

## Grading Policies and Practices in Canada: A Landscape Study

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### Abstract

Given the longstanding role of grades in education, and their increased use for high-stakes decisions including student mobility, admission, selection, and accountability, this paper presents a systematic review of grading policies across all 10 Canadian provinces and 3 territories. In total, 23 policies were inductively analyzed for their articulation of (a) the purposes of grades, (b) the methods used for generating grades, and (c) the relationship between grading and formative assessment. Our analysis revealed significant areas of consistency across Canada while also highlighting important areas of variation. Implications of these findings on the value and use of grades within and across educational systems in Canada are discussed.

*Keywords:* grading practices, grading policies, summative assessment, evaluation, Canadian education

Grading has been a longstanding tradition in education. Since as early as 1792, when William Farish a tutor at Cambridge University established grading as a quantitative method for efficiently teaching and tracking students, grades have become the dominant process for summing and communicating student achievement (Brookhart, 2013). Within contemporary standards-based systems of education, evident particularly across many jurisdictions in Canada and elsewhere, grades are increasingly used to make public statements about student learning in relation to common curriculum standards and performance expectations (Brookhart et al., 2016). Specifically, grades are evaluative statements about student learning and achievement based on summative forms of assessments. Previous research into grading has focused primarily on the reliability of teachers' grades (Brimi, 2011; Brookhart, 2015) and the predictive and concurrent validity of grades in relation to other achievement measures (Thorsen, 2014). One consistent finding across grading literature is that teachers have variable grading practices that involve differentially weighting student achievement evidence in relation to non-achievement factors such as student effort, work habits, previous achievement, parental expectations, and grade consequences (Brookhart et al., 2016; McMillan & Nash, 2000; Randall & Engelhard, 2010; Stiggins, Frisbie, & Griswold, 1989).

Grading policies have also been identified as a primary external factor influencing teachers' grading decisions (McMillan & Nash, 2000). Previous studies have shown that teachers' understanding of the meaning and value of grades are influenced by local and government grading policies, especially in standards-based systems of education (Noonan, 2002; Simon et al., 2010; Stiggins et al., 1989). Policy-based grading has also been suggested as a means to reduce the variability in teachers' grading practices leading to more consistent grade decisions. Poli-

cy-based grading means that governing bodies make explicit guidelines and/or practices to direct teachers' grading practices through policy decisions and documentation. The presence of assessment policies in each of Canada's provinces and territories suggest that teachers operate within a policy-based approach to grading across the country.

Within the Canadian context, each province and territory has adopted a standards-based framework of education, with grades serving as the primary and most consistent metric for reporting student achievement (Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2008). However, due to the provincial/territorial responsibility of education throughout Canada, the grading policies across the country vary. The purpose of this study is to provide comprehensive information on the content and scope of grading policies across the 13 standards-based systems of education in Canada. This study considers the degree of variation in grading policies and the consistency of grades across the country. While grading falls within the broad framework of evaluation, our interest in this paper is on the specific policies directed towards the practice of grading – the construction and communication of grades about student learning and achievement. Understanding teacher generated grade consistency has become increasingly important given the growing use of grades for high-stakes decisions including student mobility, admission, selection, and accountability (Brookhart et al., 2016). Through a document analysis of ministry-based policies from all 10 provinces and 3 territories in Canada, grading policies were analyzed for their (a) articulated purpose of grading, (b) method of grade construction, and (c) grade composition. The results of this systematic review identified key grading policy directives across Canada, with areas of consistency and inconsistency. The paper concludes with future directions for grading research, policy development, and practice.

### **Education in Canada**

Canada's education system is publically funded and accessible to all children up to Grade 12, with compulsory elementary schooling typically beginning in Kindergarten (ages 4-5). Education in Canada is decentralized with each of the 10 provinces and 3 territories responsible for the educational system within its jurisdiction (Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2008). Each of the 13 systems has its own educational policies governing educational standards, curriculum, classroom practices, assessment, and grading; however, the nature of these policies is typically not prescriptive, leaving a range of possible interpretations for guiding assessment across schools.

Unlike other countries, there is no national policy that establishes a country-wide curriculum for students and teachers in Canada (e.g., Common Core Standards in the United States). Instead, each provincial and territorial ministry of education assumes responsibility for overseeing compulsory elementary and secondary schooling through smaller bodies called boards or districts of education (Volante & Jaafar, 2008). As such, grading policies are established by ministries of education with enactment occurring through local school boards and districts under the professional discretion of educational leaders (i.e., superintendents, principals, and other school district administrators) (Scott, 1995).

In general, the education system in Canada is one that is predicated on standards and accountability. Standards-based grades are assigned based on a criterion-referenced framework where students' performance is compared to established standards, which differs from norm-referenced grading where the purpose is to rank students or from self-referenced grading where the purpose is to support individual learning. Non-achievement factors such as learning skills (e.g., organization, collaboration, self-regulation) are reported separately from content grades (Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011). In upper years, a portion of students' course grades can be based on provincial testing, although this practice is highly variable across the country (Klinger, DeLuca, & Miller, 2008). Concurrently with this emphasis on standards and accountability, in recent years, educational assessment policies throughout Canada have also expanded to include

explicit mandates towards assessment for learning (AFL). These mandates emphasize the use of formative assessments to provide ongoing feedback to support student learning in addition to the continued use of summative assessments for standards-based grading purposes and large-scale assessments for accountability purposes.

