

Altered grades: A grey zone in the ethics of classroom assessment

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Abstract

Students' grades are altered for a variety of reasons in educational systems worldwide. While there has been considerable research on teachers' grading practices, very little is known about the circumstances and reasons for grade alteration. This article closely examines eight instances where experienced teachers altered or were asked to alter students' grades in secondary schools in Ontario, Canada. Essentially, the teachers' responses were based on: a) the need for compassion; b) the desire to provide students with opportunity; and c) the intent to teach life lessons. This work highlights the moral complexity of classroom assessment, and it aims to provoke further discussion on the ethics of grade alteration.

Classroom assessment (CA) can have serious consequences for students. Assessment results can affect students' immediate lives, especially in school systems or families where grades are associated with rewards and punishments. Assessment results influence student motivation and self-regulation, which affect further learning in a compounding cycle. Learning paths, scholarships, post-secondary opportunities, and career choices can all be significantly impacted by assessment results in the long term.

A variety of formats are used to communicate about assessment results. Letters represent ranges (e.g., A = 85 to 89%), numbers are used for levels, and sometimes written comments are provided. When assessment results are summarised using a number or letter, they are referred to as *marks* or *grades*. Determining marks or grades involves teachers in two distinct processes: first in rating or scoring students' work (i.e., assignments, performances), and then in calculating final grades that are based on a collection of work. Both processes involve "professional decision making that depends on the teacher's values and beliefs, experience, external

pressures, and best subjective judgments” (McMillan, 2011, pp. 398–399). For simplicity in this article I use the term *grading* to refer to both processes. Grading is considered a morally demanding aspect of teaching because of the power involved in judging students’ work (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002; Ryan, 1997). One veteran professor described grading as “wrestling with the dark angels of assessment” (Barreca, 2011, para. 6). Concerns about grading, from doubts about the accuracy of marks to questions about the pedagogic or social value of the process, have been expressed by educators at all levels (e.g., Cox, 2011; Zoeckler, 2005).

Some concerns about grading have been extremely persistent. An early 20th-century text on grading systems, for example, laments that the “variability in the marks given for the same subject and to the same pupils by different instructors” causes “real injustice” for students (Finklestein, 1913, p. 6). Current research on grading practices continues to explore variability, not only across institutions and educational systems, but also between teachers in the same system (Biberman-Shalev, Sabbagh, Resh, & Kramarski, 2011; Proitz, 2013; Randall & Engelhard, 2010; Resh, 2009). Grade inflation, the phenomenon of grade point averages rising without commensurate increases in achievement, is another area of ongoing research (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012; Pattison, Grodsky, & Muller, 2013). A third concern that surfaces perennially in the news is grade alteration (e.g., Brown, 2012; Farran, 2009; Myerberg, 2013; White, 2013). However, unlike grade variation and inflation, very little empirical research has been published on grade alteration. Grade alteration differs from grade inflation and the adjustment of test scores for comparability (i.e., rescaling) in that it is not gradual or systematic. It also differs in intent from grading “in pencil” (O’Connor, 2009, p. 135), which refers to the process of updating records with fresh assessment results to accurately summarise students’ current achievement. Grade alteration involves deliberately increasing or decreasing a grade for a reason that may relate to achievement, but that is not motivated by an interest in accurate reporting.

While it is clear that grade alteration occurs in educational systems worldwide, the extent to which it is fair for students is less evident. At this point, inquiry into the circumstances and reasons for grade alterations is very limited. In this article, I look closely at the values and pressures

that influenced teachers' thinking when students' grades were altered in secondary schools in Ontario, Canada. In what type of circumstances are students' grades raised or lowered, and how are these alterations rationalised by the teachers involved? The purpose of this work is to better understand grade alteration and provoke further discussion around the ethics of this practice.

