

Gradeless Assessment: Improving Engagement and Motivation in High School Classrooms

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Abstract

When I first began teaching, conventional methods of learning and assessment practices were part of my everyday teaching experience. I commonly gave worksheets and tests that encouraged rote memorization as I felt they were rigorous and reflected the high standard I set for my students. I soon discovered that my students were struggling, both with the methods of learning I had provided, and the assessments that accompanied them. This prompted the beginning of my own educational journey, one that held student engagement and motivation as the focus. As I incorporated inquiry-based learning and competency-focused strategies into my classroom, it was essential that my assessment practices shift to align with them. My journey through the Master of Education (M.Ed.) program helped reaffirm the critical role that strength-based feedback has on the learning process, reminding me how important it is that teachers provide their students an opportunity to reflect, learn and grow. As I abandoned traditional marking for gradeless assessment practices, I noticed a significant change in the attitudes my students had about their learning. This paper claims that gradeless classrooms have positive implications for student engagement and motivation at the high school level. Gradeless classrooms provide equitable opportunities for students by employing strength-based feedback, digital portfolios and student conferencing as alternative forms of assessment. These strategies provide students with the freedom to demonstrate their learning in different ways. Gradeless classrooms positively impact student well-being by decreasing stress levels and helping them develop motivation for learning beyond grades. They also encourage student growth and meaningful engagement which aligns with the First Peoples Principles of Learning. Gradeless assessment has applications in all educational contexts, but this paper will explore the specific role it can play in high school classes. The perceived implications for gradeless classrooms are significant as they include an opportunity for students to become more engaged with their learning.

Keywords: Gradeless Assessment, Engagement, Motivation, Well-being, Strength-based feedback, Inquiry-based learning, Equity, High School

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Chapter One: Introduction

This paper explores the positive impacts that gradeless assessment has on high school students. Conventional educational practices have emphasized grades as a way to motivate and rank students in their various subjects. My own schooling experience was one of worksheets, tests, and competitions for top marks, not for understanding or developing thinking skills. In my early years as a teacher, I continued that conventional practice, but have since seen the stress and negative impacts on student self-esteem that comes with conventional grading. This paper illuminates how gradeless assessment can provide equitable learning opportunities, increasing student well-being and improving their engagement with their learning.

My Journey to Gradeless Assessment

My journey to gradeless assessment began 14 years ago when I took a teaching position at a high school in a small, rural town in Northern British Columbia. It was an adventurous undertaking as I was moving to an unknown school, in an unknown part of the province, with unknown learners. As I situated myself, I quickly learned that my teaching practices did not work for these students. I taught them the only way I knew, using formal teacher-centred lessons, rigorous note-taking, and frequent assessments in the forms of worksheets, quizzes, and tests. Slowly the class attendance started dwindling, and those who attended regularly were struggling to get by. Still, I persevered and continued to prepare lessons that I thought were highly engaging with the hope that the students would start performing better on their tests.

My wake-up call to this disillusionment came in the form of a struggling Grade 8 student. I distinctly remember them sitting through an entire block of science with an unfinished test in front of them. I felt it was fair to give them more time, and so I asked them to stay and finish up during lunch hour. At the end of lunch, over two hours since they began, they admitted that they were still not finished. When I took their test, it was mostly blank. To this day I remember the look of shame on their

face when they handed it over. This moment has stayed with me for 14 years because it was the turning point in my career; I knew something needed to change.

Later that year, I had the opportunity to be mentored by my Vice-Principal. They introduced me to inquiry-based learning, which promotes the deeper exploration of concepts through student-focused activities. It was the shift that I was looking for, and that the students desperately needed. Slowly, I noticed a positive change in their attitudes about their learning and towards school. Attendance became better, as did their achievement. As my teaching practice changed, so did the way I viewed assessment. I put less of an emphasis on summative assessment, and more into the process of learning. This process included having more conversations with students and allowing them to show their learning in different ways. Not only were they growing and learning, but so was I. This was the beginning of my journey to gradeless assessment.

Shifting from Content to Competency

Though my teaching practice had changed, I was still bound by prescriptive Ministry outlines for reporting. I struggled to put percentages on student growth and didn't understand how I could grade conversations meaningfully. For many years this was my battle, and though I continued to use inquiry-based learning, my assessment practices still did not align with that method of learning. Years later, now in a new district, I was again afforded the opportunity for mentorship. This experience opened my eyes to the world of competencies, the bridge I needed between my teaching and assessment practices. The new language and requirements for reporting, acknowledging student growth and the development of deeper-level thinking competencies fit intrinsically with the practices I had been implementing for many years.

The only issue with the Ministry reporting requirements was that they only applied for students up to Grade 9. For senior high school students, percentages were still required. I was again faced with a dilemma: do I teach conventionally and make my assessments align with percentages, or do I change my

assessment to make percentages fit with inquiry-based learning? To me, the solution was obvious. Though I was going against the common practice in my school and district, it felt ingenuine to deny senior students the benefits of inquiry-based and competency-focused learning. Driven by my desire to do what I perceived to be best for students, I once again delved into the unknown, and began implementing gradeless assessment into my senior science classrooms.

Looking back on this journey, I see many parallels to my own experiences as a student. My Undergraduate Science Degree courses encouraged rote memorization, whereas the M.Ed. has been filled with opportunities to grow as a learner, reflect, and develop critical thinking and communication skills. This has been supported by the thoughtful feedback provided by my professors. I have also been given the confidence to continue in my practice through the teachings of Dewey, Montessori, Freire as well as other pedagogical leaders. I see their passion and dedication and know that they place the student at the heart of their practice. I carry that inspiration through my own practice and reflect on it during the times when I need to be reminded to have conviction in the work I am doing.