## **Grading**

Grading is a complex evaluative practice that requires teachers to make judgments about student learning. In Canada, grades are generally intended to communicate student achievement in relation to provincial educational standards (Volante & Jaafar, 2008). Across Canada, teachers are expected to follow provincial policies in generating student grades (i.e., policy-based grading; Noonan, 2002). However, due to the decentralized nature of educational policies in Canada and the contextual, socio-cultural, and personal conditions that shape teachers' grading decisions (Brookhart, 2003, 2013; McMillan & Nash, 2000; Randall & Engelhard, 2010), research suggests significant variability in grading practices from one jurisdiction to the next (Simon et al., 2010). Previous research on grading as discussed below, largely conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom, suggests that three key considerations influence the consistency of grades across contexts: (a) The evidence used to construct grades, (b) The reporting system for grades, and (c) The relationship between formative assessments and grades.

### *The Evidence Used to Construct Grades*

Although achievement is the primary factor considered in grading across Canadian contexts, research has shown that teachers also value non-achievement factors when constructing grades. McMillan (2008) suggested that one of the most difficult issues in grading is how to deal with non-achievement factors such as effort, work habits, and motivation. Consistent with McMillan and Nash's (2000) work, these non-achievement factors are a major influence on grading practices because they are traits that teachers cultivate and regard as important for student achievement. In an examination of how US English teachers attempted to assign fair grades, Zoeckler (2007) found that teachers' perceptions of student effort influenced their grading decisions. Similarly, in a survey of 516 teachers in the USA, Randall and Engelhard (2010) found that teachers generally followed district grading policies by assigning grades based primarily on achievement. However, in some cases, they found that teachers tended to value other characteristics such as ability, behavior, and effort, especially in borderline grade decisions. In the Canadian context, Simon, Chitpin, and Yahya (2010) found that pre-service teachers consistently based grading decisions in part on non-achievement factors. Including non-achievement factors in grade decisions has been a critiqued practice as it undermines the reliability and validity of classroom grades by confounding achievement measures with learning skills.

Increased professional development in the area of assessment and grading supports teachers' understandings of grading but does not appear to fully reduce the influence of non-achievement factors in grade decisions. For example, McMunn, McColskey, and Butler (2004) examined 241 Florida teachers' grading practices after completing a professional development program in assessment. In total, 75% of teachers reported that they assigned grades based on achievement of standards rather than on non-achievement factors such as motivation. However, observations in classrooms and examination of artifacts indicated that many teachers did not actually generate grades solely based on student achievement and that considerations for non-achievement factors influenced teachers' decisions differently across the group. Accordingly, research indicates that teachers use evidence from both achievement and non-achievement factors when generating grades, despite policies that favour achievement-based grading (McMillan, 2008; McMunn et al., 2004; Simon et al., 2010).

### *The Reporting System for Grades*

Variation typically exists in how grades are reported across jurisdictions. Despite different options for reporting student achievement, it seems that providing a final grade for each subject from Grades 1-12 is the most frequently used reporting method (Bailey & McTighe, 1996). However, a variety of scales have been used to report grades. For example, some schools and districts use percentages, while others use levels and letters. There are also differences in reporting scales between grades, with primary and junior divisions typically using a different scale compared to intermediate and senior grade divisions. While conversion tables exist that correlate one scale to another, there is variability within these tables whereby a grade in one system may be considered differently in another (e.g., an A might have a range of 90-100% in one system but 80-100% in another) (Bailey & McTighe, 1996; Brookhart, 2013; Brookhart et al., 2016).

Waltman and Frisbie (1994) investigated parents' interpretation of grades and discovered an overwhelming messiness of school-to-home grade communication, and an inconsistency between teachers and parents' interpretations of grades. According to Friedman and Frisbie (1995), who conducted a seminal content analysis of report cards in Wisconsin, the variation in characteristics of report cards influenced the validity of grading information. Furthermore, few of the report cards in their sample contained purpose statements explaining what grades were intended to mean, leaving their interpretation open to the reader. Between variability in grading scales and the interpretability of report cards, how grades are reported can lead to significant inconsistencies in the understanding and comparability of grades across schools and systems.

### *The Relationship between Formative Assessments and Grades*

Research suggests that teachers often consider a variety of assessment evidence when assigning grades, therefore combining various judgments on student achievement (Brookhart, 1993). Specifically, early diagnostic and ongoing formative assessment evidence has been used to determine a students' summative grade, despite the fact that the primary definition of diagnostic and formative assessment is that it is not used for grading purposes (Bennett, 2011; Brookhart, 2001). Formative assessment involves using assessment practices to develop or improve educational processes and to support and monitor student learning. Hence, formative assessment is intended to inform teaching during learning periods. Recently, conceptions of formative assessment have expanded to involve students in ongoing assessment processes and encourage them to use assessment information to support their own learning. AFL and Assessment *as* Learning (AAL) have emerged as newer concepts related to formative assessment. AFL involves a participatory approach to monitoring student learning via self-, peer-, and teacher-assessments in relation to learning goals and success criteria (Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Popham, 2013; Willis, 2010). AAL focuses discretely on supporting students' metacognitive development through ongoing assessment practice (Earl, 2013).