Influences on teachers' grading practices

A sizeable body of research now shows that grading is influenced by multiple factors. Teachers' grading practices vary by subject area (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; McMillan, 2001; Resh, 2009) and by level taught (Guskey, 2009; Randall & Engelhard, 2009). Additionally, Biberman-Shalev and colleagues (2011) found that teachers' grading styles were affected by their gender, subject expertise, and perceptions of the subject matter (e.g., mathematics as inflexible). Student factors, such as gender and socioeconomic background, also influence teachers' assessment decisions (Elwood, 2006; Klapp Lekholm, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012; Peterson & Kennedy, 2006). A persistent finding, from Stiggins, Frisbie and Griswold's (1989) pioneering study to the present is that teachers often consider their perception of non-achievement factors in grading, particularly student effort (e.g., Cox, 2011; Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Hunter, Mayenga, & Gambell, 2006; Sun & Cheng, 2014). In a survey by Green and colleagues (2007), most teachers (85.2%; $n = 169$) felt that it was ethical to consider effort when grading, which suggests that this practice is not controversial. However, research has also shown that effort is not taken into account equally for every student. In an early study on values in grading, teachers reported that, while they would not lower high-achieving students' grades for a lack of effort, they would raise grades for lower-achieving students who seemed to have made an effort (Brookhart, 1993). McMillan and Nash (2000) referred to this practice as "pulling for students" (p. 30) when teachers in their study explained that effort was a key consideration in borderline cases. At the same time, Howley, Kusimo and Parrott's (2000) findings suggested that this practice is not limited to individual cases and may be pervasive in some school grading cultures. Specifically, they found that in schools where many students

were perceived to be “disadvantaged and difficult” (p. 238), the conflation of student achievement and effort was routine. A decade later, Randall and Engelhard (2010) focused on the interactions between achievement, ability, behaviour, and effort in grading. They reported that, while student achievement is usually the main consideration, other factors are still at play. Departing from previous research, they determined that teachers’ decisions were affected more by student behaviour than effort. These studies are important for understanding grade alteration because they illuminate the leeway that commonly exists in grading.

The ethics of adjusting grades on the basis of teacher’s perceptions is often unquestioned. Some of the teachers in Zoeckler’s (2005) case study, for example, felt that it was “within their rights to exercise this power” (p. 89). In contrast, there are also situations where reactions are more critical. Several teachers in Campbell’s (2003) inquiry reported that they were asked by their principals to change students’ final grades. One teacher described a case of “mark tampering” (p. 73) where the department head told him to raise students’ grades in order to improve the school’s performance statistics. For some of the teachers in both Zoeckler and Campbell’s studies, altering grades this way was a disservice to their students. A survey of teachers, administrators and school staff by Barrett, Headley, Stovall and Witte (2006) supports the notion that some types of grade alteration are commonly viewed as unethical. All items that described teachers being pressured to raise grades, whether by a student, a parent, or an administrator, or where teachers raised grades owing to favouritism, were rated as serious ethical violations (82.6% to 90.8% agreement, $n = 184$). Considered together, these findings reveal a grey zone in the basis for grading decisions. One teacher’s perceptions of a student’s good behaviour as sufficient for a grade boost might be viewed as favouritism by another. It also seems that grade alteration is more likely to be recognised as unethical when it is imposed on teachers’ decisions. The cloudy rationale and recurrence of grade alterations across educational contexts provide strong imperative for looking more closely at the reasons and circumstances that might or might not warrant the practice.

Methodology

This article reports on the supplemental analysis of a multi-case study on the concept of fairness in CA. Supplemental analysis is a type of qualitative secondary analysis that provides a “more in-depth investigation of an emergent issue or aspect of the data which was not addressed in the primary study” (Heaton, 2000, p. 8). The multi-case design for the initial study was both instrumental and particularistic as it sought insight for further understanding about a complex concept used in everyday practice (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005). Specifically, it drew on the practical wisdom of experienced secondary English teachers in Ontario, Canada to contribute to the reconceptualisation of fairness for the dynamics of CA.

Assessment context

Ontario’s publicly funded school system is governed centrally by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), and it serves one of the most diverse populations in the world (OECD, 2011). Assessment policies have shifted over the past decade to emphasise equity, differentiated instruction, and assessment for learning (OME, 2010). A working draft reflecting these policies was in circulation at the time of the initial study (2008). The standardised report card for students at the time contained a column for achievement grades given as percentages, space for brief comments, and a section for rating five learning skills: independent work, teamwork, organisation, work habits, and initiative (OME, 2000). To graduate from secondary school with a diploma, students are also required to pass the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), a large-scale assessment of basic literacy.

Participants

Purposeful selection of participants can amplify the richness and utility of a small number of cases (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005). By analysing data from a pan-Canadian teachers’ questionnaire (Council of Ministers of Education Canada [CMEC], 2002), I determined that teachers who would most likely provide rich and relevant information for this study would have three characteristics: at least 10 years of teaching experience, specialisation in teaching English, and a related university

degree. I selected six participants from a pool of volunteers on the Ontario College of Teacher's (OCT) network. All had advanced professional qualifications in addition to undergraduate or graduate degrees, between 13 and 40 years of experience, and had specialised in teaching English in Grades 7 to 12 in Ontario.