Significance of the Topic

From personal experience, I have seen how gradeless assessment has cultivated student confidence and caused a shift in their attitudes towards learning. This holds significant meaning for the way students feel about school and about themselves as learners. Blum (2020) reminds us that many conventional assessment practices fail to promote learning or produce positive relationships, and that they do not meet the needs of diverse students. Therefore, it is critical that educators rethink the way that they assess their students to ensure they are providing equitable opportunities. The significance of this paper lies in helping teachers realize how gradeless assessment can actively engage students in their learning and contribute to their overall well-being and success in school.

Presenting the Argument

In this paper, I claim that gradeless classrooms have positive implications for student engagement and motivation at the high school level. I make this claim for three reasons. First, gradeless classrooms create an equitable learning environment for students. Klapp's (2015) longitudinal study focused on the negative effects that grading has on students' subsequent achievement and found that "graded low-ability students received lower subsequent grades through Grades 7-9 and had lower odds to finish upper secondary education, compared to ungraded low-ability students" (p. 302). Gradeless classrooms also eliminate rigid expectations, the need for students to seek out the teacher's approval and the commodification of learning in favour of more authentic learning situations (O'Connor & Lessing, 2017). Second, gradeless classrooms support the emotional well-being of students. Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens, (2002, as cited in Ndoye, 2017) indicate that students' anxiety and stress hinders deep learning when assessments are used to assign a grade. Schinske and Tanner (2014) also found that conventional grading "lowers interest in learning and enhances anxiety and extrinsic motivation, especially among those students who are struggling" (p. 162). Third, gradeless classrooms help improve the attitudes of students towards their learning. Masters (2013) reminds us that while conventional assessment is intended to challenge and motivate students, it can have the opposite effect on their attitudes and behaviour towards learning. This is because grades appear to play on students' fears of punishment or shame, or their desires to outcompete peers, as opposed to stimulating interest and enjoyment in learning tasks (Pulfrey et al., 2011, as cited in Schinske & Tanner, 2014).

Overview of the Paper

This paper provides an in-depth examination of the literature and scholarly discourse associated with gradeless assessment. It investigates the impacts of gradeless assessment on educational equity, the well-being of students, as well as their attitudes towards learning. In addition, a practical approach to gradeless assessment is presented, including how teachers can shift their mindset to embrace

innovative teaching techniques, as well as how to align inquiry and competency practices with assessment. Furthermore, this paper summarizes the academic findings supporting gradeless assessment and concludes with the implications for education and positive impacts on students.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Gradeless assessment emphasizes the process of learning instead of the accrual of numerical scores. To this end, teachers employ alternative forms of assessment such as rubrics, portfolios and conferences which emphasize the use of strength-based feedback (Whitmell, 2020). These strategies assess students' growth and development in various curricular and core competencies, which replaces conventional marking practices. Instead of receiving a percent or letter grade, students are provided with descriptive feedback to help guide their learning. A focus on the development of competencies is meant to foster deeper, more transferable learning, and to encourage the active engagement of students (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2019b).

This review considers the available evidence related to this topic. Relevant literature was obtained from peer reviewed articles and government documents, and by cross-referencing related materials. Through an analysis of how gradeless learning impacts equity, student well-being and their attitudes, we can begin to understand the benefits and relevance of incorporating this assessment strategy into senior high school classrooms.

Theoretical Framework: Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) placed student engagement at the forefront of educational practices. His goal was to raise consciousness and cause transformative change in both society and in education. Freire questioned teaching practices that supported oppressive knowledge and was critical of narrative education that was detached from reality. His concept of "banking education" involved using knowledge as a form of power over students. Freire felt this practice perpetuated oppression and resulted in education that lacked the power to transform lives. This stemmed from educators depositing concepts in students' heads without their need for critical thought. To break away from this mentality, Freire outlined the roles that teachers and students play in co-creating education as a practice of freedom. Freire called this process liberation and explained how it could be achieved

through shared dialogue and mutual respect. He called the process of action ‘praxis,’ a form of practical education. Freire believed that reflection and action can transform reality and are sources of both knowledge and creation.

Historically, education in Canada has been teacher-focused, with emphasis on note taking, rote memorization and achievement based on test results. Brookhart et al. (2016) stated that “high schools tended to stay with norm-referenced grades to accommodate the need for ranking students for college admission” (p. 805). In British Columbia, however, there has been a fundamental shift to both the curriculum and how student achievement is assessed. The focus is now placed on understanding and applying knowledge as opposed to memorizing facts. This philosophy aligns with Freire and shifts away from the banking and narrative styles that he so adamantly opposed. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can serve as a theoretical framework for gradeless assessment in the way that it encourages equitable opportunities for all students to demonstrate their learning. Freire’s philosophy also connects directly to the idea of education that serves to support the mental well-being of students, and to improve their attitudes towards learning.

Positive Implications for Engagement and Motivation

In the current British Columbia school system, students from kindergarten to ninth grade are evaluated using a proficiency scale which uses descriptive feedback to communicate progress. This embodies the spirit of gradeless assessment, where time and effort are given to the development of curricular skills while students are actively engaged in their learning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2019c). This form of assessment does not apply for students in Grades 10-12, and they are provided with a percent grade at the end of a course. These percentages are often determined from the use of conventional forms of teaching and assessment. Link (2018) explained how teachers often incorporate effort, and meeting deadlines into student grades, and suggested that many even utilize grading as a form of classroom management. This assumes that students will be motivated to raise

achievement levels to meet these standards, however, Masters (2013) found that viewing achievement in terms of grades encourages a fixed mindset about students' learning abilities. Chiaravalli (2017) noticed that when teachers use conventional assessment, students struggle to develop traits such as being able to self-regulate. Additionally, he found that students have difficulty guiding their own learning and so they become passive to the learning process. To overcome this, Freire believed a teacher's role was to ask their students challenging questions to have them critically analyze their own beliefs (Gutek, 2011). He felt this process would help initiate critical thinking and encourage student engagement. Freire also believed "their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed" (Freire, 1970, p. 81). Ultimately, the goal of gradeless assessment is to actively involve students in their learning, and to improve their engagement and motivation to learn. This can be accomplished by creating equitable learning environments, supporting student well-being, and improving their attitudes towards school.