While these assessment purposes appear neat and tidy in theory, in practice, research shows that formative and summative assessments may not be as distinct. As recognized by Brookhart (2001) and Bennett (2011), the terms *formative* and *summative* are not used consistently in the literature or in practical classroom contexts. For example, Brookhart (2001) demonstrated how 50 students in high school English and Anatomy classes used feedback from a summative assessment formatively to support their continued learning. Specifically, she found that students "do not make neat distinctions between formative and summative assessment, but use assessment in a variety of integrated ways, including some that may be categorized as 'formative with a hint of summative' and 'summative with a bit of formative'" (Brookhart, 2001, p. 168). Similarly, in establishing student grades, teachers often rely on formative assessment data despite its primary formative function to inform teaching and learning, not summate learning. For example, it is not uncommon for teachers to use formative quiz grades when generating their summative report

card grades. The blurring of formative and summative assessments has a significant impact on the way grades are constructed and the consistency of grading practices across teachers (DeLuca & Volante, 2016). To date, few studies have examined how grading policies direct teachers to value and use formative assessment information when constructing summative assessments, and how formative assessments are related to teachers' actual grading practices.

## Methods

This policy analysis study used a systematic review process to identify primary, government-based grading documents across Canada (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). All data collected for this study came from publically accessible policy documents on websites affiliated with Canadian ministries of education including 10 provinces and three territories. The following key terms were used to identify relevant policies through the MOEs' websites: *grading, assessment policies, summative assessment, and evaluation*. A total of 23 grading and assessment policy documents from Canadian provinces and territories were included in the study. Some policy documents did not include pertinent information regarding grading practices therefore, data was not extracted from all of the policies reviewed. Also, if school board grading policies were referenced on the ministry websites, they were included in the analyses. Please see Appendix A (Table A1) for a list of the policy documents reviewed and province/territory abbreviations.

Qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2014) was used to analyze the policy documents within three broad categories: (a) purposes of grades, (b) methods for generating grades, and (c) grading in relation to formative assessment. Within these categories, we deductively analyzed the documents to identify emergent codes (Patton, 2014). The first category, purposes of grades, included identifying the main purpose of grading as explicitly stated in policy documents (e.g., feedback, sorting students, motivating learning, etc.). We also included the extent to which grading fairness, justice, or equity was discussed throughout the policies. Within the methods for generating grades category, our analysis focused on the methods used to calculate grades, the evidence that contributes to grades, and the stakeholders involved in the grading process. Specifically, we examined how documents described the function of both achievement and non-achievement factors in grade construction, type of assessment data (e.g., portfolios, tests), and the influence of large-scale assessments. In this category, we also considered how grades were reported (i.e., reporting periods, distribution/composition of grades, scale systems). The final category, grading in relation to formative assessment, focused on (a) how policies articulated the distinction between formative and summative assessment, and (b) terminology used throughout the document to articulate the role of grades in relation to other assessment purposes.

## Results

The results of our systematic review of Canadian grading policies are presented in relation to three categories: (a) purposes of grades, (b) methods for generating grades, and (c) grading in relation to formative assessment. Within each of these categories, general trends and specific examples from provincial/territorial policy documents are described. Table 1 presents an analysis summary by province related to each category.

### *Purposes of Grades*

Our analysis of grading policies identified four main purposes of grading: (a) monitoring and reporting, (b) feedback, (c) accountability, and (d) sorting. Specifically, in terms of summative assessment, monitoring and reporting student learning and achievement was the most common reason for assigning grades. As articulated in the QC document, "evaluation is the process whereby a judgment is made on a student's learning on the basis of information gathered, analyzed and interpreted, for the purpose of making pedagogical and administrative decisions" (QC MEQ,

2003, p. 2). Some provinces (i.e., SK, QC, PE, YT, NU) went further to specify that this monitoring would be the responsibility of both teachers and students. In terms of teachers, all provinces emphasized that summative assessment is used to “assist teachers in meeting individual needs” (SK Education, 1991, p. 2), by integrating assessments that encourage the holistic development of students, and provide them with “multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways and contexts” (NL Department of Education, 2013, p. 11). In terms of students, all provinces stressed the importance of developing skills to monitor their own progress as “independent self-assessors in the quest for life-long learning” (YT Department of Education, 2004, as cited in Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006, p. viii). Students used the data collected through assessments to inform their learning and encourage reflective thinking (Alberta Education, 2015, p. 3-4).

All provinces described reporting and communication as a purpose of summative assessment. All provinces also emphasized that grades were intended to inform teachers and students. However, using grades to inform broader groups was made explicit in ON, PE, and the northern provinces. Parents and others in ON and parents and administrators in PE were included in addition to teachers and students. The ON *Growing Success* document stipulates that “summative assessment...support[s] the communication of information about achievement to students themselves, parents, teachers, and others” (ON MOE, 2010, p. 31). In the Northwest Territories parents were explicitly identified as key players in monitoring students’ assessment results. Reporting was stressed as a way for parents to become informed of their child’s strengths and needs in terms of learning and achievement (NT Department of Education, Culture & Employment, 2011-2012).

