

**“It Wasn’t Fair!” Educators’ Recollections of  
Their Experiences as Students with Grading**

Thomas R. Guskey  
College of Education  
University of Kentucky  
Lexington, KY 40506  
Phone: 859/257-8666  
E-mail: GUSKEY@UKY.EDU

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Thomas R. Guskey  
University of Kentucky

## **Abstract**

Few educators receive any formal training in assigning marks to students’ work or in grading students’ performance and achievement. As a result, when required to do so, most simply reflect back on what was done to them and then, based on those experiences, try to develop policies and practices that they believe are fair, equitable, defensible, and educationally sound. Their personal experiences as students, therefore, may have significant influence on the policies and practices they choose to employ.

This study explored educators’ recollections of their experiences as students with grading. Data were gathered through questionnaires administered to 320 elementary, middle, and secondary school educators. Questionnaire items asked respondents to describe their most positive and most negative experiences with grading when they were students, and to explain the reasons for their feelings. Content analyses of questionnaire responses revealed that nearly 70% of educators at all levels indicated their most negative experiences occurred in college or university level classes. In the vast majority of those cases, the recalled experience related to perceptions of unfair treatment or personal bias on the part of their professors or instructors. No differences were identified based on respondents’ experience, gender, or current assignment.

Positive experiences were more evenly dispersed across elementary, secondary, and college level classes, showing that the high proportion of negative experiences in college or university classes was not be explained simply because they occurred most recently.

Respondents' descriptions of positive experiences typically related to extremely challenging learning tasks assigned by the teacher that required exceptional effort. The teacher or professor then offered personalized guidance and assistance that resulted in a high level of performance or outstanding achievement.

Although the specific influence of these experiences on educators' current grading and reporting practices remains unknown, these results offer clear insights into the factors that contribute to educators' personal perspectives on grading and reporting. In addition, they provide specific implications for reform efforts in grading policies and practices.

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The grades teachers and professors assign to students’ work and performance have long been identified by those in the measurement community as prime examples of unreliable measurement (Brookhart, 1993; Stiggins, Frisbie, & Griswold, 1989). What one teacher considers in determining students’ grades may differ greatly from the criteria used by another teacher (Cizek, Fitzgerald, & Rachor, 1996; McMillan, Workman, & Myran, 1999). Even in schools and colleges where established grading policies offer guidelines for assigning grades, significant variation remains in the grading practices of individual teachers and professors (Brookhart, 1994, McMillan, 2001).

One reason for this variation is that few teachers or professors receive any formal training on grading and reporting. Most have scant knowledge of the various grading methods, the advantages and disadvantages of each, or the effects of different grading policies (Stiggins, 1993, 1999). As a result, the majority of teachers and professors rely on traditional grading practices, often replicating what they experienced as students (Frary, Cross, & Weber, 1993; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Truog & Friedman, 1996). Because personal recollections of these experiences vary among teachers and professors, so too do the practices and policies they employ.

Despite their questionable psychometric properties, however, grades have a powerful influence on students. Grades reflect the teacher or professors’ judgment of students’ level of achievement and, ideally, provide students with information they can use to improve their performance. But grades also have been shown to have strong and lasting effects on students’ attitudes, behaviors, and motivation to learn (Brookhart, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to investigate these lasting effects as viewed through the eyes of teachers and school administrators. Specifically, it sought to determine the nature of elementary and secondary educators' most positive and most negative experiences with grades, recalled from their days as students, and why these experiences are so perceived. Because educators' personal experiences as students with grading may influence the grading practices and policies they advocate or use, a better understanding of those experiences is essential to our knowledge of the nature of that relationship. Furthermore, such knowledge may be vital in efforts designed to improve the grading practices and policies of educators.

### **Methods**

The data for this investigation were gathered from 325 public school educators from three different U.S. states who took part in summer professional development institutes. Each of these institutes was sponsored by a regional education service center and enrolled comparable numbers of administrators and teachers who generally attended in school or school district teams. Each institute lasted one day and involved participants in a series of activities on the topic of "Improving Classroom Assessment, Grading, and Reporting Practices." Institute morning presentations and discussions described how school leaders and teachers can use the results from both large-scale assessments and regular classroom assessments to identify student learning problems and then plan specific strategies for improvement. In the afternoon, school leaders and teachers engaged in discussions and other activities designed to illustrate the consequences of various grading and reporting techniques, and procedures for developing more effective grading and reporting policies and practices.

The schools and school districts from which these educators came varied widely in size and in the social, demographic, and economic characteristics of their student populations. Twenty-seven percent reported coming from large school districts in urban centers, 51% came from suburban school districts, and 22% came from school districts serving primarily rural communities. For reasons of confidentiality, participants were not asked to identify their race or ethnicity, nor the level of affluence or poverty among the students in the school districts in which they worked.