Creating Equitable Learning Environments

Equitable learning environments identify and replace practices that put students in positions of disadvantage. Montenegro and Jankowski (2020) reminded educators that "equitable assessment should work to ensure that learning outcomes, and how we assess those outcomes, are done in ways which do not privilege certain students over others" (p. 14). Often, conventional practices inadvertently punish students with fewer resources, such as access to food, or family support. Safir and Dugan (2021) called this process 'test-and-punish' and remind educators that when it comes to assessment, "what is *measurable* is not the same as what is *valuable*" (p. 12). Gradeless practices contribute to establishing equitable learning environments by removing measurable barriers to learning, which ultimately has positive implications for student engagement and motivation.

Historically, conventional assessment practices have been thought of as motivators for students to achieve to the best of their ability, but there are questions as to how accurate these claims may be. Schinske and Tanner (2014) discovered that “students receiving descriptive feedback (but *not* grades) on an initial assignment performed significantly better on follow-up quantitative tasks and problem-solving tasks than did students receiving grades or students receiving no feedback” (p. 161). They determined that “perhaps, at best, grading motivates high-achieving students to continue getting high grades—regardless of whether that goal also happens to overlap with learning” (p. 162). Klapp’s (2015) longitudinal study focused on the negative effects that grading has on students’ subsequent achievement and found that “graded low-ability students received lower subsequent grades through Grades 7-9 and had lower odds to finish upper secondary education, compared to ungraded low-ability students” (p. 302). Similarly, Beck, Rorrer-Woody and Pierce’s (1991) quantitative study on learning, grades and academic performance suggested that excessive interest in grades impedes the growth of academic skills. Overall, gradeless assessment provides opportunities for students to learn and grow from feedback, and to demonstrate their learning over time. This practice is equitable because it accommodates learners with differing abilities and provides space for educators to incorporate culturally responsive learning environments for students from diverse backgrounds.

Incorporating the First Peoples Principles of Learning. Preston and Claypool’s (2021) qualitative research study found that the “mainstream culture-infused, linguistic-laden practices of assessment disadvantage Indigenous students” (p. 4). They also found that standardized assessment practices which include a Western worldview, and which focus on cognitive abilities can be discriminatory. Trumbull and Nelson-Barber (2019) also found that this type of assessment is detrimental to Indigenous student’s engagement as it is disconnected from their cultural ways of knowing and learning. Freire (1970) referred to this act as cultural invasion and described how it can “inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression” (p. 152).

Incorporating the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FPPL) can play an integral role in engaging Indigenous students with their learning. FPPL attempts to “identify common elements in the varied teaching and learning approaches that prevail within particular First Nations societies” (First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), n.d.). These can be integral to helping students make connections to school. Such principles include recognizing that learning involves patience and time, that learning is embedded in story, and that it is holistic, reflective, and relational (FNESC). The philosophy of gradeless assessment fits intrinsically with these principles, as it provides opportunity for student growth and an avenue to express learning in different ways. It also aligns with Freire’s concept of genuine teaching, wherein teachers are ethically committed to fighting discriminatory practices (Gutek, 2011). In this sense, gradeless assessment supports the needs of the individual student, and helps to create a culturally responsive and equitable learning environment for them to engage with.

Supporting Student Well-being

High school can be a very stressful time for students which can have a significant impact on their personal well-being. Stress and anxiety about school can be compounded by a multitude of factors, such as socioeconomic status, mental health issues, friendship dynamics and learning abilities. Conventional grading practices can also add to student stress and anxiety. Masters (2013) suggested that grades send demotivating messages which undermine student’s self-confidence and result in disengagement from the learning process. He also determined that grades fail to provide a sense of the learning progress that students make over time. Schinske and Tanner (2014) found that conventional grading “lowers interest in learning and enhances anxiety and extrinsic motivation, especially among those students who are struggling” (p. 162). Struyven et al., (2002, as cited in Ndoye, 2017) also indicated that students’ anxiety and stress hinder deep learning when assessments are used to assign a grade. McMorran and Ragupathi’s (2020) research determined that grades incentivize learning for the achievement of a mark, rather than for learning itself, which increases student stress.

Gradeless classrooms can offer solutions to the complex issue of anxiety. This is accomplished by focusing in on student growth and development, by providing students with meaningful opportunities to demonstrate their learning and by providing strength-based feedback to prompt self-reflection and deeper understanding. The BC Ministry of Education's *A Framework for Classroom Assessment* (2019a) suggested that when assessment is competency-driven, it allows students the freedom to demonstrate their learning and growth in different ways, which may reduce student stress. McMorran et al. (2017) claimed that alternative forms of assessment result in decreasing student stress levels and encouraging them to take more academic risks. Sanders (2021) also found that gradeless assessment decreased student stress about grades and making mistakes. He explained, however, that not all stressors were removed, as many students experienced uncertainty around needing to take more personal accountability for their learning. Though stressful, this opportunity will help students develop competencies that translate to the real world, such as being able to critically evaluate and communicate about their learning. This act involves meaningful engagement, which has implications for overcoming standardized educational practices.

Addressing the Commodification of Learning. Gradeless assessment contributes to the well-being of students by addressing the commodification of learning, which Shukr (2017) described as “assigning economic value to something which previously had a non-commercial aspect” (p. 65). In education, this commodification stems from conventional grading practices which favour a one-size-fits-all model of assessment. O'Connor and Lessing (2017) described how this is driven by external rewards and practices and that it turns students into commodities “that are packaged and disseminated to colleges, where the system starts all over again” (p. 304). Freire (1970) also described the commodification of education where humans are alienated from their own decision making and how it changes them into objects. This process de-emphasizes “expanding knowledge and exploring new

possibilities, problem-solving and inculcating creativity thinking” (Shukr, p. 66) which are all practices at the heart of gradeless assessment.