Data collection and analysis

I used two written questionnaires and interviews to gather data. The first questionnaire asked about the participants' background and it included short items on the ethics of CA. The second questionnaire contained eight vignettes that described dilemmas for fair CA. Vignettes are brief stories that are especially well-suited for eliciting responses from participants in research on sensitive topics or ethical dilemmas (Hughes & Huby, 2004; Wilks, 2004). Open-ended questions asked participants to recommend the fairest course of action, and I also invited them to discuss any fairness issues they had encountered in practice. My analyses were both deductive (Yin, 2006) and inductive (Patton, 2002). I used multiple strategies to support the credibility, thoroughness, and meaningfulness of my work, including analysis of contextual documents, collegial interviewing and discussion, verbatim transcription, written reflection, triangulation, and feedback from participants (for more detail see Tierney, 2010).

Supplemental analysis

Cross-case analysis revealed that five participants discussed altering students' grades a total of eight times. For the supplemental analysis, I created eight electronic incident cards to organise pertinent information, including a section of verbatim transcript with a brief summary to situate it within the interview process. The aspects of fairness in each instance were identified (from the initial study), and the instances were then categorised using the OCT's ethical standards as a framework. There are four ethical standards for the teaching profession in Ontario, and they focus on the core values of care, trust, respect and integrity. Although these standards do not refer specifically to CA, they are intended to guide all aspects of teaching practice (OCT, 2012).

Results: Instances of grade alteration in Ontario

All eight instances involved students in special circumstances at the secondary level in Ontario’s publicly funded schools. Table 1 shows the participants’ pseudonyms, their school environment, and briefly describes each instance. Five instances involved an increase and three a decrease. Reasons for these alterations fell into three categories: compassionate grounds, student opportunity, and life lessons.

Table 1. Instances of grade alteration

Pseudonym	School Environment	Instance	Grade	Rationale	
Kevin	Small (under 400) secondary school in rural area. OSSLT pass rate below provincial average	1	Students who made progress during a course benefited from a system using peg marks (set percentage points for report cards).	Increase	Future Opportunity
		2	Student did not attend class in the morning most of the term, but had psychiatrist’s note. Principal disagreed with the teacher who wanted to fail the student.	Decrease + Reversal	Life Lesson
York	Very large (over 2000) learning center on outer edge of major urban area. Mostly young adults with few attempting OSSLT. Results not released.	3	Student often missed classes and did not complete work despite strong ability. Teacher aimed to motivate with extremely low grade.	Decrease	Life Lesson
		4	Students having faced repeated failure need to gain certificate as condition of parole or to get a job.	Increase	Future Opportunity
Tanar	Medium sized (under 1000) school in older suburb. OSSLT pass rate higher than provincial average.	5	Student handed in one essay for two courses. Principal disagreed with the teacher who wanted to fail the student.	Decrease+ Reversal	Life Lesson
		6	Student in final year had high marks until her father died suddenly and she did not hand in the final major assignment.	Increase	Compassionate Grounds
Lucy	Large secondary school (over 1000) in newer suburb on outskirts of major urban area with many ESL students. OSSLT pass rate higher than provincial average.	7	Student is five percentage points below a scholarship cut-off. Teacher was asked by administration to alter the grade.	Increase	Future Opportunity
Amada	Formerly large secondary school, now adult learning center in outer urban area. OSSLT results not released.	8	Student handed in work late and the teacher subsequently learns that the lateness was due to traumatic family event.	Increase	Compassionate Grounds

Instances requiring human compassion

The first type of special circumstance involves a significant event in a student's life where teachers make an exception on compassionate grounds. Amada discussed having altered students' grades for this reason.

I have actually changed a student's grade. The circumstances for that were that the work was late, but I didn't know the reason why it was late. Then I later discovered a parent was ill, or in hospital or died, or some trauma in the family, or whatever, which delayed the work coming in on time. So I have to make adjustments ... what else am I to do? (Instance 8)

Tanar also referred to traumatic family events that occur in students' lives.

There are, from time to time, individual cases which require us to think as humane individuals, to adjust assessment ... and that's fair too ... because how can you assess someone who's lost a mother in a car accident the same way that you can assess someone who's simply going through the normal ups and downs of a high school situation.

