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ANNOTATION

Imperial, Peter. “Grading and Reporting Purposes and Practices in Catholic Secondary Schools and Grades’ Efficacy in Accurately Communicating Student Learning.” Ed.D. dissertation, University of San Francisco. 2011, 242 pp.

Peter Imperial described that the purpose of his study “was to identify the practices that Catholic high-school teachers employed in determining their students’ grades” (7). While the grading practices and purposes of public-school teachers have been studied, the grading purposes and practices employed by Catholic high-school teachers have been unknown. Imperial used two researcher-designed surveys and then conducted a thematic analysis of available school grading policies. The study intended to answer four research questions: What grading practices do Catholic secondary-school teachers currently employ in determining their students’ grades? To what extent does academic achievement comprise the grades Catholic high-school teachers report for their students? To what extent are Catholic secondary-school teachers’ grading practices consistent with their expressed purposes for grading? To what extent are Catholic secondary-school teachers’ grading practices consistent with their school’s purpose for grading? (15).

The conceptual framework for the author’s study focused on three guidelines from Guskey: a) develop a clear statement of purpose addressing why grading is done, for whom the information is intended, and what the desired results are; b) provide accurate descriptions of what students know and can do that receivers of information can understand; and c) use grading and reporting methods to enhance, not hinder, teaching and learning (13-14). It is through this lens that Imperial examines the data from the two surveys in order to understand what teachers do when they determine grades, and what teachers and administrators, as school leaders, expect grades to communicate (15). As a result, the author states that “this study can assist Catholic high-school teachers to identify the effects that grading policies and practices have in supporting all learners, especially those who struggle because of learning disabilities or because of economic or social disadvantage. In this regard, it is a matter of social justice” (13).

The review of current literature focused on the development, from a historical perspective, of the need for a change in the way students are graded (17-28), followed by the researcher’s elaboration on the conceptual framework utilized in his study (28-32), and concluded with a review of the literature on grading policies and practices employed by teachers (32-58). From the literature review, it is evident there remains considerable confusion as to the meaning of grades and their reliability to ascertain student academic achievement.

The researcher designed two surveys and administered them online to a random sample of teachers and administrators in high schools in the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops Region IX, which includes California, Hawaii, and Nevada. The surveys were validated by a distinguished panel that included, Guskey, McTighe and O’Connor, prominent figures in education who have published numerous articles and books on the subjects of grading and

assessment (68). The survey items were designed to uncover the practices teachers employ, the purposes they claim for reporting student learning through grading, and the school policies that guide teachers in grading (78). Other survey items sought to discover the amount of personal training – particularly in grading – that teachers and administrators had received in preparation for their duties, as well as the methods that schools use to communicate students' grades to parents, students, and other educational institutions (78). Given that Catholic high-schools' missions are different from those of public high-schools, the results of the study might shine light on how well the practice of reporting student learning through grades serves Catholic schools' missions (71). The survey results are presented in percentages and proportions for each item (75). Finally, the author conducted a thematic analysis of the schools' published grading policies, coding the schools' grading purposes, policies, and practices in order "to identify if each school had articulated its purpose for grading, and if so, what the purpose was, and to identify specific school-wide policies and practices schools had established for teachers to follow in determining students' grades" (76).

Imperial presents an exhaustive and detailed analysis of the surveys and reports there is not an evident consensus regarding Catholic secondary school teachers' grading policies (128). It is clear that teachers utilize a wide variety of grading practices and that academic achievement is the "primary focus for which they report grades" (128), but over half of the respondents report that they provide grades for more than achievement alone (129). Additionally, the researcher found that teachers' grading policies are "frequently inconsistent with their expressed purpose" (129) of reporting academic achievement. The researcher identifies two ancillary findings: first, the data was analyzed by separating the responses by the teachers' respective subject areas (123); and, second, the teachers were asked to report the training they had received in grading (125). The data reveal little variation in purpose and practice in either of these ancillary areas.

Imperial offers both research and educational practice implications and recommendations for future research (147-153). He suggests that future research is needed: to explore the extent to which educators were aware of the differences between achievement and non-achievement evidence; to identify exactly how teachers compute, weigh, and blend assessment information so as to avoid misinterpretation; to examine how a teacher's grading is influenced by their specific subject area; to gain insight into the attitudes at the root of teachers' beliefs about grading; and, to identify obstacles to change that are rooted in school culture and the realities of teaching. The need for on-going and sustained professional development, the formal adoption of school-wide practices and policies consonant with current best-practices from educational measurement experts, and grading reform, are recommended for implementation in Catholic high schools.

This study provides much needed data on Catholic high-school teachers' grading practices, policies, and purposes. The findings show that "many Catholic high-school teachers mix non-achievement factors, such as effort, ability, and behavior, with academic achievement into a single symbol, obscuring the grade's meaning, misleading students, and diminishing the ability of teachers, schools, and parents to meet students' educational needs" (154). There is optimism for the future as Catholic schools possess the flexibility to make changes to grading policies and procedures relatively quickly when compared to the public schools. Imperial's research provides useful and relevant knowledge for school administrators to create and implement mission-based grading policies, practices, and procedures.