Fostering mentalities which praise competition is another aspect of the commodification of learning. This is often perpetuated through the thoughts and values of parents who were commodified through their own educational experiences. Parents in Pérez-Arredondo and Bernales-Carrasco’s (2021) qualitative study “explicitly highlight how they, inadvertently, transfer this competition to their children” (p. 8). The study also described how parents and teachers felt numerical assessments fostered healthy competition between students. However, Pérez-Arredondo and Bernales-Carrasco also acknowledged the negative impact that grades have on student stress, frustration, and anxiety. They found that grades “contributed to a detrimental learning atmosphere where the educational system and parents, alike, are to blame” (p. 7). O’Connor and Lessing (2017) noticed that in gradeless classrooms, students were “less distracted, more engaged, and more imaginative when they are freed from the constant stress of the grade” (p. 307). When considering how to establish equity through assessment, it is critical for educators to provide authentic learning experiences. This allows students to actively participate in their own learning, becoming genuinely engaged in the process.

Improving Attitudes Towards School

Changing student attitudes towards learning is another important theme of gradeless assessment. When conventional assessment practices are used, students often ‘chase the grade.’ This may result in students copying work just to get a good mark. The outcome of this practice may include general apathy towards the learning tasks and compliance with teacher expectations. Hartono (2016) suggested that “when we emphasize grades as the sole end of education, then students will always treat it as a duty or a chore” (para. 5). Masters (2013) explained that while conventional assessment is intended to challenge and motivate students, it can have the opposite effect on their attitudes and behaviour towards learning. This is because grades appear to play on students’ fears of punishment or

shame, or their desires to outcompete peers, as opposed to stimulating interest and enjoyment in learning tasks (Pulfrey et al., 2011, as cited in Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Shame is a particularly damaging feeling for students as it can crush a “child’s self-worth and spirit” (Brown, 2020, p. 3). Masters (2013) found that the experience of failure makes learning less pleasurable, lowers student self confidence and leads to disengagement and poorer learning outcomes. Kohn (1999) also suggested that emphasizing the importance of grades results in a decrease in students’ interest in learning, a decrease in their willingness to take on challenging tasks, as well as a reduction in the quality of their thinking.

Gradeless classrooms help improve the attitudes of students towards their learning. If students are given tasks on which they are likely to succeed, then the resulting success experiences will make learning more pleasurable, increase engagement, build self-confidence and lead to further learning success. O’Connor and Lessing (2017) determined that students are found to be less distracted, more engaged, and imaginative without the stress of grades. Learning itself becomes the reward; it becomes enjoyable and encourages learning beyond the classroom. McMorran et al. (2017) argued that gradeless classrooms help students develop motivation for learning beyond grades. Anderson (2016) also showed that when students can create a connection to the curriculum, it results in increased interest and motivation to engage with their own learning. All of this is accomplished through a partnership between student and teacher, and this relationship is critical to the successful implementation of gradeless assessment.

Building Meaningful Relationships. An important aspect of changing student attitudes towards learning is through relationships. Gradeless assessment is student-focused, and teacher guidance is critical to the success of the learning experience. Bourke (2015) outlined how the facilitation of alternative grading strategies gives students meaningful control over their learning which changes the relationship between student and teacher. Richart and Church (2020) further stated:

It is a two-way street actively involving students and teachers in dialogue about learning. It doesn't reside in a task and is not the evaluation of one's performance on that task. Formative assessment lives in our listening, observing, examining, and analyzing, and reflecting on the process of learning. (p. 12)

Through shared dialogue and increased conversation, authentic relationships are forged, and educational experiences are co-created (Freire, 1970). Gradeless classrooms create space for communication that fosters trust, and which allows teachers to better know their students and their learning needs. They promote the acquisition of skills and capacities while strengthening teacher–student bonds through feedback (Domene-Martos et al., 2021). They also eliminate rigid expectations and the need for students to seek out the teacher's approval (O'Connor & Lessing, 2017).

O'Connor and Lessing (2017) also described how conventional grades accentuate the authority and expertise of the teacher while reinforcing the fixed mindset that success means doing what the teacher asks. They explained how gradeless classrooms facilitate communication and increase the likelihood that teachers get to know their students personally. Relationships can be built by taking opportunities to talk with students (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2019d), and reconceptualizing what learning means can be a starting point for these types of conversations (Bourke, 2015). Though some teachers may struggle with this shift, it is important to remember that “a pedagogy that promotes progressive ideas such as valuing student voice and promoting authentic learning ultimately falls short if it's only measured through points that culminate in a grade, with little to no qualitative feedback” (O'Connor & Lessing, p. 306). In a gradeless classroom setting, these ideals can be brought to fruition and better relationships can be established.

Summary

Based upon the review of the literature, the benefits of gradeless assessment through improving equity, well-being, and student attitudes are evident. Though “assigning fair and meaningful grades to

students will continue to challenge educators at every level” (Guskey, 2013, p. 72), recognizing when grading practices are not equitable is an important first step for educators to take. Understanding the impact grading has on the well-being and attitudes of students is also critical. This reminds educators that although “some students are motivated by grades, it is also true that there are endless other ways to motivate young people” (O’Connor & Lessing, 2017, p. 305), and while grading systems may have the intention of providing incentives for motivation, it does not help students who may lack ability or drive. Grades can also be a stumbling block to building the core competencies, which include “collaborating and communicating effectively, taking risks, learning from failure, thinking critically, productively engaging with authority, and learning over the course of a lifetime” (Tannock, 2017, as cited in McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020, p. 926). Freire (1970) also viewed education as an ongoing activity and recognized that for education to truly change people’s lives, it takes time. To this end, gradeless classrooms put “the focus squarely on learning, eliminating grades in favor of feedback and growth” (Chiaravalli, 2017, para. 7). Ultimately, gradeless classrooms provide students with successful experiences that can increase their engagement and confidence, resulting in future academic success (Masters, 2013). The next chapter explores these themes further within a practical application of gradeless assessment.

Chapter Three: Application

This chapter facilitates the integration of gradeless assessment into high school classrooms.