In both instances, the participants spoke from decades of teaching experience. Amada was recently retired, but still tutoring after a 40-year teaching career, and Tanar had been teaching for 20 years. He followed the above thought with a specific example from his practice:

I had a student whose father literally died at the supper table. He just passed away. It was a massive coronary. Now, was I going to insist that that student hand in the [final major assignment]? It was at the end of the year, it was June. She was well nigh a graduate, and a graduate with a good mark. Was I going to say, 'now listen, I want you to hand that in because you've got to be like everybody else?' That's absurd. (Instance 6)

It seems obvious that students should not be penalised for events beyond their control, and the need for human compassion is unquestionable in this type of circumstance. Nonetheless, these instances raise several questions for ethical grading, which I pursue in the discussion section.

Instances involving students' future opportunities

The second type of special circumstance described by the participants involved students' future opportunities. Lucy, who had just received a teaching award and was about to retire after a 40-year career, explained why she would alter a student's grade:

The only time I will ever change a grade is if I'm asked to raise, say a—79 to an 80 ... because of university. And I will always ... base it on how well that student's performed during the semester. I don't give that lightly. I really think they've got to earn it.

She then gave a recent example from practice.

Last semester that's what happened. They said to me, "Oh, he's got great averages, can we give him another 5%?" And I at once said, "No." You know, that's a lot. My mark was holding him back from getting a ... [scholarship] ... That's a tough one. That's a really tough one. Yeah, that's pressure for a teacher. (Instance 7)

Kevin, who was the least-experienced participant (13 years), also mentioned students' post-secondary opportunities, but he was open to a slightly higher degree of alteration.

Bumping grades ... I think yeah, especially when I look toward senior students ... looking to get into university... You've got 82 ... it's only 4 marks away [86% being the next peg mark] ... and that's going to make maybe all the difference in the world. Especially for the second semester, those are the marks the universities actually get. So ... yeah for me, if it's 5% ... it's kind of like a grey area.

Kevin subsequently provided the criteria he uses to determine if a grade should be raised:

If somebody's actually handing in decent stuff, and they're putting in a solid effort into it ... it hasn't just been the night before ... if you've started off rough, and you've gotten a little bit better along well then yeah, maybe I'll go up. (Instance 1)

York also considered students' future opportunities. He had been teaching for 18 years, and he worked in a school where very few students aspired to attend university. He explained that some students needed their Ontario Secondary School Diplomas (OSSD) as a condition for parole, but most wanted it to help gain employment.

For students who ... just need this OSSD, I will round a 45 or 48 up to 50. There's no point in making them repeat ... they have faced so much failure for so many years in all kinds of conditions So it really depends on what the student needs.

York felt that grade alterations should help struggling students move on, which excluded students with passing grades. He also set a rough range for grade alteration with the idea of avoiding negative consequences for students.

If you're a 70 ... I'm not going to round it up to an 80 to make you feel better ... I usually err in saying what I think is best for the student, both in the short term and in the long run. If you've got a 30, I'm not—I don't think I'd ever round a 30 to 60 or a 70. I'd set you up for failure. (Instance 4)

Opportunity is central in all three of these instances. For Lucy and Kevin's students the opportunity in question was post-secondary learning, whereas for York's students it was more a matter of economic survival, and the boost he was willing to provide was more generous. York considered the lack of opportunity in his students' past lives during grading as well as the impact on their future lives.

Both Kevin and Lucy expected students to work for their grades. Kevin taught in a traditional secondary school in a rural area where the student population was relatively transient (owing to military assignments) and the overall achievement level was below the provincial average. Kevin tempered his consideration of students' future opportunities by taking their effort and improvement into account. Lucy taught congregated gifted classes in a high-achieving school in an affluent neighbourhood, and she was the least willing to alter grades. Lucy believed quite strongly that even the smallest boost had to be clearly merited by the student.

Instances involving life lessons

Unlike the previous categories where students' grades were raised, in this category the participants either lowered or attempted to lower a student's grade. These three instances also differ in that they were shared with considerably more emotion. Irritation, frustration, and resignation were heard in their telling.

York was concerned about a student who he described as "extremely intelligent" but "addicted" to video games. The student frequently missed classes, and he had not completed most of the course assignments. York explained that in writing mid-term report cards, he had lowered this

student's grade to 1 percent to send a clear warning about the need for more effort.

I know he can do it ... there was a little bit of power and punishment in that 1% ... because I have no other way or hold over him ... he's 18 ... I'm not going to give him an 80% for the two assignments he did extremely well because that would totally give him, it would mislead ... he would read that as license to continue the way as he is doing. Of course this 1% may not make any difference to him, because he may not be there. (Instance 3)

While York aimed to motivate this student with an extremely low grade, he expressed the last sentence with resignation that suggested his expectations were blunted by experience.