The total sample included 29 district level administrators and program directors, 45 principals and assistant principals, 23 counselors and special educators, 114 elementary teachers, 42 middle school teachers, and 67 secondary school teachers. The average years of teaching experience was approximately 12.5 years, with administrators having slightly more experience than teachers. Male and females were fairly evenly represented in all groups, with the exception of elementary teachers, who were predominately female (91 versus 23). Five educators (less than 2%) failed to provide complete information and could not be included in the analysis.

All of the educators included in the study completed the same, one-page “Grading Experience Questionnaire” before the seminar began. This was done to insure the information presented as part of the seminar did not taint their perceptions. The questionnaire asked respondents to record their name (optional), their years of experience in education, and their current position (District Level Administrator, Program Director/Coordinator, Principal or Assistant Principal, Counselor, Special Educator, or Teacher [Primary Grades K-2, Elementary Grades 3-5, Middle Grades 6-8, Secondary Grades 9-12]). Next respondents were asked to answer four questions based on their experiences “*as a student.*” The four questions included:

1. What was your most *negative* experience with grades or grading?
2. Why was it so *negative*?
3. What was your most *positive* experience with grades or grading?
4. Why was it so *positive*?

Respondents also were asked to indicate the grade level and the subject area in which these experiences occurred.

Questionnaire responses were analyzed in two stages. First, tallies were computed and tested through chi-square procedures to determine if differences existed among educators in various positions and with varying levels of experience (1-5 years, 6-10 years, 10-20 years, and 21+ years). Specifically, tests were conducted for differences in the education level (elementary, secondary, or college), and subject area (language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, or other) of these educators most negative and most positive grading experiences. Second, responses of these educators to the four open-ended questions were analyzed using standard content-analysis procedures. Three different raters read each answer and then grouped responses into broad, content-specific categories using key words, expressions, or experiences. When discrepancies arose, these were discussed until consensus was reached. Overall inter-rater agreement was .90.

## **Results**

The results from the chi-square analyses showed no statistical differences among any of the characteristics of the educators included in the sample. In other words, there were no significant differences among educators from different types of school districts (urban, suburban,

or rural), with different levels of experience, or with different responsibilities (administrative versus teaching) in terms of the education level or subject area of their most negative or most positive experiences regarding grades. Although these experiences varied widely, this variation appeared not to be attributable to any of these characteristics.

Tallies of educators' responses overall, however, yielded unexpected consistency. Approximately 68% of educators in all groups reported that their most negative experiences occurred in college or university level classes. Again, no differences among educators in various professional positions or with different levels of experience proved to be statistically significant. The remaining 32% of responses were divided fairly evenly among elementary and secondary level classes. These negative experiences also were equally dispersed across subject areas.

Content analyses of the open-ended questions revealed that the vast majority of educators' negative experiences in college and university classes related to what they considered to be unfair treatment or personal bias on the part of their professors or instructors. Many described tests or assessments covering material that had not been discussed in class. One teacher, for example, wrote:

“In our physics class, we never knew what the expectations were on any test. Often problems were used that required formulas that we never learned in class or in labs. I received the lowest grade I got in any of my college courses, even with a tremendous amount of work.”

Other educators described arbitrary standards for grades, harsh criticism of their work without suggestions for improvement, or high scores receiving low grades because of “grading on the curve.” An administrator recalled:

“Once, in a sociology class, I spent a lot of time preparing for a test, got a 92%, and felt assured of an ‘A.’ But in the next class, I found out that my grade was a ‘B’ because the professor graded on the curve and others in the class did somewhat better than I. It wasn’t fair. I knew the material and deserved an ‘A.’ It shouldn’t have mattered how everyone else did.”

Still others recalled receiving low grades on group projects because of classmates’ poor efforts.

Said one teacher:

“I worked my butt off for a group project we had in an education class, but my teammates did nothing. We all got ‘Cs.’ How fair was that?”

Some educators described their professors’ preferential treatment of certain “favored” students, while others told of professors’ unconcealed disapproval of students who expressed alternative points of view. An administrator explained:

“It was clear from the start that she wanted everyone to agree with her point of view. She smiled when her own words were fed back to her, but would get visibly angry if

someone expressed another opinion. I should have played her game, but I was young and arrogant – and paid for my arrogance with a low grade.”

Educators who described elementary or secondary school negative experiences typically focused on feelings of personal embarrassment. Negative experiences in the elementary grades frequently related to public humiliation. One teacher related:

“The teacher crumpled up my picture of an elephant in an art class because I hadn’t drawn it according to her model which was comprised of circles. I started to cry. My picture was good, but she was angry because I didn’t draw it her way.”

Another teacher reported:

“I had been ill the night before, was unprepared for a quiz, and did very poorly. After correcting the quiz, we had to announce our score when the teacher called our name. I got the lowest grade in the class and felt embarrassed already. But then the teacher asked who in the class would like to volunteer to help me, because ‘It’s clear Susan needs a lot of help!’ I felt like the class idiot!