Though I am speaking from my own experiences as a science teacher, the goal for this paper is to suggest broad strategies that could be used in any educational setting. First, I take the reader through a journey that begins with the need to counter the narrative around grades. I then discuss shifting teaching mindsets and embracing innovation which influences student attitudes. The next steps align teaching strategies with gradeless assessment practices and highlight the importance of inquiry-based learning and a competency focus. The final section provides practical strategies to implement gradeless assessment and discusses the use of strength-based feedback, the integration of digital portfolios and conferencing for communicating student learning.

Countering the Narrative Around Grades

It is a massive undertaking to try to change the narrative around grades, a practice that is thoroughly embedded within the education system. Formal education is entrenched with basing a students' value on a letter grade or a percentage. Perhaps this is because we were all raised in this system; it is familiar and feels safe. Somehow that comfort has been translated into a practice that has been deemed good for students. However, I raise the uncomfortable notion that grades are not what is best for students; they are not equitable, nor do grades achieve the goals for students' engagement and motivation that we expect them to.

I have worked in many schools where teachers devote time and energy to the question of how to improve student attendance, engagement, and motivation. These conversations ultimately revolve around the latest and greatest teaching strategy, or behavioural technique, but never has the conversation been around shifting the narrative about assessment. It may seem counterintuitive to solve systemic issues through assessment, but from personal experience I have witnessed the genuine positive impact that gradeless classrooms can have on student achievement.

So much of the learning we do in life is gradeless. From how to ride a bike, or how to tie your shoes, learning is accomplished through practice and feedback. Parents do not give their children a percentage grade on how well they made the bed; instead, they model, give feedback, and encourage them to practice. If this type of learning is so integral to how we master life skills, then I challenge educators to think about school in the same way. Instead of diverging from this natural form of learning, embrace the way that it can help spark true motivation and the drive to learn and grow. If, as educators, we can shift the narrative from basing a student's worth on whether they got an 'A', and away from using grades as a form of bribery for compliance, then we can get to the heart of the matter. Learning, relationships, equity, engagement, and motivation are all integral pieces of the philosophy of gradeless assessment.

Education is so much more than achieving a number on a page. It is about developing competencies, learning how to think and reason, justifying and communicating understanding, and building relationships (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2019c). How can you genuinely assign a number to those things in a way that recognizes the growth that students experience in those areas? Gradeless assessment provides an avenue to shift from a student's drive to 'get an A' towards being valued for their growth and development.

I challenge educators to reconsider what grades actually mean to them. That may involve an uncomfortable realization that their teaching practices need to shift. I never wanted to put my students in a place of disadvantage, but the difficult truth is that it happened. I needed a wake-up call to realize that, and to start my own pedagogical journey to gradeless assessment. I encourage educators to challenge their own narrative around grades, and to consider the positive implications that this change could have for their students. Shifting this mindset is the first step in implementing gradeless assessment.

Shifting Teaching Mindset

My journey to gradeless assessment has been over a decade in the making, so I understand and value the time that it takes to make such a huge philosophical shift. Conventional grading practices have been ingrained in teachers through their own educational experiences and many “consider grades as an indispensable part of their teaching practices” (Pérez-Arredondo & Bernal-Carrasco, 2021). Since teachers play such an integral role in the relationships fostered by gradeless classrooms, which serves to engage and motivate students, it is critical to acknowledge the trend of teacher reluctance as an impediment to the process. Reluctance includes a feeling of teachers being “unable to adjust their teaching and assessments to suit the new system” (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020, p. 933) and therefore, maintaining grade-centric attitudes towards assessment.

McMorran and Ragupathi’s (2020) mixed-methods survey highlighted the feelings of 500 faculty members at a University in Singapore that offered gradeless assessment to its first-year students. While teachers recognized the many benefits of gradeless learning for their students, they displayed negativity towards their own experiences and felt that gradeless assessment had no benefit for them. It is evident that teachers “must be integral in developing pedagogical innovations that help de-emphasize grades as a way to motivate and measure learning” (p. 925). Regardless of the institution or grade level, teacher buy-in is key to the success of gradeless assessment for learning. A pedagogical shift and commitment to innovative teaching strategies is required to break free from an educational system that values grades over lived experiences (O’Connor & Lessing, 2017).

Within the past few years, there have been significant factors impacting education. Digital technology, the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action all demand that education change to be more equitable and inclusive. As a result, teaching mindsets around educational and assessment practices must also be challenged. The first step to this

philosophical change is to embrace innovation, and to consider the positive impact that gradeless assessment can have on student attitudes.

Embracing Innovation

When students are not engaged with their learning, many teachers respond by ‘raising the bar’ or increasing the level of difficulty of assignments or tests. Their emphasis is placed on higher standards which include rigor, workload, and content mastery. However, these strategies are not equitable and often act as punitive measures towards learning. Before gradeless assessment can be genuinely implemented, teachers must be willing to embrace innovation, both in thought and in action. It is critical that the emphasis must shift towards valuing the time learning takes and embracing creativity over conformity. Safir and Dugan (2021) ask that educators incorporate bold and experimental pedagogical approaches into their teaching, even if it feels uncomfortable. That begins with recognizing “the features of a pedagogy of compliance that still operate inside many classrooms and professional-learning spaces” (p. 107).

Shukr (2017) discovered that as education becomes increasingly commodified, the role of teachers becomes a transactional delivery of a service. For those who may be trapped in this world of convention, it is important to remember the process of “de-grading” can be done in stages (Kohn, 1999). Kohn also suggests that innovative thinking can challenge the archaic remnants of a factory-oriented approach to instruction,” (para. 33) as well as other aspects of schools that compound the issue of assessment. Though teachers may be fearful of adopting a philosophy of gradeless assessment because they are afraid of how their students may react, that should not be a mitigating factor in their decision-making process. Working alongside students in a spirit of innovation and collaboration can help facilitate this shift and allow students to also embrace a different way of looking at grades.