Tanar also described an instance where he altered a grade dramatically from a pass to a failure.

I teach the grade 12 Writers' Craft course online and I find out that a student of mine... has just simply taken a philosophy essay and submitted it to me, so I gave him zero on it. This is inappropriate. You can't submit one paper for two different courses.

Tanar was ultimately forced to reverse his decision, and he explained that he found the instance and the subsequent "lack of support" from his administration to be "disturbing".

Well, I made the mistake of letting our coordinator know this, who then told his supervising principal, and I was told, "Give him the mark you originally gave him." I gave him a mark I think of 70%. And I think that is such a slap in the face to all the other students who didn't do that, and I think even more important is that this student has learned nothing. Unfortunately this student will likely do this again, but maybe in university ... it's a life consequence for him. And I think it also besmirches the integrity of what we're trying to do ... as a system and as online teachers. (Instance 5)

Tanar thought that the "huge push for success for all" was at the heart of the problem because government student success initiatives (e.g., OME, 2006) were being interpreted in practice as "everybody gets to succeed". Kevin also felt that government policy was having a detrimental effect, but he referred to assessment policy on students' demonstration of learning (OME, 2010). While some of the other stories Kevin shared indicated

that he was flexible in working with students, he did not believe in the instance below that the need for special treatment was legitimate.

Right now I am having a rather big fairness issue that I'm having a problem with. I've got one young lady who's missed fifty-some classes, but who also says 'I'm going to come in with all the work for you.' It's not fair, but she has a doctor's note—from a psychiatrist.

Kevin wanted to give the student a failing grade for the course because of her frequent absences, but he suspected this decision would not be supported by his administration.

I went to see our principal ... If you miss sixty classes, but hand in all the work, is it fair that you should still get the pass when everybody else has put in their eighty classes? I don't think it is, but the powers that be say that you have to take it. I think it's giving them the wrong message that as long as the job gets done, it doesn't really matter when you do the work ... and I don't think that's right. And it goes back to the Ministry thing. The Ministry says they have to demonstrate it, and she's demonstrated it. And there's not really anything there about time. (Instance 2)

While Kevin and Tanar both complied with their principals' decisions, their moral beliefs were transgressed in the process. In all three of these instances, the participants experienced a loss of professional power because of disregard for, or disagreement relating to, students' grades.

Discussion on the ethics of grade alteration

Eight instances where students' grades were raised or lowered were described by five teachers in Ontario. While the specifics varied, these instances essentially provoked three responses based on: a) the need for compassion; b) the desire to provide students with opportunity; and c) the intent to teach life lessons. In the following sections I discuss these reasons for grade alteration in relation to the OCT ethical standards and existing literature.

Grading decisions based on compassion

The alteration of grades on compassionate grounds is the least likely of the three categories to generate controversy among educational stakeholders.

Teaching is generally considered a caring profession, and the ethical standard of Care “includes compassion” (OCT, 2012, p. 9). Even profit-oriented corporations allow for exceptions based on compassion (e.g., bereavement air fares). Instinctive reactions aside, closer examination of the instances described by Amada and Tanar reveals several questions that should be considered for ethical practice.

The first question involves knowledge about students and their families. How do teachers know about the events that occur in students’ lives? Amada explained that she learned about a serious family event after the fact, and then changed the students’ grade as a matter of fairness. Communication between students and teachers, or between families and schools, depends on trust. According to the OCT (2013), the “development and maintenance of trust is a central tenet of ethical professional practice for all members of the teaching profession” (p. 3). Students and families should ideally be comfortable sharing information with teachers and school administrators, especially in circumstances that call for compassion. However, busy schedules, poor leadership, and bigger student populations can strain trust in school relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). It is entirely possible, particularly in large secondary schools, for a serious event in a student’s life to pass without notice. Compassion in work environments is a process of recognising, relating, and reacting (Way & Tracy, 2012). The need for compassion may be overlooked when trust in school relationships is insufficient for students and families to share personal information.