In the northern communities (i.e. YT, NT, NU), there was an additional emphasis on the importance of extended family and the broader community as users of grading information. “Schools are extensions of the cultures and languages of the communities they serve, so assessment must reflect the vision, values, and goals of the community” (Educating All Our Children: Departmental Directive on Student Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting, Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment, 2001, as cited in Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006, p. viii). Each of these territories also made explicit reference to the importance of integrating assessments that reflect their culture and/or community: “Assessment must be sensitive to the social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of students” (NU Department of Education, 2008, p. 33).

All but two of the provinces, identified *feedback* as an integral part of the monitoring process. While summative assessment was used to monitor, and make judgments about student work, grades were also intended to provide feedback that “inform[s] and support[s] future teaching and learning” (Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008, p. 12). By providing a summary of student achievement over a given period of time, or over a particular content area, grades identify students’ strengths and point to next steps. “If students are to successfully move on to the next stage, it is important to build into the learning environment reflection...and correction” (NU, Guidelines for Teaching in a Bilingual Setting, Nunavut Department of Education as cited in Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006, p. viii).

Although feedback was prominently articulated in grading policies, some provinces also paid particular attention to *accountability* (NB and NS) and reporting/communication (NT). In terms of accountability, NB sets, monitors, and reports on specific targets for its literacy, numeracy, and science provincial assessments. For example, “85% of students [are expected to] reach or exceed the standard in grades 6-12 on provincial assessments of literacy, numeracy, and science” (NB Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013, p. 17). This was considered an “important part of [their] overall accountability framework” (NB Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013, p. 18) and aimed to ensure that their ed-

Table 1

*Analysis of Canadian Grading Policies (Provinces and Territories)*

Province	Purpose of grading					Method for generating grades		Grading in relation to formative assessment	
	Monitoring	Reporting	Feedback	Accountability	Sorting	Curriculum-referenced	Teacher-driven grading process	Explicitly not for grading purposes	Assessment terminology*
Alberta (AB)						X			Form/Sum
British Columbia (BC)	X		X			X	X	X	Form/Sum
Manitoba (MB)	X		X		X	X	X	X	AfL/AaL/AoL
New Brunswick (NB)	X		X	X					AfL/AoL
Newfoundland and Labrador (NL)	X		X					X	AfL/AaL/AoL
Northwest Territories (NT)	X	X				X		X	AfL/AoL
Nova Scotia (NS)	X	X		X		X	X		AfL/AoL
Nunavut (NU)	X		X			X		X	AfL/AaL/AoL
Ontario (ON)	X		X				X	X	AfL/AaL/AoL
Prince Edward Island (PE)	X	X	X					X	AfL/AoL
Québec (QC)	X		X				X	X	Form/Sum
Saskatchewan (SK)	X							X	Form/Sum
Yukon (YT)	X		X			X	X		Form/Sum

\*Assessment for Learning=AfL, Assessment of Learning = AoL, Assessment as Learning = AaL, Form = Formative, Sum = Summative

ucation system was improving on its provincial goals and standards over time. NS emphasized accountability at the classroom/school level with “assessment [based] on achievement of standards for which schools, teachers and students are held accountable” (AVRSB, 2005, p. 13).

Manitoba also identified *sorting* as a reason for summative assessment and grades. “Grades may be used to sort students for acceptance into post-secondary programs or for scholarships” (Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008, p. 28). However, sorting was not emphasized as one of the main purposes in any province. “Greater emphasis is being placed on using assessment to focus on learning rather than on using assessment to accumulate marks or compete with others” (Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008, p. 1). While grades do ultimately result in the sorting of students (e.g., admission into university, funding decisions), monitoring and feedback were identified as the main intentions of summative assessment in provincial policy documents.

### *Methods for Generating Grades*

Canadian provinces and territories generated and reported grades using different methods. These differences were seen at both the elementary and secondary levels across Canada. For many of the provinces and territories letter grades were used at the elementary level whereas percentages tend to be used at the secondary level to report student achievement.

**Scales.** It seems that across Canada although percentages were used to report student achievement for older students, the grade level in which percentages are introduced varies. MB and ON (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015; ON MOE, 2010) both used percentages to describe student achievement from Grades 7-12 whereas they are used in Grades 8-12 for Newfoundland (NL Department of Education, 2013) and Grades 10-12 for Alberta (Alberta Education, 2015) and YT (Yukon Education, 2011). The scale for grading at the secondary level is left to the discretion of individual schools in QC, which is different to the other provinces and territories that mandated how student achievement should be reported (QC MEQ, 2011). British Columbia and the YT used performance scales to report student achievement in relation to learning outcomes as: approaching expectations, meeting expectations, or exceeding expectations for grades Kindergarten through to Grade 3 (BC MOE, 2009; Yukon Education, 2011). Manitoba used an ordinal scale ranging from 1-4 to report student achievement up to Grade 6 (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015).