Influencing Student Attitudes

The shift in mindset that teachers must make to embrace gradeless assessment must also be done by students. Students may be used to being passive participants in their learning, especially in classrooms that are teacher-centered, and which employ conventional teaching and assessment practices. Gradeless assessment asks students to become actively involved in their education. It also changes their relationship with grades and the purpose of school. Ultimately, it asks students to see the value of working to learn. This shift does not happen overnight. Just as students have been conditioned to think about grades as a transaction (Freire, 1970), they will need to shift their own thoughts, values, and attitudes to embrace gradeless assessment.

Gradeless classrooms eliminate many of the negative impacts that conventional grading practices have on students, such as a failure to stimulate interest in learning, negative impacts on motivation, increasing fear of failure and anxiety and an enhancement of avoiding challenging tasks (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). If students can embrace the philosophy of gradeless assessment, they will experience greater motivation for learning beyond the achievement of a grade (McMorran et al., 2017). Together with their teachers, students can help foster the culture associated with a gradeless classroom and experience the positive impacts it has on their engagement and drive to learn.

Aligning Teaching Strategies with Assessment Practices

Once having embraced the philosophy behind gradeless assessment, educators must evaluate how to apply it within their classrooms. Gradeless assessment requires foresight and planning, and it must also align with innovative teaching practices. Teachers who struggle with implementation may be trying to overlay the process with conventional practices. Guskey (2013) reminds educators that the process of meaningful assessment “requires thoughtful and informed professional judgment, an abiding concern for what best serves the interests of students and their families, and careful examination of the

tasks students are asked to complete and the questions they are asked to answer to demonstrate their learning” (p. 72).

Educators must be mindful of providing flexible learning opportunities that value curiosity and skill development instead of those which promote content mastery and memorization. This practice aligns with traditional societal views of educational success, where students are judged against a set standard. Using teaching strategies which align with gradeless assessment practices allow for what Safir and Dugan (2021) call a pedagogy of voice. This practice shifts both learning and power to the student and eliminates the duality of teaching and assessment. When aligned through inquiry-based learning or through a lens of competency, assessment becomes a natural part of learning, and not a singular event.

Inquiry-Based Learning

One method of teaching and learning that fits intrinsically with gradeless assessment is inquiry-based learning (IBL). This process involves students choosing a topic of curiosity and asking questions that guide subsequent research. Students process information, ultimately evaluating and sharing the learning they have done and the connections they have made. This differs significantly from conventional forms of learning, which may be teacher-centered, and involve memorizing facts and completing tasks of compliance. IBL encourages curiosity, supports diverse learning needs and different modes of communication. It is important to note that when students create a connection to the curriculum, it results in increased interest and motivation to engage with their own learning (Anderson, 2016).

IBL eliminates the need for grades, as the emphasis is placed on learning and discovery, having ongoing discussions, and providing feedback to encourage growth. Assessment within inquiry work can include self-reflection, peer-assessments, and formative feedback in both written and verbal formats. Each of these provides insight as to what the student can do, and guidance on areas of improvement. Attention is paid to how students are growing and learning, and that is best done through gradeless

assessment. This is particularly important when considering the competencies that students are developing through the inquiry process.

Competency-Focused Learning

The BC curriculum is organized by three elements which support a competency-driven approach to deeper learning: content (what students know), curricular competencies (the demonstration of skill) and the big ideas (what students understand) (BC Ministry of Education, 2019b). The curriculum is also meant to help students develop core competencies, which are “sets of intellectual, personal, and social and emotional proficiencies that all students need in order to engage in deep, lifelong learning” (BC Ministry of Education, 2019c, para. 1). Competency-focused learning emphasizes the development of skills through the application of knowledge. Traditionally, assessment has focused on learning and content, but with gradeless classrooms content is seen as the vehicle to demonstrate competencies. One may argue that the learning done in a competency-focused classroom is deeper and more meaningful because students learn to process, analyze, and evaluate the content, rather than blindly memorizing it.

When teaching and learning is shifted away from conventional practices, students are free to develop their competencies without fear of being penalized for getting something wrong. This is particularly important for Indigenous students whose ways of expressing their learning are influenced by their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, their educational experiences and communication styles (Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019). Competency-focused learning values the individual perspectives of each student and allows them to draw on their unique learning experiences. Time is devoted to developing their critical and creative thinking skills, their ability to communicate and their social responsibility within the classroom. These skills are transferable to their lives outside of school, with the goal that they will thrive as individuals in whatever path they take in life. Conventional assessment

practices can not capture the essence of competencies the way that gradeless formats can, which is why this is such an important aspect to ultimately integrate into the classroom practice.

Integrating Gradeless Assessment into the Classroom

Once teachers have embraced the mindset of gradeless assessment and have adopted teaching strategies that align with its practice, they can begin to establish a gradeless classroom. The goal of a gradeless classroom is to eliminate assessment practices which produce ‘score pollution,’ a practice where students’ grades “limit students, families and other stakeholders in the educational system from attaining valid information regarding academic achievement” (Green, Johnson, Kim, & Pope, 2006, as cited in Link, 2018, p. 65). Another goal is to improve equity within the classroom, to bolster student well-being and to improve their attitudes.

To achieve this, teachers may “use their understanding of individual student circumstances, their instructional experience, and perceptions of equity, consistency, accuracy, and fairness to make professional judgments, instead of relying solely on a grading algorithm” (Brookhart et al., 2016, p. 827). A gradeless classroom “*decenters* compliance, grading, the quest for ‘answers,’ competition and all the other features of dominant classroom culture” (Safir & Dugan, 2021, p. 107). This may seem like a daunting undertaking, however, accomplishing this involves practical strategies such as using strength-based feedback, digital portfolios, and student conferences for both assessing and communicating student learning.