This leads to a related set of questions involving power. Who decides which events warrant compassion and who determines how a student’s grade is to be altered? Simpson, Clegg and Freeder (2013) point out that the “social expression of compassion is not only an emotion but also a power relation” (p. 386). In the context of grading, a teacher or administrator with the authority to accord or decline an alteration must recognise the need for compassion. The idea that circumstances must exceed “normal ups and downs” (Tanar) to warrant an alteration is troubling because the interpretation of “normal” fluctuates over time and place. Consider, for example, that while it was once considered normal for aboriginal children to live apart from their families in residential schools, the long-term trauma this caused is now widely recognised in Canada (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2012). Tanar and Amada both identified an extreme situation,

the death of parent, which is relatively uncommon during adolescence. But students can be significantly affected by many other seemingly normal or less obvious circumstances, and similar events outside of school create different circumstances for students. Assumptions about what is normal, especially if cultural or generational differences exist in how students' lives are understood, can stunt recognition of the need for compassion.

A final question about altering grades based on compassion relates to students' achievement. Should achievement matter in these circumstances? Tanar felt that an alteration was justified in the situation he described partly because of the student's academic record. Should students who are less academically successful receive the same consideration? Is compassion a student's right or a teacher's prerogative? Students in Canada do have legislated rights (Crook & Truscott, 2007), and CA practices should be in accord with human rights legislation (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation [JCSEE], 2003). Legislation does provide direction for assessment policy, but it offers little guidance for grading practices. Students' rights in grade alteration seem to depend instead on "accepted ethical practice, common sense, and courtesy" (JCSEE, p. 51). For some teachers and administrators, common sense may mean that a student's prior achievement should always be considered in decision-making, whereas for others compassion may easily supersede the need for accurate assessment. As guidelines for grade alteration are not explicit, teachers and administrators may react quite differently in similar circumstances.

Grading decisions focused on opportunity

Three instances described by the participants involved raising grades to improve students' chances in the future. Motivation for this may stem from a "commitment to students' wellbeing" (OCT, 2012, p. 9), which is part of the ethical standard of Care. It is also akin to the notion of teachers "pulling for students" (McMillan & Nash, 2000, p. 30). While noble in intent, grade alteration for this reason is problematic for distributive justice. Grades are a "highly valued distributed good" that can significantly affect students' experiences and opportunities (Resh, 2009, p. 316). When students' grades are compared for the distribution of scholarships and post-secondary opportunities, variation in their calculation threatens

the fairness of the process. The degree of change that the participants felt was acceptable varied considerably. Lucy thought 5 percent was too much, whereas Kevin said he might go that high, and York acknowledged that he had and would go higher. Furthermore, as Lucy's story suggests, grade boosts may depend idiosyncratically on student factors. Grading decisions are affected by student behaviour (Randall & Engelhard, 2010), which makes a boost more likely for some than others. Boosting one student can be at the expense of another equally deserving student when the distribution of scholarships and post-secondary opportunities is limited. From this perspective, this type of grade alteration is unfair despite the underlying good intent.

Distinction is made in moral philosophy between virtues, such as care and compassion, and their negative correlates. Caring passionately about someone or something can lead to extreme behaviour and derailed ethics (Soloman, 1998). Stark examples are seen in news stories about the alteration of student-athletes' grades (e.g., Keilman, 2011). This type of grade alternation may brighten students' short-term prospects, but the motivation lies more in passion for the game (or fame) than care for students. The three instances of grade alteration discussed here under the rubric of opportunity are not as overtly unethical, but they do reflect two long-standing issues in grading. First, Kevin and Lucy both used student effort as a determinant for raising grades. This is consistent with decades of research showing that teachers consider effort in addition to achievement in grading (e.g. Stiggins et al., 1989; Sun & Cheng, 2014). Although assessing both achievement and effort has benefits for understanding and supporting learners (Bowers, 2011), their conflation muddies the meaning of a grade. The standardised report card in Ontario was designed for achievement and work habits to be reported separately, but as teachers continue to consider effort in the calculation of achievement grades, students can benefit from or be penalised twice for their effort.

A second issue relates to the double standard identified by Brookhart (1993). York was willing to raise grades for students who were failing, but would not do so for higher achieving students. York's school was in a lower-income area where many students were at-risk of academic failure. He raised their grades not because of any effort they displayed, but because he felt it was pointless to do otherwise in light of their circumstances.

Greater inclusion of non-achievement factors in grading is correlated with lower student achievement (CMEC, 2009), and the practice may pervade schools where most students are thought to be at-risk (Howley et al., 2000). While some teachers and administrators might see this as a form of social justice because it seems to favour less advantaged students, it is in effect a form of “killing with kindness” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 81). As Jackson, Boostrom and Hansen (1993) discussed in their ethnographic study on the moral workings of schools, students are shortchanged in the long-term when teachers’ low expectations lead to insufficiently rigorous instruction and assessment. It is a way of caring *over* students that is imbued with power and unlikely to change the status quo. This side of caring is not addressed in the OCT ethical standards.