**Constructing grades.** MB, YT, NB, NS, QC, and ON maintained a teacher-centered approach for assigning grades. For all provinces and territories (except NB) the policy documents explicitly mentioned how grades should be assigned based upon student achievement of learning and curricular outcomes. MB and ON emphasized that the most recent and consistent demonstrations of student achievement are given priority when constructing grades (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015; ON MOE, 2010). BC and Manitoba were specific and provided explicit examples for teachers to follow when assigning grades (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015; BC MOE, 2009). Interestingly, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Ontario had templates for constructing report cards (Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008; NB Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013; NS Department of Education, 2002; ON MOE, 2010). Templates are likely provided for all provinces and territories however, the ones reported above were explicitly provided in the Ministry grading policy documents.

The evidence on what contributes to generating student grades was articulated differently across Canada. Manitoba articulated that non-achievement factors (e.g., attitude) should not be included when constructing grades (MB Education and Advanced Learning, 2015). “Non-academic factors such as attendance, punctuality, attitude, effort, and behaviour are not included in the determination of students’ grades. However, it is understood that these factors affect student



achievement and, therefore, could be addressed in teacher comments in the context of next steps that will enhance learning” (MB Education and Advanced Learning, 2015, p. 6). ON, NL, NS, and the YT also explicitly outlined that only achievement factors should be included when assigning grades (NL Department of Education, 2013; NS Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016; ON MOE, 2010; Yukon Education, 2011).

Many provinces and territories across Canada mentioned how assigning grades also included professional judgment and interpretations made by teachers. QC highlighted the use of judgment during the evaluation process: “evaluation is a complex process that is largely based on the teacher’s professional judgment. Consequently, the exercise of this judgment must be based on guidelines to maintain the credibility of evaluation activities” (QC MEQ, 2003, p. 4). All Canadian provinces and territories emphasized the need to have fair, equitable, and just grading practices, which included not only the assignment of grades but also the reporting and use of student grades (AB Education, 2015; BC Ministry of Education, 2009; MB Education and Advanced Learning, 2015; NB Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013; NL Department of Education, 2013; NS Department of Education, 2002; NT Department of Education, Culture & Employment, 2011-2012; NU Department of Education, 2008; ON MOE, 2010; PE English Language School Board, 2015; QC MEQ, 2003; SK Education, 1991; Yukon Education, 2011).

The SK Education (1991) document suggested that “evaluation should be an integral part of the teaching-learning process, . . . be a planned, continuous activity . . . [that] reflect[s] the intended outcomes of the curriculum” (p. 4). The BC MOE (2009) document supported this assertion by indicating that, “assessment should be continuous, collaborative, consultative and based on an agreed set of criteria” (p. 21). Some provinces (i.e., ON, NL, YT, MB, NB) specified that grading should only occur “at or near the end of a period of learning” (ON MOE, 2010, p. 31), “at the end of a significant period of learning” (NL Department of Education, 2013, p. 2), or on “achievement to date” (Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008, p. 1). Overall, it seems that the policy documents were consistent in their approach to grading with achievement and non-achievement factors reported separately.

**Large-scale assessments.** Large-scale assessments were frequently used across Canada in both elementary and secondary education; however, the extent to which they contributed to students’ final grade varies. The provincial assessments and examinations administered across Canada ranged in contributions from 10%-50% of students’ course grades. AB administers the Diploma Examinations for specific courses in Grade 12 where 30% of students’ grades are factored into final grades (Alberta Education, 2015, p. 105). BC administers Graduation Program Examinations for Language Arts in Grades 10 and 12, Science and Mathematics in Grade 10, and Social Studies in Grades 11 and 12. Grades 10 and 11 examinations account for 20% of students’ final grades whereas those written at the Grade 12 level count for 40% of students’ grades (BC MOE, 2015, p. 10). MB administers Grade 12 provincial tests in Language Arts and Mathematics contributing between 20-30% of students’ final course grades (MB Department of Education, 2016). SK administers Diploma Examinations in Grade 12 for core subjects and 40% contributes to final course grades (SK MOE, 2016). The YT uses the standards tests from BC (Yukon Education, 2011) whereas the NT and NU use the AB Diploma Examinations with the exception that the examinations are worth 50% of students’ final course grades in NU (NU Department of Education, 2008) rather than 30% for the NT (NT Department of Education, Culture & Employment, 2011-2012) and AB (AB Education, 2015).

NB has an extensive provincial assessment program, in the Francophone school boards, students complete a Grade 11 French and Mathematics examination which contributes to 40% of students’ course grades (NB Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013). NS Examinations are administered in Grade 10 for both English and Mathematics, which

account for 20% of students' final grades (NS Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016). NL administers examinations for senior high school core courses where the achieved grade accounts for 50% of students' final grades (NL Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016). Interestingly, QC administers certification examinations in Grades 10 and 11 for core subjects where the grades can account for up to 50% of students' final course grades (QC MEQ, 2015). In PE results from Grade 9 large-scale assessments contribute to 10% of students' final grades and 20-25% of students' final grades for Grade 11 (PE Education, Early Learning and Culture, 2016). The amount varies according to the mathematics course (PE Education, Early Learning and Culture, 2016). Lastly, ON mandates that students' results from the Grade 9 Numeracy Assessment can count for up to 30% of students' final course grade. Schools and/or school boards have the discretion to decide whether to count the provincial Grade 9 assessment in course grades (ON MOE, 2010).

