective grading system.

The mean grades from Quarter 2 were very similar to the mean grades from Quarter 4. Although a different rubric was used, there was not a statistically significant difference in the mean scores from the two quarters.

Implications

This research provides the framework for the development of an alternate grading rubric that could be used to grade students in academic special education classes. This research is also a starting point for special education and general education. Continued and increased collaboration between general and special education teachers is essential to ensuring that students who access least-restrictive environments are also provided with valid and reliable grades that accurately reflect their abilities and their progress towards their IEP goals. As previously indicated, if there are sound grading practices, then the rubric itself does not matter as much. Therefore, the best practice focus in terms of grading may need to shift from developing a rubric-based grading system to helping educators develop sound grading practices. However, at this point, we need to ensure that teachers are “on the same page” in terms of grading, and implementing a universal rubric would be a start to ensuring this.

This study contributes to the small sample of current research in the field of alternate grading and special education. While a small sample size was used in this study, it was an important study nonetheless as it was the first to use the specific participant population (moderate to severe disabilities).

Recommendations

Students with disabilities have also been graded on attendance and behavior. While some view this as a practical practice to a certain extent (as many students with special needs have IEP goals related to behavior and/or attendance) these two components should not be the primary basis for their grades. Therefore, this default grading system is no longer considered as the best option for three reasons. First, there has been increased focus on standards-based grading, in both regular education and special education. Traditional grading is now often viewed as too subjective and therefore, not as valid or reliable. Second, now, more than ever, students with special needs are being included in the general education curriculum (Jung & Guskey, 2007, p.48). And third, students with special needs deserve to be assessed on what they know and what they have learned. It has been widely reported that teacher standards for students with disabilities have been too low (Voltz & Fore, 2006), and simply assessing students' attendance and behaviors does not assess what they have learned.

It is evident that we need to move towards standards-based grading. Although it would be very difficult to have a grading rubric and alternate grading system designed that would be a "one size fits all" it would be ideal to have a grading template for educators to use as a starting point. Although we may never find the perfect rubric, educators need to utilize the same rubric in an attempt to increase validity and reliability.

In considering the lack of current research in the field of alternate grading, further studies are recommended. In order to ensure validity, it is imperative that future research include far larger sample sizes. For example, instead of using one class as was used in this study, it is suggested that future research utilize an entire district for its sample size; a greater sample size is necessary

in order to produce data that is statistically significant. It is also recommended that future studies incorporate larger, more diverse populations such as urban, suburban, and rural populations.

Future studies should also include populations with students with varying disabilities, such as emotional-behavioral disorders. Moreover, it is imperative that there be collaboration between regular education and special education teachers in order to facilitate success when working with students in least-restrictive environments.

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Appendix A
Grading Rubric
Quarter 2
2011-2012
Product/Process

Attitude	2 points/class
Behavior	2 points/class
Commitment	2 points/class
Done in Time	2 points/class
Effort	2 points/class

Product/Process Rubric

Proficient	2 points
Minimal	1 point
Not present	0 points

Appendix B

Quarter 4

2011-2012

Product

English

Application	4 points/class
Composition	4 points/class
Connection	4 points/class
Identification	4 points/class

Social Studies

Connection	4 points/class
Identification	4 points/class
Interpretation	4 points/class
Summarization	4 points/class

Math

Application	4 points/class
Comparison	4 points/class
Identification	4 points/class
Organization	4 points/class

Product Rubric

Advanced	4 points
Proficient	3 points
Basic	2 points
Minimal	1 point
Not present	0 points

Process

Achievement	3 points/class
Classwork	3 points/class
Effort	3 points/class
Participation	3 points/class

Process Rubric

Consistently	3 points
Sometimes	2 points
Rarely	1 point
Not present	0 points