The ethical standards of Care and Integrity seem to conflict in these circumstances. The OCT (2012) states that “honesty, reliability and moral action are embodied in the ethical standard of Integrity” (p. 9). Other than suggesting that “continual reflection” will aid teachers in “exercising” their integrity, no guidance is provided for its maintenance in grading practice. The OCT’s ethical standards suffer in this regard from the same limitation as other professional codes. Macfarlane (2011) explains that “while such documents invariably contain a praiseworthy set of sentiments, they are often too generalised and de-contextualised to be of much value to the practitioner” (p. 80). The brief descriptions of Care, Trust, Respect and Integrity leave much open to interpretation. One teacher’s understanding of integrity, for example, could mean giving a student a low but honest grade, whereas another teacher might raise the same student’s grade as a matter of moral action. Both could claim to have maintained their professional integrity based on the OCT standards.

Grading decisions intended to teach life lessons

Professional integrity is also at stake in the three instances in this final category, but they are fundamentally different because they involve students who were found wanting. The rationale for lowering grades in these instances related to the students’ work ethic rather than their academic achievement. Kevin, Tanar, and York, like some of the teachers in Zoeckler’s (2005) study, believed that grades could teach a “life lesson” (p. 154).

The alteration of grades to teach life lessons could be discussed in relation to all four of the OCT's ethical standards. For example, York had high regard for his student's ability (Respect), and he tried to direct the student onto a more productive path (Care). However, he resorted to reporting a grade that he knew was inaccurate (Integrity), and the student may no longer perceive him as fair (Trust). Although the ethical standards make core values explicit for the teaching profession, it is necessary to go beyond them to understand the strong moral imperative in the participants' responses. In essence, they believed that teaching students to be productive members of society was their professional responsibility. This value is reflected in one of the OCT's (2012) five standards for *practice*, which states that "members facilitate the development of students as contributing citizens of Canadian society" (p. 13). York's student was playing video games instead of writing essays, Kevin's student was attending half instead of full school days, and Tanar's student wrote one instead of two essays. Kevin was particularly vehement in arguing that a passing grade would teach his student that it was acceptable to "not show up for work". Attendance makes students' effort visible, and it continues to figure in teachers' calculation of grades (e.g., CMEC, 2009). Work completion is also seen as a proxy for effort, sometimes to the degree that teachers require work to be completed, even when learning expectations have already been met or exceeded (Allen & Lambating, 2001). In all of these instances, retributive justice was sought. Noddings (1999) explains that retributive justice requires rights to be earned, and thus deserved. From a retributivist perspective, you get your due, good or bad. Punishment should not only deter the offender, but also serve as a lesson for others (Fox & DeMarco, 2001). Because their students' work habits appeared less than desirable for productive citizenship, Kevin, York and Tanar felt that lowered grades were a justified consequence.

Kevin and Tanar both expressed concerns about students not being treated equally in these circumstances. Equality and equity are often confused in CA practice (Tierney, 2013). In measurement theory, equality is defined as the "state of being the same," whereas equity involves "treatment that is just under the circumstances" and "appropriate to the characteristic and sufficient to the need" (Messick, 2000, p. 12). Kevin and Tanar felt

that passing students who had not demonstrated effort through regular attendance or work completion was unfair to those who had. Given that both instances involved summative assessments and final grades, equal treatment would enhance the justness of any subsequent selection for rewards or opportunities. However, an equitable approach would be more productive for student learning, which is ideally the ultimate goal of CA. In these instances, the ethical standard of Care fell wayside to the participants' sense of justice. As Noddings (1999) has argued, the ethics of justice and care need not be at odds, and it is possible to "ensure that justice is meted out caringly" (Colnerud, 2006, p. 369). The OCT (2012) standards, as well as standards formulated more specifically for CA (JCSEE, 2003), do aim to support ethical practice, but they do not acknowledge the moral complexity of negotiating between the ideals of equality and equity, or justice and care.