**Reporting grades.** Student achievement was also reported differently across Canada with some processes mandated by ministries of education in some areas and school board discretion in others. In BC, there were general guidelines for reporting student achievement. However, school board policies provided more specific guidelines about the timing of reporting and suggestions for the structure of written comments (BC MOE, 2009). Some provinces, like AB and SK, do not restrict teachers to reporting student achievement through certain methods; rather, reporting is at the discretion of school boards for Kindergarten through to Grade 9. Teachers are required to report on learning outcomes, student progress in each subject, and grade levels in relation to the provincial assessments for math and language (Alberta Education, 2015). Reporting student achievement in MB and ON was more prescriptive and outlined explicitly in their policy documents. Report cards were used for Grades 1-12 with affiliated templates and processes outlined for teachers. In MB, local school jurisdictions regulated the reporting of grades at the secondary level (Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008; MB Education and Advanced Learning 2015). In ON, report cards are circulated twice at the elementary level alongside a progress report whereas there are two formal reports circulated per semester at the secondary level in ON. Stringent guidelines and requirements were evident for constructing report cards and reporting student achievement. These guidelines emphasized reporting learning skills and work habits separately to student achievement. Student achievement is evaluated in relation to the specific outcomes. Specifically, for Grades 9-12, 70% of the final grade is based upon course work whereas the final 30% is comprised of a final evaluation given at the end of the course to demonstrate achievement of overall course expectations (ON MOE, 2010).

There are three mandatory formal reports on student achievement at the elementary level and two mandatory per semester at the intermediate and senior grade levels for the YT. Teachers must also host parent-teacher conferences at least once a year as an additional way to report student achievement. (Yukon Education, 2011). In NT, the school boards outline the requirements and procedures (North West Territories Department of Education, Culture & Employment, 2011-2012). NU used an online system called Maplewood Student Information System to maintain student grades and information, which actually generates report cards for students. Some local school boards have deviated slightly from this simple grading system by adding pluses and minuses at the elementary level, however, it is planned that the grading system will be standardized across school boards (NU MOE, 2016). In QC, reporting at the elementary level occurs during each of the three cycles through a variety of informal and formal methods (e.g., portfolios, journals, and report cards). At the secondary level reporting was regulated at the individual school level (QC MEQ, 2011).

NB provided examples of report cards at the elementary level. Interestingly, new report cards have been piloted in the Anglophone West school board where there was a movement away from letter and numerical grades (NB Anglophone West School District, 2016). In NS, letter and nu-

merical grades are used for the various grade levels. It is emphasized that when reporting student achievement, it should be clear, timely, relevant, and accurate so that it is effectively used and interpreted (NS Department of Education, 2002). Lastly, reporting of student achievement in PE seems to be outlined at both the provincial and school district levels. The primary purpose of report cards was clearly mentioned: “while report cards serve many functions their primary purpose is to communicate student achievement to the student and parents/guardians” (PE English Language School Board, 2015, p. 3). In PE, there are both informal and formal reports that were mandated by the ministry to communicate student achievement to parents/guardians. Overall, there were clearly differences in grade reporting processes across Canada where some ministries of education outlined the requirements for reporting, whereas in some areas, school districts were responsible for how student achievement was reported.

### *Grading in Relation to Formative Assessments*

Grading policies across Canada articulated the tensions between summative and formative assessment practices differently. Differences related to terminology used, the use of balanced assessment practices, and articulations on how formative and summative assessments should be used.

**Terminology.** Canadian provinces and territories used both evaluation and assessment throughout their grading policies. Although when using evaluation it was made clear that this included a summative judgment about student learning from teachers. Summative and formative assessment terms were used in BC (BC MOE, 2009), however other provinces and territories such as SK, NT, NU, and QC, have included diagnostic assessment as tasks that identify student needs before learning (NT, Department of Education, Culture & Employment, 2011-2012; NU Department of Education, 2008; QC MEQ, 2003; SK Education, 1991). Other provinces like ON and MB have moved to AOL, AFL, and AAL in place of summative and formative terminology (Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008; ON MOE, 2010). Other Canadian provinces such as NB, NS, and PE did not explicitly use AAL but include assessment for and of learning (NB Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013; NS South Shore Regional School Board, 2015). PE used the term “student achievement” to indicate what students have learned from a more holistic perspective (PE English Language School Board, 2015). More specifically, this term included student learning through informal and formal means, learning in relation to the curriculum outcomes, an individual’s work habits and efforts while also including student progress or growth over time. This term clearly indicated that grades from summative assessments would be considered alongside other evidence gathered throughout the learning process. Although a separate term was used to describe this holistic approach this is an indication that the boundaries between summative and formative assessments continue to be blurred. Surprisingly, formative assessment was not explicitly articulated in AB grading policies despite emphasizing that student exemplars and expected outcomes should be made available to students. Formative assessment practices may be articulated in other AB policies including general curriculum and assessment policies. Formative and summative assessments in NB were conceptualized as different approaches through their purpose (the why) and process (the how) (NB Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013). These distinctions helped to clarify the blurred boundaries between formative and summative assessments.