Ongoing Strength-Based Feedback

Often, in conventional assessment practices, educators focus on negative aspects of student learning. The onus is placed on what students cannot do, and what they still need to work on. This may be compounded by student behavior, poor attendance, or other negative feelings that a teacher has about their students. Educators may feel uncomfortable using strength-based comments if they feel they do not acknowledge problem areas. This, however, is not the case, as strength-based feedback

describes what a student can do, and what they understand. It also highlights areas to improve, and steps that the student can take to make those improvements. This is particularly important when learning is competency-based, and the focus is placed on the development of skills; students need ongoing descriptive feedback to understand how they can improve. Acknowledging a student's area of strength introduces a lens of optimism, wherein the student can feel more empowered and confident in their skills. This simple act can remove feelings of shame that students may feel if they are worried about their progress and instill a sense of agency and resilience (Brown, 2020).

It is important that “if we want students to keep pushing, revising, learning, we must continue to provide feedback without a particular grade” (Blum, 2020, p. 78). Providing ongoing strength-based feedback eliminates the need to collect and average marks which are uninformative and arbitrary (Kohn, 1999). This grading system penalizes students who may initially struggle with the learning task, but who ultimately achieve a level of proficiency. Masters (2013) suggests instead that “by praising success, teachers endeavour to promote positive attitudes, build self-esteem and encourage all students in their learning” (p. 1). By eliminating grades in favor of ongoing strength-based feedback, students can focus on their own growth and development. Digital portfolios are a tool that can be used to collect a students' evidence of learning, their reflections and the feedback provided to them, serving as a replacement for conventional tracking of grades.

Digital Portfolios

Digital portfolios support gradeless assessment by providing a place for students to collect evidence of their learning, receive feedback, and reflect on their growth and development over time. They are highly individualized, equitable tools that empower students to take responsibility for their learning. Students can track their feedback and use it to set specific goals for improving (Blum, 2020). Digital portfolios help create “a new concept of the classroom as a place where students learn according

to their individual pace, including the valuation of the reflective thinking, intuition and knowledge of each individual and the belief that difficulties can be overcome” (Domene-Martos et al., 2021, p. 2).

Digital portfolios also help build a sense of community around the student, as they provide a direct link between the classroom and their home. Most digital portfolio platforms allow for families to join, allowing them to engage with their child’s learning and witness their growth and development. This reinforces the important FNESC (n.d.) value that learning supports the well-being of the self and the family, and that it establishes a sense of connectedness. It also reinforces the philosophy that gradeless assessment, using portfolios, helps enrich students’ generation of knowledge and their personal development (Domene-Martos et al., 2021). Students can then share their knowledge and development during individualized conferences with their teachers in a way that showcases their growth over time.

Conferencing with Students

Though school districts may be supportive of gradeless assessment, teachers are often required to provide a percentage grade on report cards to fulfill ministry expectations for reporting. This is the case for BC students in Grades 10-12. Conferencing is a strategy that allows teachers to use gradeless assessment and still be able to provide a mark on a report card. Through conferencing, students and teachers co-create a grade which is justified through conversation and students providing evidence of their learning. Conferencing also allows for the creation of report card comments which reflect the students’ voice and goals that they personally set. It is important to note that these types of conferences differ from parent-teacher interviews, often referred to as student-led conferences, which are part of the formal BC reporting requirements.

A vital aspect of conferencing is the resulting relationships that teachers build with their students. Conferencing need not be just for the purpose of formal reporting and should be used to provide ongoing feedback and to build trust with students. Freire (1970) describes dialogue as an act that builds a climate of mutual trust, and Bourke (2016) reminds educators that when assessment is

seen from the students' perspective it can lead to conversations about learning that frees them from pre-determined agendas. Conferencing is an integral part of engaging students in their learning, and one that allows relationships to build naturally within the classroom.

Summary

Gradeless assessment has become a cornerstone within my educational practice because of the positive impacts it has on student engagement and motivation. Removing the stress of grades not only increases a students' desire to participate in deeper learning, but it has positive implications for their sense of well-being. It is important for educators to shift their mindset around grades in order to address the pervasive dominance of grades within our educational culture. Being receptive to new ideas can help teachers adopt strategies such as IBL, or competency-focused pedagogy which will help them align their teaching strategies with gradeless assessment. Employing strategies such as strength-based feedback, digital portfolios and conferencing can help teachers guide and assess students without the need for grades. These approaches also have positive implications for communicating student learning and involving parents into the educational journeys of their children. Ultimately, the integration of gradeless assessment has the capacity to change the learning culture of a classroom to make it more equitable and supportive of students' well-being. In the final chapter, I will revisit my argument, review both the literature and the practical application of gradeless assessment and discuss the overarching implications for education.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that gradeless assessment has positive implications for student engagement and motivation, which include ensuring equity and fostering students' positive well-being and attitudes towards learning. This form of assessment is empowering for all students, regardless of ability. Students are not ranked or compared; instead, the focus is placed on their individual growth and development. In this final chapter, I revisit the argument that gradeless assessment has powerful implications for student engagement. I also explore the interconnected nature of the previous chapters, including how my claim, the literature review, and the practical applications are related. Finally, I explain the overarching implications that gradeless assessment has for education and provide personal thoughts to support a pedagogical overhaul of assessment.

Revisiting the Argument

For many students, conventional methods of assessment breed negative feelings towards school. There are students who experience stress and anxiety around tests, some who feel shame when they receive a bad mark on an assignment, and those who struggle to conform to rigid expectations (O'Connor & Lessing, 2017; Schinske & Tanner, 2014). These oppressive experiences can result in student disengagement from learning, and a lack of motivation towards learning tasks (Masters, 2013). Gradeless assessment counters the predominant narrative around grades, changing the perspectives and attitudes of teachers and students alike. It replaces compliance with creativity, grades with feedback, and negativity with optimism. The climate of gradeless classrooms nurtures positive relationships and fosters the growth and development of each individual student. Standardized practices are abandoned for those which recognize the needs of today's diverse classrooms. Gradeless assessment recognizes diversity and evaluates students based upon their individual abilities. With that in mind, gradeless classrooms enrich the learning experience of all students. Assessment becomes

equitable in the way that it considers students' individual strengths, fosters a climate that supports students' well-being and helps students develop a positive connection with their learning.