Kevin and Tanar's students ultimately received passing grades because their principals intervened. This highlights Moss' (2013) point that "teachers do not assess in a vacuum" (p. 252). Principals do participate in grade alteration, sometimes for less than ethical reasons (e.g., Strauss, 2014). Both Kevin and Tanar experienced an inner conflict because of their principals' decisions. Colnerud (2006) explains this is because teachers have a "double mandate" (p. 379) in being accountable to two parties, their students and the school/system, which do not always operate in harmony. Pope, Green, Johnson and Mitchell (2009) found that teachers frequently identify "institutional requirements" (p. 780) as a source of ethical conflict in CA. From the information that Tanar and Kevin shared, their principals' motivation for giving the students passing grades is not clear. Were they zealously upholding policy, as Tanar suggested, or did they intervene to maintain trust in home-school relationships? Grading decisions can be counterproductive for students when their justification is not accepted or understood (JCSEE, 2003, p. 113). For grades to serve students constructively, school relationships need a strong ethical foundation that includes core values such as care, trust, respect and integrity. But ultimately in a climate where these values were truly understood and practiced, would grades be altered to teach life lessons?

Conclusion

Drawing on information shared by experienced teachers in Ontario, Canada, I have discussed three reasons that grades are altered: the need for compassion; the desire to provide students with opportunity; and the intent to teach life lessons. In this final section, I identify limitations in my work and implications for further research, professional learning, and fair CA practice.

Limitations

A supplemental analysis necessarily carries forth the limitations of the initial study. The most salient here stems from the use of self-reports, which are not necessarily congruent with actual practice. Without the perspectives of the other stakeholders involved, it is impossible to confirm that the instances occurred exactly as told. However, their credibility is supported by context of their telling. The initial study was not focused on grade alteration, and the participants were not justifying their views. It was clear from their reflections that they wanted their practices to serve their students' best interests. A second limitation arises from the use of a small number of cases situated in one educational context. News reports suggest that grade alterations occur for other reasons that were not mentioned by the participants in this study, such as financial gain and accountability pressure (e.g., Brown, 2012; White, 2013). Although these circumstances may occur in Ontario as elsewhere, the discussion here was limited to the information shared by the participants as we discussed fairness in CA.

Implications for research, professional learning, and practice

Instances of grade alteration in teachers' reports and the news are sufficiently frequent to suggest that a better understanding of the phenomenon is needed. News reports tend to involve behaviour that many people would consider unethical (e.g., principal altering his son's grades). I have aimed to show that the ethics of grade alteration are often more subtle and complex. Research with teachers is needed to examine two points: a) the extent to which circumstances warranting grade alteration are recognised; and b) the influence of students' characteristics

in these circumstances. Given the critical role of leadership for fair assessment practices (Webber, Scott, Aitken, & Lupart, 2013), research that investigates principals' roles in the range of circumstances that lead to grade alteration would also be useful.

Teachers often have few formal opportunities to learn about ethics in CA. Texts for teachers on CA tend to focus on purposes and methods, with very little mention of the ethical dilemmas teachers face in practice. Some texts on the ethics of teaching contain a few assessment-related cases (e.g., (Infantino & Wilke, 2009; Strike & Soltis, 2009), but this is proportionally insufficient given the relationship between learning and assessment, and the consequences of CA for students. The moral complexity of CA needs greater attention in teacher education and professional development programs. Explicit discussion about grade alteration is especially important to help teachers and school leaders recognise and respond to the variety of circumstances that affect students. They must have opportunities to learn about CA as a value-laden practice that requires skill, guiding principles, and critical reflection for it to genuinely serve diverse students.

The idea that CA should be transparent is now widely accepted in the educational community, and assessment criteria is commonly shared with students (Tierney, 2013). Nonetheless, grading decisions are often still made individually and idiosyncratically by teachers. Silva, Munk and Bursuck (2005) recommend that grading adaptations for students with disabilities be "chosen collaboratively and implemented systematically" (p. 87). When grade alterations are necessary, it would be wise to keep in mind that assessment decisions are more productive for student learning with stakeholder buy-in (JCSEE, 2003). A more transparent and systematic approach to grade alterations would be a fairer for *all* students.

Final thoughts

Research on grade alteration may have the same effect as news reports in undermining public confidence in schools and teachers. However, the fairness of CA will continue to be compromised if the circumstances and reasons for grade alteration are not examined. Circumstances warranting grade alteration will be recognised for some students, but not for others,

regardless of need. Instances of CA that garner attention in the news will continue to have mild repercussions (e.g., principal reassignment), while instances that pass unseen impact the equitable distribution of opportunity. The dark angels of assessment represent the very real pressures that teachers wrestle with in practice, and they cast long shadows on the fairness of grading decisions. The consequences of grade alteration have been overlooked for too long, and it is time for a more considered response.

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