The majority of grading policies across provinces and territories were very explicit about the value of formative assessment. However, it was explicitly mentioned in all provinces and territories (with the exception of NS, NB, and AB) that formative assessments should not be used for summative purposes. More specifically, BC states “results from practice exercises support students’ learning but should not contribute to the term or final letter grade” (BC MOE, 2009, p.

25). QC also articulated this explicitly: “the student must be provided with feedback on this element, but the element must not be considered when determining the student’s mark in the report card” (QC MEQ, 2011, p. 3). Assessment was viewed as an ongoing process and was emphasized as such in documents from many provinces and territories emphasizing assessment and/or evaluation as a process that should enhance student learning. NU articulated this simply by stating “assessment should be seen as a process that improves both teaching and learning” (NU Department of Education, 2008, p. 23). QC also emphasized the value of evaluation in relation to student learning “students do not learn in order to be evaluated: they are evaluated so that they can learn more effectively. Evaluation complements all the means used to support students in their learning” (QC MEQ, 2003, p. 4).

The importance of providing students with feedback was emphasized across most educational systems in Canada. For feedback the emphasis was on providing consistent, descriptive feedback in a timely manner for students. Interestingly, MB emphasized providing feedback not only for formative tasks but also for summative assessments so that “these summative assessments inform and support future teaching and learning” (Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008, p. 12). NS and ON emphasized that feedback for students should identify an individual’s strengths, needs, and directions for improvement (AVRSB, 2005; ON MOE, 2010). Complimenting feedback are reflective and self-assessment components emphasized in some provinces and territories. NU, MB, ON, NS, and PE all indicated that students should have regular and structured opportunities to engage in reflection about their learning. More specifically, NS emphasized the use of self-assessment throughout the learning process for students similarly to NU stating that “if students are to successfully move on to the next stage, it is important to build into the learning environment reflection, self-assessment and correction” (NU Department of Education, 2000, as cited in Department of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006, p. viii).

Many provinces and territories encouraged the reporting of learning behaviours throughout elementary and secondary grades. However, learning behaviours were not a mandatory component of the reporting process. Although reporting traditionally revolves around student grades and indicating their achievement in relation to learning outcomes and the curriculum, some policies suggested that communication about student learning should include more than grades. MB, NL, and NS indicated explicitly that more results and information should be communicated to parents/guardians rather than only grades. Based upon the reviewed policy documents it seems that grades are only one component of student learning. The grading policies examined across Canada indicate a shift towards a more balanced assessment approach, where summative assessment no longer dominates classroom assessment practices. These documents indicated that it is necessary to have formative assessments to inform the development of summative assessments.

The majority of provinces and territories made it explicit that grades are to be based upon achievement in relation to learning outcomes/standards and the curriculum. MB, NL, QC, ON, and PE were all explicit in indicating the composition of grades. Some policy documents emphasized the need for multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning such as those for NL, NS, NU, and NT. Emphasis was placed on having students demonstrate their learning at some point in time through a variety of assessments so that multiple data are considered when constructing grades. The policies for NL indicated that teachers should also provide consistent and frequent opportunities to evaluate student learning. Canadian provinces and territories seem to be moving away from having large-scale assessments dominate reporting of student learning at the classroom level. NS clearly indicated this movement through this statement “learning, and the demonstration of that learning, is what’s important – not student performance on a single high-stakes test” (NS AVRBS, 2005, p. 8).

## Discussion

Grading is one of the most ubiquitous yet high-stakes practices in education. For hundreds of years, grades have been used as the key metric in decisions about student promotion, admissions, scholarship, and work placements (Atkinson & Geiser, 2009; Bowers, 2010; Pattison, Grodsky, & Muller, 2013; Thorsen & Cliffordson, 2012). Further, the function of grades has become even more important given the increased rates of student mobility across provincial/territorial education systems in Canada, and throughout the world. Grades have become the primary currency for selection, placement, and admissions processes. While previous research has shed light on variability in teachers' grading practices, raising significant concerns about the validity and reliability of grade information (Brookhart, 1991, 1993, 1994; Cross & Frary, 1999; McMillan, 2008), few studies have examined consistency within grading policies. As grading policies provide guidelines for educators responsible for constructing grades, examining the messages about grading embedded within and across policies from different educational systems is critical.

The results of our systematic review of grading policies from across the 13 provincial/territorial systems of education in Canada point to critical insights into the consistency of grades throughout the country. Key findings from this review are as follows:

1. Grading policies emphasized the use of grades to monitor, report, and communicate student achievement as the primary purposes of grading;
2. Grading scales are similar across Canada with percentages being used in secondary classrooms and letter grades in elementary classrooms;
3. Grades consistently included achievement factors with non-achievement factors reported separately;
4. Reporting practices tended to be fairly consistent across Canada with the general guidelines and templates generated from ministries of education;
5. Large-scale assessments contributed variable amounts to students' final grades across the country, with contributions ranging from 10%-50% in calculations for the final grade; and
6. Significant variation in terminology was evident in grading policies across Canada related to the terms: formative, summative, AOL, AFL, and AAL.