Overview of Findings

Chapter One explored my personal journey to gradeless assessment. I experienced first-hand the negative impacts that conventional assessment practices can have on student self-esteem and ability to engage meaningfully with their learning. My practice evolved to embrace inquiry-based strategies, and a focus on the development of competencies, which resulted in students becoming more involved in their learning. This reinforced the need to move from a method of assessment that focused on content, to one that fostered the development of competencies. My experiences in the M.Ed. program validated this method of assessment, where personal growth was supported through feedback, and emphasis was placed on developing thinking skills. These experiences show how assessment can actively engage students in their learning and contribute to their overall well-being and success in school. This reinforces the pedagogical and philosophical shifts that are needed to fully embrace gradeless assessment.

In the literature review, I used Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a theoretical framework for implementing gradeless assessment. Freire's philosophy centers around equity, building relationships, and empowering students to engage in their learning. These are also key pieces to the philosophy of gradeless assessment. They contribute to the liberating implications that gradeless assessment has on student engagement and motivation. The literature provided insight to how this is supported by the creation of equitable learning environments which embody the ideals of the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FNESC, n.d.). The literature supported my claim that gradeless assessment decreases student stress levels (McMorran et al., 2017; Sanders, 2021), which ultimately improves their overall sense of well-being. The commodification of learning was also addressed, and the literature revealed the way that generational attitudes around assessment can impact a student's

thoughts about their own school experience (Pérez-Arredondo and Bernal-Carrasco, 2021). Recent evidence also showed that gradeless assessment has empowering implications for students' attitudes, including feeling that learning is more enjoyable (O'Connor & Lessing, 2017). Building meaningful relationships is key to this process, wherein students are actively involved and engaged with their learning.

The practical application chapter provided strategies to implement gradeless assessment in any educational setting. I first addressed the need to change the dialogue around the importance of grades, which is pervasive throughout education. Changing the mindsets of teachers and students alike is critical for the success of this practice; each must take an active role in engaging with the learning and assessment process. Educators must also be willing to embrace innovation and abandon the fear of the unknown (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Once the teacher has embraced the philosophy around gradeless assessment, practical steps for implementation are suggested. This begins with the need to adopt teaching practices such as inquiry-based learning and competency-focused strategies which fit intrinsically with a gradeless approach. The literature also suggested other techniques for integrating gradeless practices, including the use of strength-based feedback, digital portfolios, and student conferencing. These aim to replace grades with modes of assessment that encourage relationships, communication, self-reflection, and ultimately, deeper engagement. This paper highlighted the need for multiple interconnected strategies to best implement and support gradeless assessment practices in high school classrooms.

This paper has successfully advanced my argument that gradeless assessment practices have significant implications for student engagement and motivation. It clearly highlighted the need for assessment practices that better support the well-being of students. It reinforced gradeless assessment as a method to promote equitable practices which allow students to be more actively involved in demonstrating their learning. The literature cited also advocated for gradeless assessment's power to

help students decrease stress, build self-confidence, and enjoy learning for learning's sake. Additionally, it described how student communication skills and relationships are improved through meaningful interactions with their teacher. These positive implications are all reasons why I successfully argued that gradeless assessment is a worthwhile practice for educators to implement in their own classrooms.

Implications for Education

Gradeless assessment has significant theoretical and practical implications for education. Theoretically, gradeless practice has the capacity to change the face of assessment, starting with the relationships students have with their learning. This practice puts emotion back into learning through building relationships, which reminds us that learning is relational (FNESC, n.d.). It also helps making personal connections, fostering communication, recognizing equity, and putting the student at the centre of the assessment practice. This paper asks educators to rethink their current methods of assessment and challenges them to consider the benefits of going gradeless. It also adds to the discussion of how to facilitate assessment practices that are more inclusive of all learners. Often, when educational changes are suggested, the benefits are touted only for those who struggle academically. Gradeless assessment, however, has positive implications for all students and the power to change the way they engage with their learning.

This shift proves to be promising, as it allows students to focus on their growth and learning without the fear of punishment. It also allows students to enjoyably engage in learning, and to build confidence in the process. The practical implications of this are considerable, including students feeling safe to be challenged and motivated by their learning. This, in turn, fosters intrinsic and genuine curiosity and engagement. Students are encouraged by feedback that is tailored to their own needs, and which encourages personal responsibility and growth. Together with their teachers, students co-create a learning experience that is meaningful and personal. These experiences also carry outside of the classroom setting into the real world. The intrinsic motivation students develop facilitates life-long

learning, and ultimately, has the capacity to change the way they think about and engage with education.

Final Thoughts

Gradeless assessment is not a stand-alone program that can be implemented homogeneously throughout every classroom. It is a philosophy to be embraced and implemented uniquely by educators in contexts that fit their own situations and the needs of their students. Thus, this paper highlights the need for multiple interconnected strategies to successfully implement gradeless assessment. Its dynamic approach is meant to foster the engagement and motivation of students, and to provide them with a positive mindset about their schooling experience.

Just like learning, educational change takes patience and time. Generations of students have been raised in a system that exalts high achievement in the form of grades. As students pass through the system, this mindset of achievement is perpetuated as students become parents, who then relive the system through their own experiences and assumptions. If those students become teachers, they may utilize similar modes of teaching and assessment that they were accustomed to, thus perpetuating the cycle of grades within the educational system.

Change can be difficult, especially if it is seen as challenging everything that is already widely accepted. This may prevent teachers from questioning why assessment practices should be changed. Shifting teacher mindsets is an ambitious task, let alone asking them to adopt an entirely new educational philosophy. Considering the needs of the student is critical to taking that first step. This was the catalyst in my own philosophical shift, and one that I am personally grateful for. Gradeless assessment has changed the way I teach; it has allowed me to know my students better as learners, and to witness their incredible growth. So, while change is difficult, I argue wholeheartedly that it is worth it. Our students are worth it.

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