Others related a parent’s overt disappointment or unsympathetic reaction to a poor grade, often compounded by the teachers’ requirement to have parents sign the paper or assessment to which the low grade was assigned. A teacher said:

“Because everyone did so poorly on a test, the teacher made us take it home and have our parents sign it. My dad got so angry and said I was lazy. But the teacher hadn’t explained any of what was on the test. You would think that having so many students fail might have given her a clue.”

Secondary school experiences more often described a teacher’s public announcement of a student’s poor performance. One teacher related:

“She used my paper as an example to the entire class of how not to write an essay! I never felt smaller in my life.”

Tallies of most positive experiences were much more evenly divided across college and university (37%), secondary (38%), and elementary (25%) classes. This challenged the interpretation that the majority of negative experiences related to college or university classes simply because they were the most recent and, therefore, easiest to recall. Like recollections of negative experiences, the relationship between these levels and educators’ current positions and years of experience were not statistically significant. Positive experiences also were equally dispersed across classes in different subject areas.

Content analyses of educators’ descriptions of their most positive experiences showed striking consistency as well. Nearly all educators described achieving success on an especially challenging learning task assigned by the teacher that required exceptional effort. Oddly, few educators described this task as personally meaningful or as particularly interesting or exciting. Instead, they focused in their descriptions on the clear directions provided by their teacher or

professor for the project or task, along with very specific expectations for excellent performance.

One teacher wrote:

“I wrote a lengthy essay in an Art Appreciation class, which I took as an elective. My first draft was pretty poor. But the teacher sat down with every one in the class, went through our papers in detail, and told us specifically how to make them better. She told me that she liked my point of view. I worked really hard revising the paper because I didn’t want to disappoint her. I got an ‘A’ – my first ever in a major writing project – and she praised my writing skills and creativity. It encouraged me to continue writing and to have confidence in my abilities.”

The vast majority of educators also described teachers or professors who provided special encouragement and assistance to ensure student success. One school administrator responded:

“He expected a lot, but showed us how to meet his expectations. You never had to guess about what he wanted. I never worked harder and never felt such a sense of accomplishment in the end.”

The combination of high expectations coupled with specific directions for achieving excellence was evident in nearly all responses. Another teacher described:

“You never had to guess about what she expected. She made it clear from the start. And she never accepted anything that wasn’t done according to her specifications. Time and again she reminded us, ‘If it’s not done well, it’s not done!’”

Many educators described how the positive experience had life-long influence. Several even indicated that the experience was a major factor in their decision to go into teaching. One teacher expressed:

“I was bright, but never really challenged in school. I got by without doing much. Mr. X pulled me aside and told me that my work was mediocre at best. He said he knew I could do better. At first I let it go, but he kept after me, always pointing out where I started well but never followed through. Then one time I thought “I’ll show him.” I worked really hard on a class project and got the highest grade in the class. Mr. X said only that he knew I could do it, and would expect the same from then on. It changed me and showed me the power of teachers. I knew then that I wanted to be a teacher.”

The perceptions of these educators, both positive and negative, were clearly related to specific actions taken by their teachers or professors. For better and for worse, teachers and professors obviously have powerful influence on their students’ perceptions of grading, what grades mean, and what impact they will have. Teachers at all levels need to recognize this powerful influence and then, with knowledge of appropriate applications, use that influence well.

## Summary and Conclusions

Without specific training on grading and reporting, educators draw primarily from their own experiences as students in determining the grading policies and practices they employ (Frisbie & Waltman, 1992; Stiggins, 2005). For this reason, understanding the nature of those experiences can provide important insights for efforts designed to improve grading and reporting.

The evidence gathered in this study shows first the importance of clarity and fairness in establishing grading policies, as well as avoidance of practices that may be perceived as belittling or embarrassing to students. Educators' recollections of their most negative grading experiences, some recalled from over 20 years ago, relate primarily to perceptions of unfairness or bias on the part of their teachers or professors. At all levels of education, therefore, educators must strive to ensure that the procedures they use in assigning grades or marks to students' work are explicit, clear, and as objective as possible. They also must work hard to guarantee that their personal opinions and unconscious biases do not influence their grading practices. Above all, teachers and professors must base their grading policies and practices on criteria that will be judged by all to be just, equitable, and unprejudiced.

In addition, educators must be sensitive to situations that could be potentially embarrassing to students. Grades or marks that serve to inform, particularly when accompanied by specific suggestions for improvement, have far greater educational value than those that diminish students' sense of self-worth or reduce their self-confidence. While these experiences may seem relatively minor from the teacher or professor's perspective, the results of this study show that they often have lifelong consequences for students.

Second, these results also show the importance of engaging students in challenging learning tasks accompanied by specific and personalized guidance and direction for success from their teachers and professors. The positive benefits of such success, and the critical role of the teacher or professor's assistance in attaining that success, also appears to have profound and lasting effects. Reform initiatives that focus on these issues will help make grading and reporting practices more educationally sound and more beneficial to students.

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