It is evident that there are several consistent messages across provinces and territories in Canada about the purpose and construction of grades. Namely, that the primary functions of grades are to monitor and report on student achievement and to provide feedback to various stakeholders (students, parents, and educators) about student progress toward educational standards. Another fairly consistent message is that grades should primarily reflect students' learning of academic standards. In many provinces and territories, learning skills and work habits are represented through other reporting methods. Relatedly, the scales used for communicating grades are largely consistent across regions with secondary grades typically reported using percentages and elementary grades typically using letter grades. Finally, there is a consistent commitment to both formative and summative functions of assessment, with the latter reserved primarily for grading purposes. Nevertheless, there are mixed messages about the use of formative assessment information in the construction of grades or the influence on teachers' judgments in grading decisions. Grades continue to serve high-stakes and important decisions including accountability, gatekeeping, and progress monitoring functions (Nagy, 2000).

Several inconsistencies were observed across the grading policies reviewed in this study. First, some provinces articulated secondary purposes for grades including accountability and sorting functions. While sorting has been a longstanding function of grades that connects with tracking and monitoring functions evident in international literature (Brookhart, 2015; O'Connor, 2010; Stiggins, 2005), accountability has only emerged as a watchword in education during

the past two decades (Stobart, 2008). As a relatively new construct, it appears that its application across systems of education is inconsistent. Although grading policies do not fully explicate how grades function as accountability measures in select systems, the addition of this secondary purpose requires further investigation, especially in relation to its validity (Kane, 2015, 2012; Koch 2013). This call for additional research follows others who have argued that further studies are needed to fully understand the influence of accountability practices on teaching, learning, and other assessment processes within and across systems of education (Bowers, 2011; Brookhart et al., 2016).

Second, across Canada, the evidence that contributes to generating student grades is described differently. The guidelines for grade construction were fairly consistent across Canada with the general understanding that grades are based upon achievement factors. It was emphasized that non-achievement factors were still important but should remain separate to grades. Some policies suggested ways in which non-achievement factors could be represented in the reporting process. Large-scale assessments pose another source of invariance within the construction of grades as at the secondary level they contribute varied weights (10%-50%) to students' final course grades in select subject areas. Most importantly, across the policies we found very little specific guidance for teachers on how to calculate grades based on a body of evidence. Presumably, these guidelines are offered at more local levels (Scott, 1995); however, such a practice contributes to increased variability across teacher-constructed grades. Finally, there is inconsistent terminology related to diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment as well as assessment for, of, and as learning across educational systems in Canada.

These inconsistencies point to significant implications for the comparability of grades across systems of education, especially in relation to accountability and sorting functions. In particular, if grades are constructed differently by teachers based on educational policies, then the reliability of the grades for sorting and selection purposes is diminished. The result is that a grade from one region may not mean the same as a grade from another region. This result poses less of a challenge in elementary and early secondary years but becomes a central concern in late secondary when student mobility is high. Hence, while maintaining commitments to the inherent diversity of our educational systems in Canada, there is a need to simultaneously wrestle with mechanisms to ensure comparability of grades when used for accountability, sorting, and selection decisions.

Finally, a notable finding from this research is that systems of education throughout Canada maintain different terminology for describing classroom assessment purposes. While consistency in terminology is not required, it is worth noting that these various terms could signal the presence of different conceptions of classroom assessment across the country. Arguably, AFL is not the same as early conceptions of formative assessment (Swaffield, 2011). Likewise, AAL represents a fundamentally different concept than formative or diagnostic assessment (Earl, 2013). Pursuing a comparative analysis of how these terms are enacted would provide empirical support for understanding their consistency across classrooms throughout Canada.

It is imperative to note that the purpose of this study was to analyze explicit grading policies across the 10 provincial and 3 territorial systems in Canada as government grading policies have been shown to be an external driver for teacher practice (McMillan & Nash, 2000). Specifically, how grades are constructed and the values and meaning of grades are, in part, influenced by provincial grading policies (Noonan, 2002; Simon et al., 2010; Stiggins et al., 1989). That said, this study did not examine, nor can it draw conclusions on, the enactment of Canadian grading policies at the classroom level. As articulated above, exploring the enacted practice of grading is the next step for grading research in Canada. Moreover, we assert that rather than retracing previous grading studies that explore the reliability of teachers' grades across time, students, and contexts, it would be useful to understand how teachers (a) interpret grading policies within their

unique work contexts; (b) justify the validity of grading decisions in relation to individual student evidences, background, and needs; (c) actively construct grades that respond to curriculum standards, formative student evidence, and summative assessments; and (d) are influenced by secondary grading purposes including accountability demands and sorting functions.

Given the longstanding role of grading in education, and the increased use of grades for high-stakes decisions including student mobility, admission, selection, accountability, and reporting, much more information is needed on the policies and practices that support grading decisions. Through this research, we have added to the Canadian literature base with findings that provide a foundation for subsequent studies.

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